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## Interview: Mohamed Osman Omar

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# 'Other newly independent countries should learn from Somalia's mistakes'

*His Excellency Mr. Osman Omar, the ambassador of Somalia to India, was interviewed by Susan Maitra and Ramtanu Maitra on Jan. 27 in New Delhi. The review of his book, which is discussed in the interview, appears on page 21.*

**EIR:** Your book tells the story of independent Somalia, its first 30 years—from the heady optimism of independence in 1960, to the civil war of 1991, to the present. What is the current situation on the ground? Is there any prospect for peace?

**Osman:** Today we enter the third year without stability. We pray that there will be peace. The prospect is always there. The hope never dies. We have seen big problems, difficulties, and the country has suffered, the people have suffered. And the perspective is that, we say, we believe that every bad thing is followed by good things. So we don't give up. When we see bad we say, "Thank God," then we pray for good things. I only pray that those who are involved in making peace will come to the conclusion that the time has come when the country must be given a chance to get back on its feet again.

**EIR:** The United States is leaving soon; the U.N. force is staying. Has the foreign intervention helped?

**Osman:** Yes. I say yes because the civil war was also coupled with drought. So the country had two disasters together, and many people have died. We have seen people dying from bullet wounds, for lack of food; we have seen houses, properties, schools, hospitals, offices destroyed. Definitely, the intervention has helped to ease that suffering. The food has come. The civil war, the random shelling of heavy guns has stopped. The people have started talking to each other. I have seen personally in the streets of Mogadishu, patrolled by U.N. forces, the people come to the market place; they have started selling things in the streets, although big business is still missing because millions are outside the country. They have run away from the country because of the fear of death. Somalis have suffered a lot. Somalis have taken to the sea, to the roads. You may have heard the news that hundreds died in the Indian Ocean, just off the shore of Kenya. Then,

60 or 70 people died while sailing to Yemen. So the civil war caused a nightmare for the nation, and the intervention has helped. The multinational forces have really helped at least those innocent people who were not involved in the power struggle.

As far as the U.S. withdrawal is concerned, this is a decision being made by the U.S. government. But I think that they will remain with the U.N. forces, as part of the multinational forces, not as a separate U.S. contingent. Lately, the U.N. has been organizing limited forces to help work on humanitarian projects, and this is important. Our country is devastated by civil war and famine, and therefore external assistance is a necessity if the suffering of the people is to be alleviated.

**EIR:** Will they be able to have any influence on a political solution, or are the U.N. forces primarily laying the ground for the people to begin talking?

**Osman:** In any country today you can have differences among yourselves. You can have differences in the family. Then, if the family members start quarrelling or fighting, neighbors will help mediate. That's why Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda are all now trying to help us to solve our differences. It's necessary to have regional organizations, international organizations, the U.N., the OAU [Organization of African Unity], the Arab League, the Islamic Conference; you need them. Even if they only help us with logistics, it's important. It may sound impossible, but today if we want to have a conference in Mogadishu, we don't have chairs or tables, let alone microphones. The only decent conference hall, in the People's Assembly (Golaha Ummada), has been stripped of all facilities. No one gave a thought that the country would need it tomorrow.

To make it work, you have to try to make use of the assistance given by others, and it depends on you how you make use of it. The international organizations can help us, organize a forum for us, or an individual country can organize or give us a forum. That is necessary. Otherwise, if we trust ourselves and we can sit together and talk without outside help, it's much better.

**EIR:** Somalia is the tenth poorest nation in the world. What in your view are the priorities for a national reconstruction program?

**Osman:** The priority is stability. Peace. If we have stability and peace then the rest comes.

We are among the 10 least developed countries. Maybe we are today number one, or below that, because some time ago we were "least developed," an LDC; but today, I think, if there are LLDCs, then we go down below that because we have destroyed the little we had. We have to first reestablish stability, and then with the help of others we can raise our own heads again from the ground—start producing food, developing fisheries, raising livestock, which is our main lifeline. Due to the civil war, we have today nearly a million children who need to be rehabilitated. Then, God willing, we will arise again as a nation.

