

Italy, The United Nations and Somali Nationalism

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The decolonization of former Italian Somalia followed peculiar patterns. Once an Italian colony, it was administered by the British as a follow-up to the war developments from 1941 until 1950. On April 1950 former Italian Somalia was placed by the United Nations under a 10-year Trusteeship System whose administration was given to Italy. Differently from most of African colonies whose independences resulted from national struggles, the Trusteeship System stated in advance the date of Somali independence; it scheduled the implementation of economic, political and social programme for the region; and decided for the introduction of forms of self-government and a progressive "Somalization" of the state. Further, political elections were scheduled in 1956 and 1959 and resulted in the formation of two Legislative Assemblies led by the Somali Youth League, the most important expression of Somali nationalism at the time. The Assemblies meant a considerable degree of autonomy and self-government for the region. However, the extent to which the features of the Trusteeship System affected the post-colonial state remains unexplored and the role that Italy played in shaping the independent state is still understudied. Nevertheless, a reconsideration of the patterns of Somali decolonization is essential for a better understanding of recent dynamics of Somali history such as the failure of the Somali Republic, the emergence of One-Party state and the eventual collapse of the Somali state.

Based on a historical approach, the paper explores the impact that the structure of the Trusteeship System (e.g. the institution of the Territorial Councils, the elections of the Legislative Assemblies) had on the political arena. It argues that the Trusteeship System pursued the enhancement of self-government. However it also meant the implementation of vertical forces that strongly affected the nature of the post-colonial state. The paper identifies two phases: it argues that in the first phase of the Trusteeship (1950-56) political representation of Somali traditional leaders was favoured, political parties were partially neglected and, as a result, political competition exacerbated. During the second phase that coincided with self-government (1956-60) the struggle for the control of the state became predominant in Somali politics. Finally the paper argues that the process of decolonization modified the nature of Somali nationalism. Specifically, the inter-clanic features that characterised nationalism in 1940s were neutralized and the clan system originally challenged by political parties regained significance