The Islamic Courts Union: The ebb and flow of a Somali Islamist movement

Jon Abbink

The Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Somalia was a social-religious movement with a political programme. This internally diverse movement emerged from local Islamic courts active in Mogadishu in the late 1990s. In the absence of state authority and public security in 2004, it responded to the social needs of local people and grew into a large militia force that, by late 2006, controlled much of southern Somalia. In December 2006 a military campaign by Ethiopia, in support of the Somali Transitional Federal Government, ousted the ICU. The movement subsequently declined, split and withdrew to transform itself into a new military grouping. Its socio-religious programme waned, its violent militant agenda re-emerged and it morphed into a new nationalist movement.

This chapter considers the ICU as a social movement and questions its precedents, its social-reformist agenda and ideology, and its mobilizational procedures. The reasons for the rapid rise of the ICU in 2006 within the unstable and militarized society of southern Somalia have to be understood against the background of Muslim movements that existed in the country in earlier decades and unsuccessful attempts to establish a national government. This is marked by a mixture of political segmentation determined by the Somali clan-family system, socio-religious innovation, economic competition and local political manoeuvring in the stateless environment of southern Somalia since 1991. While local political dynamics are very important, the analysis also relates ongoing conflicts in Somali society to global geopolitics and Islamist radicalism.
Introduction: Locating the Somali case in social movement theory

This chapter presents an interpretive case study of the Islamic Courts Union (Midowga Maxkamadaha Islaamiga in Somali) in southern Somalia, an Islamist movement that was active from c. 2004 to 2008 and had social and political aims reflecting both internal diversity (and division) and a new international positioning. A study of this movement reveals the crucial role of international contacts of all the actors on the Somali scene. This was not only evident in the persistent presence of neighbouring countries but also in the growing influence of transnational Islamic ideologies and networks, including that of Somali diaspora communities. These external sources provided funding, new narratives of nationalism and religious identity, and foreign-trained cohorts that impacted on socio-religious practices and ideologies in Somalia. It can be argued that seemingly local developments, like clan-militia fighting, religiously motivated battles, piracy, looting, terrorist actions and the work of Islamic charities are inextricably linked to global flows and thus highly relevant to politics and security developments in the region as a whole.

Somalia has been in the midst of major societal transformation since 1991, not only due to the destructive civil war and the internal struggle that wrecked the country (at least its southern part), but also the transformation of customary religious life and social structures. One part of the story is the emergence of radical forms of Islam and these, although representing a minority of Somalis, seem to have become entrenched in society and redefined people’s social and religious identification. The ICU, originally known as the ‘Supreme Council of Islamic Courts of Somalia’, was founded in 2004 and is an intriguing example of a movement that emerged in extreme conditions of statelessness, civil war, humanitarian crisis and social disarray in southern Somalia. It was characterized by mobilization and recruitment on the basis of (a specific form of) Muslim

---

1 One in every ten Somalis lives in the diaspora, mainly in the US, Western Europe, the Middle East (Gulf States, Saudi Arabia) and neighbouring countries in the Horn.
3 In Somali: Golaha Sare ee Makhamaddaha Islaamiga ee Soomaaliya.