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## ***'Igu sawir* gone too far'? Social media and state reconstruction in Somalia**

**Peter Chonka**

### **Introduction**

In 2017, Somali rapper Ilkacase Qays released on Youtube the music video for his track *'Igu Sawir'* ('Take my picture'). Clad in a turquoise blue Somalia football team tracksuit, Ilkacase raps and sings in Somali over images of politicians taking pictures and 'selfies' with various citizens and symbols: "A disabled person? Yes - *Igu sawir!* A blind person? Yes - *Igu sawir!* The flag? Yes - *Igu sawir!*"<sup>1</sup>. The catchy refrain encapsulated and intensified a social media-driven critique of Somali power-holders' own use of social media in their attempts to connect with the public and legitimise the arduous process of state-reconstruction that they are undertaking in a context of ongoing conflict, sporadic terrorist violence, and perennial political instability. This online engagement highlighted the importance of social media platforms for state communications, as well as their role as arenas for debates around the re-establishment of government authority in Somalia after more than a quarter century of effective statelessness.

Considering Somalia's unenviable international image as a location of chronic instability, terrorism and piracy, it is unsurprising that local efforts towards state reconstruction have frequently engaged with these mainstream narratives through the channels afforded by 'new' and 'social' media. This has been particularly true for the post-2012 period on which this chapter focuses. It was in the previous year that Harakaat Al Shabaab Al Mujahidiin (hereafter Al Shabaab) was expelled from Mogadishu by Western-backed forces. These military operations preceded the installation of Xasan Sheikh Maxamuud's Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), the first internationally-recognised authority in Mogadishu since the collapse of Siyaad Barre's government in 1991. Military, security and political gains in this period (however modest) were frequently framed in local news and social media discourse in terms of a 'Somalia rising' narrative (Hammond 2013). Often such efforts were led by internationally-connected and tech-savvy commentators in the city, many of whom were 'returnees' from various locations of the global Somali diaspora. Taking advantage of

economic opportunities in the dynamic city, as well as earlier developments in the telecommunications industry, this transnational social-media commentariat of entrepreneurs, civil society activists, and government employees remains important, and has continued to challenge international stereotypes about the status and prospects of a modern Somalia in the midst of political and economic change. These interventions also take place within a broader transnational Somali-language public sphere of mediated political debate around state reconstruction and ongoing conflict.

This chapter first situates the Somali case study in relation to wider literatures on social media and political contestation in zones of conflict or ‘limited statehood’. It argues that the blurring of public/private boundaries inherent in the modern social media environment acutely affects the very basics of political communication for state actors in Somalia. This is related to the socio-political environment in which they operate: one that has been characterised by prolonged statelessness, and physical and discursive challenges to their legitimacy from an undefeated insurgency. It further argues that although social media can facilitate a groundswell of popular optimism around state reconstruction, it can be an equally potent force for the questioning of state legitimacy and the undermining of the communicative coherence of re-emerging structures of governance. Although this ‘double-edged sword’ argument is hardly novel, the analysis suggests that specific local political circumstances (and media/cultural history) are of great importance for understanding the ways in which this dialectic relationship plays out in a political centre such as Mogadishu – the city from which the Federal reconstruction of the Somali state is being undertaken in collaboration with various external actors.

After outlining important features of the Somali conflict and developments in communications/media technologies, the chapter makes the above argument through analysis of a series of controversies that have played out through social media channels. These occurred between 2012-2017 during the two FGS administrations of Presidents Xasan Sheikh Maxamuud and Maxamed Cabdilaahi ‘Farmaajo’. The chapter discusses the former administration in terms of the securitisation of media in relation to terrorism and counter-insurgency operations. It then explores incidents occurring under Farmaajo’s subsequent administration that have highlighted the strategies and limitations of its communications through social media platforms (e.g. state actors engaging directly with constituents through Facebook) in relation to US military operations and Al Shabaab violence. Finally, the chapter

examines tensions that relate to representations of political change for local and international audiences, and returns to the example of rapper Ilkacase Qays. Media texts relating to Ilkacase provide useful examples of the complex interplay between nationalist and Islamist discourses around Somali state reconstruction, which social media platforms and practices both reflect and facilitate. The analysis is informed by the author's experience of working for an international humanitarian organisation in Somalia (undertaking local-language media monitoring through the period analysed), and by fieldwork in Mogadishu and other cities on Somali-language media networks.

### **Social media scholarship and Somalia**

The wider literature on social media's impact on politics in the Middle East and North/Sub-Saharan Africa tends to focus on its potential for democratic mobilisation and challenges to consolidated authoritarian states (Banda *et al.* 2009, Lynch 2011, Tukefci and Wilson 2012; Bruns *et al.* 2013, Wolfsfeld *et al.* 2013). In the Somali case, despite their sporadic violence or attempted regulation of media, state structures remain nascent and contested, and do not constitute a coherent leviathan against which a 'civil society' mobilises. In Western contexts scholars have explored the opportunities and technical limitations of state structures' use of social media platforms to listen to and engage with citizens (Bertot *et al.* 2010, Kavanaugh *et al.* 2012). Literature on African states' utilisations of new media technology is emerging, but often highlights locations where state power is relatively 'hard' and can be exercised towards 'developmental state'-type transformative agendas (Gagliardone 2014).