We are told that we are a rich country. Some sections of the world press were commenting that we have petrol. We are happy with it. But as long as we cannot bring peace, stability, and faith in our nation, then we will be not only below the 10 but will be nothing. That's why I called my book *The Road to Zero*. When I say the road to zero, it means that in the last 30 years, all our actions were just going to zero. You know, we never raised our heads. We had corruption, problems, nepotism, dictatorship, then all these things happened, and today we are where we are—zero. Tell me if there is in any part of the world, any country which has no President, or government, or ministries, schools, hospitals. It doesn't exist! Literally, we are zero because we don't have anything. We are rich with two things: talks without useful results and guns. So when they ask me, "What do you represent?" I say I represent the Somali nation. I always pray that the Somali nation exists, and I work for the nation. I try to play my part to keep the flag flying.

**EIR:** As a diplomat you had experience in wider African issues, beyond Somalia, and you refer to this occasionally in the book. What is your view of the situation in South Africa now?

**Osman:** The whole of independent Africa since 1960 has been supporting the people of South Africa. We spent millions of hours in talks. Each African country has given some sort of moral or material support, and some trained the South Africans in one form or another. We have done it. Somalia was among the first to assist the freedom fighters. We wish that the day will come that the black majority will succeed. We always said that this country has to have a democracy, a democratic solution for their problem. That means we blacks also should not be racists like the whites. I hope that our efforts of the last 30 years will not be in vain.

We have seen the release of Nelson Mandela. There is no country in Africa or in the world that was not calling for that, and we succeeded. The government of South Africa realized the trends, that they had no choice but to release him and to

make a change. F.W. de Klerk has made a change. He is a very courageous person. He has changed the situation in South Africa. He knew that his decision was suicidal, but chose to go down in history as the man who ended the centuries-old white supremacy. Now, if you are saying that you are not going to be racist, then you should say the country is for all Africans, for blacks and whites, for whoever lives in that place. The blacks have the majority, but they are divided. There is a group of white extremists, and there is a group of whites who would like to see change. I wish that all of them would come together and whoever has the political power to win the votes, to win in this democratic election that's forthcoming—because not only in South Africa, in all Africa, in my country, a genuine democratic political process is essential if everyone is to survive and have a chance.

Once Siad Barre's dictatorship was defeated I hoped that the groups would say, "Okay, we have defeated dictatorship. Here is, now, the key for the nation. You, the people, decide what to do with it." They did not say that; instead, they started fighting each other for power, until the seat of power itself had been destroyed. They behaved like the cowboys we saw in the films, who when they found a gold mine began killing each other for its possession until all perished.

Somalia became virtually synonymous with disaster. In Afghanistan, they used to say, "We don't want to be like the Somalis." But when those who were fighting against the [communist] regime of Mohammed Najibullah won the war, they started fighting each other. Somali groups were fighting against Siad Barre, then they won the war; now they fight for power against each other. They fought a war which everyone lost. They reduced the country to rubble and brought only misery to the people. They said they were fighting against bad government, but we now realize that bad government, as we say, is better than no government. At least you have an image as a nation. Look at Ethiopia, our neighbors. They were fighting the same type of regime. Before they took power, they said, "We should not be like the Somalis." They were very careful not to dismember the country like we did. In Liberia, the same thing is happening. They fought against the regime; they fight each other now.

Are there not enough examples that we can learn from? If somebody thinks he is the majority, I want him in the ballot box. I want to see the man who has the majority of votes to win in the ballot box, not with bullets. The one who uses a gun is only a coward; he has no trust in his political power. If you have political wisdom, political courage, you are not afraid.

**EIR:** If you have some plan for the country, some program, some vision—

**Osman:** You have to have vision. If you are going to be a leader, you must have vision for your people, your country. One has to think of the nation, its economic and social progress. I hope, I sincerely pray, that the leaders of the various

groups in South Africa will place the national interest before their own. What I see is people walking around with firearms, swords, and other dangerous items; it is really frightening. It seems that for us Africans, life has no meaning. Look at Somalia, Liberia, Angola. In Mogadishu we say, "Everything became expensive except the life of the person." Prices are high, but not the price of a life, because one can shoot anyone. No one asks why. We should understand that power is a poison. It kills you. It is a suicide when you are getting it by force, because there will be some who will not let you live with it in peace.