Elsewhere, scholars have conceptualised ICTs as a potential means to achieve 'alternative governance modalities' in settings of 'limited statehood'. Livingston and Walter-Drop's (2014) volume addresses a diverse range of cases where empirical state capacity has historically been weak and where the popular use of new media technologies can allow for either collaborations between the state and civil society (e.g. crowd-sourcing of data that strengthens *government* monitoring capabilities) or the emergence of new practices of local *governance* that bypass the state or fill in gaps in its capabilities. A relatively small number of the contributions to that volume focus on state (as opposed to other actors') use of ICTs to govern, and these (Asmolov 2014, Singh 2014) explore locations such as Russia and India, countries where state institutions are big and highly visible, if 'limited' in terms of certain capacities. Clearly, such settings differ from Somalia where a nationally sovereign authority

has been non-existent for over a quarter of a century, and where re-construction involves the fundamental (re)articulation of the state's basic legitimacy. The Federal Government in Mogadishu cannot effectively project a monopoly of the legitimate means of violence beyond the city, and continues to compete with an armed organisation such as Al Shabaab that maintains parallel systems of governance (e.g. for taxation) not only in those hinterlands but also in the capital city itself<sup>2</sup>.

Given this distinctive context, the use of social media by state actors in Somalia raises a somewhat different set of questions. These concern the necessity or desirability (for the state) of communicating with populations through increasingly ubiquitous platforms, such as Facebook. Prior experiences of prolonged state collapse have often made distinctions between state and non-state authority highly fuzzy, and emerging Somali state-builders are constructing potentially new modalities of governance and communications through social media platforms that, by their very nature, further blur boundaries between public and private, or professional and personal realms (Lange, 2007; Van Dijck 2013). The focus on social media here builds on other accounts of state-society media engagement in Somalia. For instance, Stremmler, Fantini & Gagliardone's (2015) discussion of radio call-in programmes, which argues persuasively that a sole focus on the media's supposed role as a tool for facilitating state accountability may overlook the ways in which various (state and non-state) power structures are reproduced in new forms. Eschewing, as they do, problematic normative assumptions about what media 'should' do or facilitate, this chapter examines what actually happens when the use of modern social media communications channels is almost unavoidable for state actors, but also affects the communicative coherence of embryonic institutions. This will be demonstrated below with reference to state actors using personal social media accounts to engage with publics around highly sensitive issues, and certain digitally-mediated civil society initiatives that throw into question firm distinctions between 'state' and 'stakeholder' actions (Srinivasan, 2014, 96).

Another emerging theme of contemporary media studies in the West highlights the impact of social media platforms on the nature of debate and the apparent ideological polarisations (Wodak *et al* 2013, Gruzd and Roy 2014). Algorithmic curation of content is said to create the 'filter bubbles' in which media consumers are exposed only to the opinions that they are expected to respond to positively, while the physical detachment afforded by the cyber public sphere promotes increasingly intolerant language and the flouting of norms of debate that

might otherwise characterise face-to-face interactions. Considering these important insights (very much the *zeitgeist* of an era of ‘post-truth’ politics, Brexit and Trump), it is necessary to problematize the influence of social media platforms as part of non-Western and non-English language media ecologies. In Somali-language social media, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the tracking and algorithms that so characterise European-language social media are observable, operational and effective in influencing patterns of online interaction. This kind of technical analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter. Nonetheless it deserves future attention and will be influenced by the current capacity of online platforms to process and interpret Somali-language social media generated content as a form of ‘big data’.

This chapter instead provides a qualitative overview of types of debate that are playing out within the dynamic Somali media environment and between influential networks of media producers. Although debates may take on similarly vitriolic tones (unsurprising in a context of extreme political fragmentation where post-civil war national reconciliation has never taken place), binary ideological polarisations (for instance between ‘militant Islamists’ and FGS-supporting ‘nationalists’) are not always clearly visible, and may obscure the more nuanced and ambiguous contours of debate over the future of the Somali nation state. Examples of particular types of network and producer that cross between these discursive boundaries are provided in the subsequent analysis, demonstrating the potential impact of social media on complex ‘assemblages’ of ideological affiliation and transnational religious political and socio-cultural orientation (Phillips 2006, Wise 2011, Hess 2015). Whilst the chapter demonstrates the novel features and affordances of social media platforms, it also highlights types of cultural production (for instance the political-responsive role of popular music) that should be understood with reference to historical trends in anti- and post-colonial oral literature (Johnson 1974, Samatar 1982, Adam 2001, Kapteijns 2010). Poetry, theatre and popular music (along with ‘old’ mediating technologies of production and dissemination) played fundamental roles in historically defining the contested parameters of Somali ethno, cultural and religious nationalism, and themselves can be seen to feed into modern social media debates and practices.

### **Conflict and communications technology in Somalia**

In the two decades following the collapse of dictator Siyaad Barre’s military regime in 1991 - and the civil war which both preceded and followed on from this crucial juncture - Somalia

remained without an internationally recognised or nationally sovereign state. The comparatively ‘organic’ emergence and consolidation of the Islamic Courts Union from the early 2000s (an initially decentralised network of Shariah courts funded by clan networks of business interests first in Mogadishu and then through wider swathes of south-central Somalia) was halted by the US-backed Ethiopian military intervention of 2006 (Barnes and Hassan 2007). This invasion and occupation paved the way for Al Shabaab to emerge as a ‘radical’ armed splinter of the former Courts movement. It claimed a certain degree of nationalist legitimacy in its campaign against Ethiopian forces, and moved to expand administrative systems of Islamist governance across the majority of the south-central regions (Hansen 2013). Broader historical dynamics of Islamist mobilisation, socio-religious change and growing Sunni-orthodoxy in the overwhelmingly Muslim Somali regions of the Horn helped create an environment where populations were at times willing to accept Al Shabaab’s strict forms of governance, even if only as a trade-off for improved security conditions.

Al Shabaab was expelled from Mogadishu in 2011 through the military efforts of the strengthened multinational African Union Mission for Somalia (AMISOM) and local troops affiliated with the beleaguered Transitional Federal Government, the product of externally facilitated peace negotiations and international patronage. 2012 saw the installation of its successor, the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), under an administration led by President Xasan Sheikh Maxamuud. Maxamuud’s bid for selection was heavily influenced by money from the Gulf, while his subsequent administration benefited from significant humanitarian, development and security largesse from increasingly important regional players such as Turkey. His government in Mogadishu gained diplomatic recognition from the United States for the first time since 1991.

Despite the FGS’ dependence on international support, persistent political instability, the United Nations’ bumpy orchestration of a national ‘federalisation’ process, and continued Al Shabaab violence, the post-2012 period witnessed a broadly optimistic shift in the popular discourse around the potential for Somalia to ‘rise’ from the ashes of past conflict. Taking advantage of perceived security gains, returnees and finance from the diaspora have contributed to economic change in Mogadishu. This is exemplified in symbolic locations such as the city’s Makka Al Mukarama thoroughfare, re-paved by Turkish engineers and home to newly opened banks, hotels, restaurants and a vibrant retail sector. Other locations such as the city’s Lido beach are similarly redolent with mediated imagery of Somalia’s

potential for ‘rebirth’ and serve as important sites where young locals and diaspora returnees relax and socialise.

A *dib-u-dhis* (‘reconstruction’) discourse has emerged in response to post-2012 political developments, and this period is broadly coterminous with an increased uptake of social media usage in Mogadishu and more broadly across (urban) Somalia. Modern internet penetration is closely related to the rapid expansions of the local telecommunications industry through earlier periods of statelessness (Feldman 2012). Mobile phone usage is nearly ubiquitous, as demonstrated by the extensive uptake of local innovations such as mobile money<sup>3</sup>. Such tools themselves emerged in response to local monetary and security conditions that contributed to the limited circulation of the Somali shilling, a reliance on US Dollars, and fears around carrying large amounts of cash on one’s person. Cheap (and not so cheap) smart phones have become significantly more prevalent and serve as important devices for communication and consumption of various forms of online and offline media - for instance in their common usage for listening to local private FM radio stations.

Comparative global statistics put internet penetration at only around 1-2% for the entire country (World Bank 2016). Nonetheless, such estimates may be hampered by a lack of more general census data and difficulties of gathering accurate quantitative data from multiple service providers across a highly fragmented business and political environment. As such, these figures should not obscure the wider importance of internet-based communications in urban centres such as Mogadishu. Furthermore, even fairly recent data may already be out of date considering the rapid expansions of internet infrastructure brought with Somalia’s connection to the East African network of undersea fibre-optic cables in 2013 (Reuters 2013). The author’s observations of university students’ media usage in different urban centres across Somalia since 2009 (including Mogadishu, which also has a booming private higher educational institution industry) highlight a prevalence of social use, primarily accessed through mobile devices. Similar to other African contexts (Parks & Mukherjee, 2017), Facebook remains the platform accessed and engaged with in the Somali-language by the broadest range of local users, whilst the Somali Twitter scene tends to be limited to a more ‘elite’ user base, with many discussions taking place in English.

The news media industry in Somalia is as fragmented and dynamic as the political space in which it operates. Protracted statelessness and ongoing division across the largely embryonic



federal regions has created a media environment characterised by a proliferation of private online and radio news, often with particular regional focuses. In 2015, in Mogadishu alone there were over 30 private FM radio stations in operation and countless news websites cumulatively covering the entirety of the country. Such local networks of media entrepreneurs and young journalists coexist (and overlap) with what can be characterised as transnational Somali-language broadcasters. Based outside the country but reaching audiences across the region, this category encompasses the widely listened to content of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) Somali Services, and diaspora-financed satellite television stations such as Universal TV. ‘State’ broadcasting exists but operates as merely a single (and not necessarily privileged) voice in a wider cacophony of Somali language media production. In the capital, for instance, the FGS broadcasts through Radio Mogadishu and Somali National Television, but has a relatively limited capacity to control (particularly militant) opposition voices. This does not mean that journalism in Somalia is ‘free’. Attacks against media workers are a common occurrence and have been perpetrated by state, armed opposition and private actors (NUSOJ 2014, Stremlau *et al* 2015). Whilst Somalia is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist, the fragmented nature of the media ecology means that production is dynamic and the social importance of news transmission ensures that markets exist for huge volumes of content to be broadcast.

As I have argued elsewhere, the ways in which all of the aforementioned types of broadcasters (and their audiences) engage with social media platforms help creates a transnational Somali-language ‘digital public’ that allows debates to take place across the multiple contested borders of the Somali Horn (Chonka 2018a). Considering this, and given the recent history of fragmented media development in Somalia, it is unhelpful to draw firm distinctions between ‘social media’ on one hand, and professional journalism or official state communication, on the other. The parallel trajectories of reconfigured state power and digital, social media platform-linked journalism blur these boundaries, and weak institutionalisation of nascent political structures means that the state may communicate directly (and not always coherently) with citizens via social media. Furthermore, local and transnational networks of Somali language news media interact and intersect through social media platforms, creating space for new types of network and producer.

The emergence of a group such as Dalsoor Media (primarily through social media platforms such as Youtube) is an instructive example of this process and also highlights some of the complex ideological fault lines that exist at the heart of the Somali state reconfiguration process. Dalsoor was founded by Jamaal Cusmaan, an internationally renowned British-Somali journalist who has produced content for UK media outlets such Channel 4 News and the Guardian. Cusmaan's work has long been characteristically critical of foreign security-related intervention in Somalia, highlighting, for instance, the role of foreign intelligence agencies in the running of secret places of detention and interrogation in Mogadishu<sup>4</sup>. Apparently identifying a gap in the Somali-language news media market for critical nationalistic broadcasting of a high technical quality, Dalsoor media emerged as a primarily online vehicle for Cusmaan and other journalists to bring such themes to local and diasporic Somali-speaking audiences. The majority of Dalsoor's output has constituted short polemic documentaries broadcast via their website and Youtube channel, often focusing on foreign interference and local corruption in Somali politics and society.