**EIR:** I want to ask you about some other situations in Africa. Nigeria, Algeria, and Egypt come to mind. It seems to me that there is a very palpable economic crisis that's underneath the political problems.

**Osman:** Yes. In Africa, anywhere, the basic thing is economy. If a man has bread he will not come to bother you. If a man has schooling, the child goes to school. If men have jobs, your government can live forever, provided you follow a democratic process. Economy is the basis either for peace or for crisis. I call the countries you have mentioned some of the richest countries in Africa. Algeria, Nigeria—they have petrol, they have gas, they have everything that their country needs, including well-educated people. Egypt is the center of education for most of the Arab world; it has a good industrial base; the people are hard-working. So why is there a crisis now?

Generally, we blame others, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, capitalists, and so forth, for whatever bad thing we do. We blame them, but we never blame ourselves. Why do countries such as Nigeria and Algeria, with all the wealth they have, have to go anywhere to get loans or to beg from others? Why don't they organize their economic program according to what they have? As the prices of their products are not stable, they have to be very careful. Take Zambia. It used to export copper. During the past years, whenever they had a problem with former Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, the international capital used to punish it by bringing the price of copper down in the world market.

If you take money from the world organizations, you have to pay. You know the trap. We know countries which cannot even pay the interest, let alone the capital. Then you are forever in their hands. They tell you what to do. They even guide your policy. You may say, "What about Somalia?" Somalia needs to take their help. But those nations which have enough money, such as Algeria, Nigeria, should not take loans. They must spend only according to what they have. Bad management and corruption must be eliminated because these are like a cancer in any system. These countries have petrol, and the people have to queue for petrol! The crisis has come because of mismanagement; it's as simple as that. Mismanagement of the politics and economy of the country cause the trouble. This is the money of the nation. I

would distribute it to the people through good services such as schools, hospitals, infrastructure, housing.

Why did the Shah of Iran have to fall? Because 35 million at that time, now maybe 60 million—I don't know how many thousands were living on the streets. He could have built a house for each family. He could have given them 35 million apartments. They would have kissed his feet. He could give. He didn't. The same thing is happening to these leaders. But, of course, for their wrongdoings they blame others.

A more important thing is that they feel like the country is their property. It is not. The country is the property of the nation; the government is the property of all.

It is a sad story. We have people who, once they come to power, stick to it. They don't understand that the longer one sticks to power, the more he becomes addicted and in the end he is destroyed by that power.

**EIR:** But isn't it true that even the few of those who had a vision were put against the wall, and a lot of resistance came from the West? What I have in mind is Kwame Nkrumah, for example.

**Osman:** Yes, it is true. It was the game played by the former colonial powers. They did not want Africa to develop. They want to keep Africa that way so that they can keep control. All our things depend on the former colonial powers—all telephone communications, all telexes, all our banking goes through [London, Paris, New York]. We have developed a kind of complex. We love their civilization and not our own; if we do not speak English or Italian or French, we are nothing.

People like Kwame Nkrumah were put against the wall and sometimes even eliminated by the enemies of Africa. But the worst thing is that the enemies' plan is executed by the local people. East and West used local puppets to topple the man they disliked.

Three years ago in New York I met a friend of a newly independent country, and I told him: "Be careful and learn from the mistakes we have made!" He said, "How?" I said, "When we started we only tried to stick to power and make money. Then we could not leave the power. Start to be honest with your people and do not let power carry you away. If there is a vote and you lose, stay at home. At least you can go to your farm or do your own business peacefully. But if you are a dictator, you may enjoy a few years, but sooner or later you'll be forced out of power, and in some cases forced to leave the country. You'll run away, you'll abandon your country, you'll abandon your people."

Look at Siad Barre. He is now somewhere in Niger. If he would have given the people a kind of democracy, he could have stayed among us. [Ethiopian President] Mengistu, the same thing. [Zaire President Sese] Mobutu is in the way. See, every one of them. It's unfortunate that we blame the past, we blame someone else instead of learning from the past.