One of their most notable broadcasts was a filmed interview with Al Shabaab spokesman Sheekh Cali Maxamuud Raage 'Dheere'. The interview was conducted by another high-profile international journalist of Somali heritage (Al Jazeera English's Hamze Mohamed) on behalf of Dalsoor<sup>5</sup>. Cali Dheere is one of Al Shabaab's most visible representatives and is a high value target for foreign (US) and FGS military capture/kill operations. Given the sensitivity of his location, the fact that Dalsoor and Mohamed were able to gain access to the interviewee demonstrates the efficacy of their network of contacts in the region. Whilst the journalist's questions were hardly uncritical, the very nature and facilitation of the interview was taken by some Somali commentators as evidence of Dalsoor's sympathy for a terrorist agenda and an undermining of the FGS. As such, the interviewer was subsequently detained by FGS authorities on his return to Mogadishu and interrogated by National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) operatives.

It is not the objective of this chapter to comment on the ethics of broadcasting the statements of militants, although this is a highly sensitive question in the Mogadishu context. Instead, observations of these types of network and the subsequent analyses of other social media controversies since 2012 demonstrate the affordances provided by social media platforms in settings of contentious politics to facilitate the diversification of elite and local journalistic production. Such processes both reflect and further condition the complexities of ideological

and cultural expression which cannot simply be reduced to Global War on Terror binaries of militant-Islamist/liberal-secularist affiliations. The FGS is attempting to assert itself in a decentralised media ecology which it cannot dominate in any substantive fashion. Instead of studying the impact of social media from the perspective of a coherent authoritarian state (and attempts to manage or take advantage of new media technologies), the experiences of the FGS outlined below demonstrate the context-specific and coterminous emergence of new forms of state power alongside significant developments in popular media production, reception and utilisation.

### **The securitisation of media**

As the first internationally-recognised government to take power in Mogadishu since 1991, President Xasan Sheikh Maxamuud's administration (2012-2017) was frequently engaged in attempts to gain control of the media narrative around urban security, and discredit the displaced militants who retained the capacity to strike targets close to centres of state power. During this period Al Shabaab maintained a fairly consistent pace of targeted assassinations of MPs and other individuals broadly associated with the government, as well as complex suicide attacks on locations such as hotels, the fortified airport zone and government ministries.

Al Shabaab maintains a broad network of official and affiliated media organisations and employs a variety of platforms (including social media) to distribute multi-lingual propaganda of various themes, for instance 'documentaries' extolling the virtues of life under the 'Shade of Shariah' in various locations where the group has held administrative control (Chonka 2016). The dynamic nature of its communications can be seen through the networks involved in disseminating real-time information about ongoing 'operations' in Mogadishu (Chonka 2018b) and in large-scale assaults on fixed AMISOM positions in the rural interior. There, embedded cameramen take battlefield footage which is incorporated in fast-produced communications about apparent victories. The technical quality of this often graphic footage contributes to its rapid spread across social media and the myriad Somali news websites<sup>6</sup>. Such sites may not be run by Al Shabaab supporters but they nonetheless use this material in order to document events that are deemed newsworthy to audiences. Considering the slim economic margins and reliance on advertising revenues for this vast and fragmented online news media ecology, the value of this content as potential 'clickbait' is an important

consideration. Al Shabaab also occasionally communicates directly with foreign journalists and translates and deploys a range of external material (ranging from NGO reports to external policy briefings) to bolster its claims of continued vitality and the weakness or corruption of the FGS, who are portrayed as ‘stooges’ of western imperialists<sup>7</sup>.

In response, the FGS has, at times, attempted to directly shape the media narrative through ambiguous directives on the use of the name ‘Al Shabaab’ (exhorting journalists to use the derogatory acronym ‘UGUS’ instead) and selectively prosecuting radio broadcasters ostensibly for their use of recorded militant statements<sup>8</sup>. Whilst news media cannot be described as ‘free’ in Somalia – given such moves and wider patterns of violence from state and non-state actors against journalists – the state has not been able to systematically block the rebroadcasting of Al Shabaab material through private news sites as it is unable to guarantee protection to such entities in the case of militant retaliation (UN 2016, 27).

Aside from this attempted regulation, the FGS developed its own media strategy designed to highlight security gains in the capital and the efforts of security forces such as NISA to investigate and thwart militant activity. An example of these efforts could be seen in the case of Xasan Xanafi, a journalist affiliated with an Al Shabaab’s radio station who was extradited to Somali from Kenya early in 2016 to face trial for his involvement of the killing of several other media professionals in the capital between 2007 and 2011. Before being sentenced to death by a military court, state-run Somali National Television (in collaboration with NISA) broadcast an extended interview (advertised and rebroadcast through social media platforms such as Youtube) with the accused in custody<sup>9</sup>. Xanafi was subsequently executed by firing squad in what was, essentially, a public execution: pictures in the Somali media appeared in Twitter and Facebook newsfeeds moments after it occurred.

Irrespective of judicial process this incident highlighted both the capacity and challenges faced by the state in waging a public relations battle against Al Shabaab through interlinked ‘state’ and ‘social’ media. The broadcasting of Xanafi’s apparent confession prompted the production of a counter-narrative by unidentified but presumably pro-Al Shabaab propagandists claiming to have obtained a voice recording of Xanafi in custody, distancing himself from what he alleged was a forced confession at the hands of local and Western intelligence operatives<sup>10</sup>. This Youtube ‘documentary’ ignored questions of Xanafi’s alleged guilt and focused instead on the activities of foreign intelligence services. Characteristic of

the militant media assemblages noted above, the bilingual (Somali-English) film featured material from the UK's Channel Four News (a piece by aforementioned British-Somali journalist Jamaal Cusman on foreign detention and interrogation in Mogadishu) and was produced by a self-styled human-rights advocacy group<sup>11</sup>. Such interaction demonstrates the range of formats employed by anti-state elements in their propaganda and the constant discursive interaction, via overlapping platforms of 'social' and 'official' media, between the FGS and Al Shabaab (and their supporters).

The nascent state's broadcasting of counter-terrorism or counter insurgency efforts could also be seen to have had practical ramifications for how such operations are conducted. Prominent commentators, such as former head of the BBC Somali Service Yusuf Garaad, voiced concerns through Facebook, blog posts, and private news websites that the FGS's broadcasting of images and interviews with Al Shabaab suspects was potentially detrimental to investigations and judicial processes<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, the same high profile figure (who was later appointed Foreign Minister under President Farmaajo) also criticised journalists' use of social media platforms in the midst of ongoing Al Shabaab attacks, suggesting that militants could follow the Twitter feeds of journalists to gain operational intelligence<sup>13</sup>. Garaad's use of Facebook is also illustrative here of the preferred platforms that prominent figures, public intellectuals and state officials use to communicate with various constituencies. The embryonic nature of state institutions in Mogadishu is accompanied by a high turnover of ministers, many of whom come from backgrounds outside of government. Habits of popular social media engagement by these individuals carry over into their state roles and this has implications for the maintenance of clear communications channels from government. This is a point returned to in the following section on more recent controversies.

### **The state, social media, and 'Somalia rising' (again)**

The sense of optimism that accompanied the parliamentary (s)election of President Maxamed Cabdilaahi 'Farmaajo' was reminiscent of the popular mood that greeted his predecessor in 2012. Then, Xasan Sheikh Maxamuud's background as a civil society activist (who had stayed in the country since the civil war) was viewed positively by many local and international commentators. Although the US-Somali dual citizen President Farmaajo could hardly be described as an outsider given his past stint as Prime Minister, this brief previous term in office had endeared him to a large segment of the population who saw him as a

staunch (anti-Ethiopian) nationalist and a politician with the will and capacity to undertake technocratic reforms, particularly around payments for security forces. Although both Xasan Sheikh Maxamuud *and* Farmaajo were allegedly backed by Qatari money (Roble, 2017), the latter's eventual selection by MPs was popularly perceived as being something of a surprise given the clout of former leaders who were standing against him, and significant amounts of foreign money bankrolling other 'campaigns' to ensure support amongst electors in the newly formed Parliament.

Although the selection process was live-streamed via Facebook, it can hardly be said that Farmaajo was brought to power by social media. Although commentators have pointed out that Farmaajo appeared to be the most popular candidate in online debates and Twitter 'polling' conducted by journalists (Mursal 2017), this was not a one-person-one-vote national election and the extent to which the involved MPs were influenced by candidates' respective social media strategies or standing is difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, the narrative of his 'unexpected' victory was amplified by social media particularly on the streets of Mogadishu. '*Farmaajo ii geeya*' ('bring me to Farmaajo') was the chant of a young man leading an enthusiastic crowd celebrating in public that night, the video of which went 'viral' across social media, rapidly becoming an emblem for narrative and musical expressions of optimism around the political transition.

These popular discourses chimed with earlier articulations of the 'Somalia rising' narrative predating Farmaajo's elevation to the presidency. Increased numbers of diaspora returnees post-2012 brought with them (and contributed to) local social media practices designed to highlight an alternative perspective on Somalia's political and security situation. Many Somali social media users have been quick to highlight overly negative or sensationalist 'mainstream' and external media reporting on Somalia<sup>14</sup>, countering such narratives with trending visual material of Mogadishu's physical redevelopment, the beauty of its coastline or quality of its culinary offerings<sup>15</sup>. The chapter will return to tensions that exist in this popular discursive environment between reporting of realities of violence and mediated 'solidarity' with Somalia below. However, it is first necessary to examine the ways in which state authorities themselves attempt to utilise these debates, and the potential blurring of communicative channels that occurs when government actors employ social media platforms themselves.

Like most other modern governments, the FGS is increasingly required to manage its social media profile, utilise different communicative platforms to engage with constituents, and promote particular narratives of governance. Given the wave of popular sentiment that accompanied President Farmaajo's selection, the administration was quick to capitalise on this goodwill, and intensify efforts to broadcast the new administration's activities and stance on various issues. These efforts often coalesced around a *#NabadIyoNolol* ('Peace and life') social media hashtag that denoted broad support for the new government. Farmaajo's widely broadcasted donning of military fatigues demonstrated an apparent commitment to intensified military engagements with Al Shabaab, while images of the president strolling on Lido beach in a 'team Somalia'-esque tracksuit was clearly intended to portray a 'man of the people' engaging at ease with ordinary folk at a location with high symbolic resonance for the 'Somalia rising' narrative.

This type of public relations strategy has become a topic of divisive popular debate, itself inevitably and recursively playing out through the same social media channels. Here a critique of the state's perceived immaterial self-promotion emerged around the *'igu sawir'* debate, epitomised by Ilkacase Qays' pop song quoted at the beginning of the chapter. Both the governments of Xasan Sheikh Maxamuud and Maxamed Cabdullahi Farmaajo faced popular criticism for a lack of tangible support given to a female member of the armed forces who was injured in 2016<sup>16</sup>. The slogan (and music video) thus made reference to the eagerness of politicians to be photographed with such individuals or initiatives for (social) media purposes without demonstrating tangible improvements in governance capacity or the ability to actually get things done.

Whilst the levelling of such a criticism is hardly unique to Somalia, this trending topic and ensuing debate raised questions about government communication strategies in a context where social media platforms have become a primary vector for the dissemination of information from the state itself. Lacking a dominant or highly-resourced state broadcaster, and competing in a highly fragmented digital media environment where private Somali-language commercial broadcasting overlaps almost seamlessly with social media, government figures have increasingly relied upon such platforms to communicate with various constituencies. Whilst this is the new media environment in which the nascent state finds itself, the proclivity of state officials to communicate via social media (such as President Farmaajo's 'tweeting' of his appointment of the Prime Minister before its

announcement by state media<sup>17</sup>) presents new dilemmas for authorities in maintaining coherent lines of communication, particularly around contentious issues.

Few issues are more contentious than the presence and operations of foreign forces in Somali territory. US military involvement in operations against Al Shabaab has intensified since 2012 with an increase in drone strikes and Special Forces kill/capture raids being undertaken independently or alongside Somali troops. President Trump's March 2017 designation of the country as a 'zone of active hostilities' represented a continuation of this trend with increasing operational freedoms being devolved to commanders at lower levels of the military hierarchy. The coastal and agriculturally rich Lower Shabelle region south-west of Mogadishu is a primary theatre of such operations. Al Shabaab has maintained a significant presence in the region and its proximity to Mogadishu provides space for preparing attacks on the capital. On 25 August 2017, US Special Forces undertook a joint operation with Somali troops in the town of Bariire recently seized from Al Shabaab. In the course of the pre-dawn raid ten civilians (reportedly including three children) were shot dead.

While pictures of the bodies were released and disseminated both by pro-Shabaab and unaffiliated local media, an initial statement from the Ministry of Information released both on the Minister's Facebook page and to the media suggested that no civilians had been killed in the operation<sup>18</sup>. In a separate post (in Somali) the Minister also stated that a full investigation would take place about the incident and that its findings would be released to the public<sup>19</sup>. Various other military, federal and local government officials then made contradictory statements through social and news media channels before it was established that ten civilians had, in fact, been killed in the raid (most of whom hailed from the politically influential and well-armed Habir Gedir subclan, whose elders would later negotiate sizeable compensation payments). The Minister's original Facebook post was subsequently removed and contradictory communications were explained as being the result of confusion about multiple military operations around Bariire that night<sup>20</sup>. Aside from igniting a popular social media debate between ordinary people and politicians (which the news media, as elsewhere, recursively reports as being news in of itself<sup>21</sup>), the incident soon prompted the Office of the Prime Minister to issue a directive to all ministries forbidding them to release any information without prior approval on social media or directly to journalists<sup>22</sup>. Not only did this throw into question the procedural relationship between the Ministry of Information and the Office of the Prime Minister, but it also highlighted the broader difficulties encountered



by the nascent state attempting to maintain a coherent narrative in the context of a dynamic security environment and anarchic (social) media ecology.

The importance of the Lower Shabelle conflict theatre's proximity to Mogadishu was underscored by the massive truck bomb detonated on 14 October 2017 at the busy Zoobe intersection in the heart of the capital. The attack was prepared and launched from this area and the main vehicle proceeded through checkpoints unchallenged into the city. While civilian casualties of militant attacks have always occurred, the location and magnitude of the blast – which claimed over 587 lives – was distinctive in the recent conflict history of the city.

Various dynamics of social media engagement with this attack are of relevance to this chapter's wider argument. In the aftermath of the blast extensive use was made by state and civil society actors of social media platforms to coordinate the search for the missing, and to 'crowdfund' emergency response services. Often led by diaspora Somalis or returnees, an emerging tech sector - based in Mogadishu and connected abroad - has innovated around pressing humanitarian concerns often using open source platforms to provide new online tools. A prior example of this was the *Ushahidi*-based *Abaaraha* platform facilitating contact between humanitarian actors and victims of the drought that affected large swathes of Somalia through 2016-2017. In the context of the 14 October attack, the *Gurmad252* campaign involved 50 volunteers processing data from family members and bystanders to build an accurate picture of the destruction, and to disseminate important information to injured victims and relatives (Dahir 2017). Although this constituted a 'civil society' initiative, it was promoted through government (social) media channels and became one of the most visible mechanisms through which services were coordinated. Once again, the blurring of lines between government and non-government agency became apparent with both sets of actors communicating and interacting through similar social media platforms.

The very fact that the bombing was able to take place highlighted state weakness and the continued incapacity of state security forces to secure access to the city. President Farmaajo's early post-selection 'honeymoon' period had already been thrown into question by a continued frequency of bomb attacks in the capital, while his 'nationalist' credentials were dented by his government's handling of the extradition of a senior Ogaden National Liberation Front operative to Ethiopia. The scale of the attack on October 14 necessitated a

major public relations drive that, to a large extent, played out over social media and involved a bewildering cast of characters. One aspect of this mediated response involved popular blood donations and the self-publicization of high-profile figures hooked up to the needle. These ranged from President Farmaajo himself and the British Ambassador, to Sheikh Mukhtar Roobow - former founder member of Al Shabaab who had recently defected out of exile to the FGS. The latter individual's controversial intervention was wryly described by one Somali journalist on Twitter as *igu sawir* 'gone too far'<sup>23</sup>, highlighting the complexity of the discursive battlefield on which responses to violence are played out, and the multiple platforms available for individuals to insert themselves into the debate. Roobow's post-defection social media visibility was a prelude to a predicted run for government office. At the time of writing, he is standing for the presidency of the South-West Federal State and stands a good chance of winning, assuming his path is not blocked by opposition from the FGS or Ethiopia.

Influenced by popular social-media led responses to mass terrorist violence in the West, many Somali commentators called for external signs of 'solidarity' with Mogadishu in the wake of the October 14 bombing, and lamented their general absence as a sign of the hypocrisy or racism of international media coverage. Commentators argued, with justification, that had such carnage been wrought in a Western capital then the scale and tone of coverage would have been different: why, they asked, was this not front-page news for all international outlets? Many of these same commentators have also previously critiqued the same 'mainstream' and external media for their portrayals of Somalia solely in the negative terms of violence, destruction and terrorism – a narrative that the 'Somalia rising' idea attempts to dispel with focus on many of the positive aspects of urban economic change. Recent literature highlights the potential role of social media in giving voice to 'subaltern' actors to challenge mainstream representations of contentious politics, with the Kenyan #SomeoneTellCNN campaign constituting an archetypical example (Adeiza and Howard 2017). Nonetheless, the debates around the portrayal of the October 14 destruction in Mogadishu highlighted tensions between various calls for coverage and amorphous and social-mediated 'solidarity', alongside earlier critiques of sensationalisations of violence that are equally problematic and replete with racialized undertones. This is not to suggest that objective and humane reporting cannot tread this fine line effectively. Rather, it prompts recognition that despite the recursive, potentially levelling and dialogic potentials of social/mainstream media engagement, the cumulative coverage of these overlapping media

platforms is still often inadequate for the portrayal of any complex social environment – let alone the dynamic contradictions that characterise ideological and economic contestation in a city such as Mogadishu.

In this regard, a hint at the complexity of the ideological terrain of this social media environment can be found by returning to the profile of the rapper whose critical *Igu sawir* anthem has been referred to throughout the chapter. Ilkacase Qays's music blends hip-hop culture with ideas of diasporic-inflected transnational Somali solidarity. Its mediation through journalistic and social media networks epitomises the diverse assemblage of narratives and ideological positions that feed into debates around state reconstruction. For example, in a Youtube-broadcast interview with (the also aforementioned) Dalsoor Media, the rapper emphasises both his amazement at Mogadishu's physical regeneration, and his desire that un-Islamic influences might be removed from the country<sup>24</sup>. His use here of the word '*gaal*' (non-believer) at this point in the interview is striking for its discursive linkage with the 'foreign', and indeed, is (mis)translated that way in the English subtitles that accompany the Somali audio. Ilkacase's recorded music and live public performance would hardly endear him to various Islamist factions active in Somali politics and the ongoing conflict. Nonetheless, his articulation of nationalist themes in the intersection of diasporic culture, and politically oriented and social media-platformed critical journalism, highlight the ways in which the new media environment facilitates a significant blurring of ideological affiliations towards a 'rising' Somalia. Reductive binary conceptions of 'Islamist' militant versus 'nationalist' state-builders are clearly inadequate here for understanding the tenor of these globalised but nationalistic debates in Somali social media.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated how prior conditions of prolonged statelessness have shaped a context where state governance can be quickly challenged through an anarchic media ecology. This environment is further fragmented by the accessible interactive technologies of social media, their blurring of public/private, state/non-state distinctions, and associated practices of assemblage and remediation that both polarise and complexify the ideological tone of these debates. Moving beyond the merely discursive, the chapter also shows how those who have become part of the nascent state may lack the governmental experience that might inculcate practices of communication along lines more 'appropriate' (at least in the conventional sense) to state broadcasting and public engagement. If Donald Trump's

presidency-by-Twitter can be seen to throw into question established norms of institutional communication for a powerful Western government, the one must also consider the implications of political social media engagement by power holders in a state at the extreme opposite end of the international state-capacity spectrum.

Here, the Somali state is being arduously reconstructed *in a context* of increasing digital and social media ubiquity, alongside continued armed conflict. Past repertoires of state broadcasting are limited in their effectiveness or legitimacy in this new media environment, and thus the social media communication strategies of state actors may themselves affect emergent popular understandings of what governance and state authority ‘mean’. With everyone from government ministers and armed opposition members, to nationalistic rappers and critical journalists hammering out debates over governance on a complex and ambiguous ideological terrain - and through the same social media platforms - what impact does this have on the privileged communicative position or the aura of prestige of the state? Whilst this question lies beyond the scope of the chapter, the analysis presented has highlighted novel problematics of state-making on the fringes of the global ‘network society’. As such, the social media environment presents new dilemmas of concern to both would-be political leaders in a (post-)conflict Somalia, and for those who are attempting to understand processes of state-making and breaking in the Horn of Africa and wider continent.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maxamed-Qays Cabdulqaadir Dhuubow Yare (AKA 'Ilkacase Qays')/Aflaanta Studio 'Igu Sawir' 2 August 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mn4kAm5-tpM> (accessed 11 December 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Harun Maruf, VOA Somali, 'Canshuuraha ay Al-Shabaab qaado' [The taxes collected by Al Shabaab] October 23, 2018 <https://www.voasomali.com/a/4625543.html> (11 December 2018).

<sup>3</sup> 2015 Survey data from local commercial research firm Datagrid reported 97% phone ownership amongst Mogadishu residents of all 17 districts, with 56% of the sample (386) owning smartphones. Datagrid Report <https://www.yumpu.com/xx/document/view/39963506/telecom-survey-summary-final-email> (1 November 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Channel 4 News, 'Is the US overseeing torture in Somalia?' 9 December 2014 <https://www.channel4.com/news/somalia-torture-united-states-cia-al-shabaab-video> (15 February 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Dalsoor Media, 'Wareysi Qaybtii 1aad: Sheekh Cali Dheere' 5 January 2017 [Interview Part One: Sheekh Cali Dheere] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJwuw-H0mgs> (accessed 12 April 2017)

<sup>6</sup> Caasimadda Online, 1 July 2015, 'Daawo sawirada Al Shabaab oo soo bandhigay meydadka askarii Burundi ee lagu dilay Leego' [See pictures that Al Shabaab has published of bodies of Burundian soldiers killed in Leego], <http://caasimadda.com/daawo-sawirada-alshabaab-oo-soo-bandhigay-meydadka-askarii-burundi-ee-lagu-dilay-leego/> (June 28, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Voice of Somalia.net, March 18, 2014, 'The Economist: Xasan Sheekh Si Musuq maasuq ah ayaa lagu soo doortay' [The Economist: Xasan Sheekh was elected through corrupt practices] <https://voiceofsomalia.net/tag/xasan-gurguurte/page/5/> (1 November 2017).

<sup>8</sup> UGUS: *Ururka Gumaadka Ummadda Soomaaliyeed* ('Organisation for the slaughter of the Somali Ummah') Radio Kulmiye, 3 May 2015, 'Warbaahinta Muqdisho oo laga dalbaday in ay joojiyaan isticmaalka magaca Al-shabaab' [Mogadishu Media requested to stop using the name 'Al Shabaab'] <http://radiokulmiye.com/knn/warbaahinta-muqdisho-oo-laga-dalbaday-in-ay-joojiyaan-isticmaalka-magaca-al-shabaab/> (May 10, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Somali National Television, 5 February 2016 'Dilaaga Wariyaha – waa kuma Xasan Xanafi?' [Journalist killer – who is Xasan Xanafi?] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-nGbr0Wkc> (

<sup>10</sup> Journalists for Justice, 28 March 2016, 'Confessions of a killer' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egKm-ibQkM8> (28 June 2016).

<sup>11</sup> 'Journalists for Justice' is distinct from the organisation of the same name in Kenya.

<sup>12</sup> Yuusuf Garaad, personal blog, 15 July 2014, 'Saxaafadda iyo sirdoonka' [Journalists and the intelligence agencies] <http://yuusuf-garaad.blogspot.co.uk/2014/07/saxaafadda-iyoo-sirdoonka.html> (28 June 2016)

<sup>13</sup> Yusuf Garaad, Xaqiiqa Times newspaper, Mogadishu, 10 April 2015. 'Warfaafin mise sirfaafin?' [News broadcasting or secrets broadcasting?]

<sup>14</sup> The #SomeoneTellMaryHarper hashtag took aim at the BBC's use of an image of the aftermath of an Al Shabaab attack to illustrate a story about Mogadishu's first "International Book Fair". BBC "Debating Mogadishu Pictures", 27 August 2015. [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-africa-34012096?ns\\_mchannel=social&ns\\_source=twitter&ns\\_campaign=bbc\\_live&ns\\_linkname=\[Debating%20Mogadishu%20pictures%2616:10\]&ns\\_fee=0#post\\_34076461](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/live/world-africa-34012096?ns_mchannel=social&ns_source=twitter&ns_campaign=bbc_live&ns_linkname=[Debating%20Mogadishu%20pictures%2616:10]&ns_fee=0#post_34076461) (14 December 2018).

<sup>15</sup> E.g. the social media 'stardom' of Ugaaso Abokor, a diaspora returnee who generated significant international attention for her *Instagrammed* take on life in Mogadishu: BBC, "#BBCtrending: The Somali woman who's become a global star on Instagram," February 17, 2015. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-31462954> (28 June 2016).

<sup>16</sup> BBC Somali Service, 27 July 2017, "Maxaa keenay in erayada 'Igu Sawir' iyo 'Igu Dayo' ay qabsadaan baraha bulshada?" [What's brought the terms 'igu sawir' and 'igu dayo' into social media?] <http://www.bbc.com/somali/war-40741905> (25 October 2017)

<sup>17</sup> @M\_Farmaajo's official Twitter Feed, Tweet 22 February 2017: [https://twitter.com/M\\_Farmaajo/status/834613741266296834](https://twitter.com/M_Farmaajo/status/834613741266296834) (1 November 2017)

<sup>18</sup> Radio Kulmiye, 25 August 2017, 'Dowladda Soomaaliya' Bariire 8 Shabaab ah ayaa ku dilnay' [Somali Government: "We killed 8 Shabaab at Bariire"] <http://radiokulmiye.net/2017/08/25/dowladda-soomaaliyabariire-8-shabaab-ah-ayaa-ku-dilnay-akhriso/> (27 October 2017)

<sup>19</sup> Garowe Online, 25 August 2017, 'Wasiirka Warfaafinta DF Somalia oo ka Hadlay Falkii Bariire' [Somali Federal Government Minister of Information speaks about Bariire incident] <http://www.garoweonline.com/so/news/somalia/wasiirka-warfaafinta-df-somalia-oo-ka-hadlay-falkii-bariire> (27 October 2017)

<sup>20</sup> Various Somali online news sites featured a screengrab of the Foreign Minister's statement on this apparent confusion. See Warkii Online, 26 August 2017, 'Wasiirka Arrimaha Dibadda Soomaaliya Yuusuf Garaad oo war kasoo saaray weerarkii Bariire' [Foreign Minister Yuusuf Garaad releases information about Bariire attack] <http://www.warkii.com/wasiirka-arrimaha-dibadda-soomaaliya-yuusuf-garaad-oo-war-kasoo-saaray-weerarkii-bariire/> (27 October 2017)

<sup>21</sup> Caasimada Online, 26 August 2017, '*Xasuuqa Bariire oo baraha bulshada qabsaday iyo DF oo cadaadis la kulmeysa*' [The Bariire massacre taken up on social media and Federal Government faces pressure] <http://www.caasimada.net/xasuuqa-bariire-oo-baraha-bulshada-qabsaday-df-oo-cadaadis-la-kulmeysa/> (27 October 2017)

<sup>22</sup> A copy of the notification letter (Somali) is available at Jowhar Online, 27 August 2017, '*Akhriso: Golaha Wasiirada oo lagu amray in ogolaansho la'aan isticmaali karin Warbaahinta*' [Read: Cabinet ordered not to use media without permission] <http://www.jowhar.com/2017/08/27/akhriso-golaha-wasiirada-oo-lagu-amray-in-ogolaansho-laaan-isticmaali-karin-warbaahinta/> (27 October 2017)

<sup>23</sup> Liban Ahmad, tweet, 16 October 2017, <https://twitter.com/Libanahmad1/status/919899752329830400>

<sup>24</sup> Dalsoor Media/YouTube '*Ilkacase Qays wareysi Muqdisho dhex wareegaya Daawo 2017*' [Watch 2017 interview with Ilkacase Qays in Mogadishu] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajlHZ1bhhfY> (1 November 2017).