



CONTENDING RELIGIONS, IDENTITIES AND SPACE

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PAPER'S TITLE: FROM NETWORKS TO PLATFORMS. HOW ISLAMIC NGOS BUILD THE NATION IN SOMALIA.

ABSTRACT: Since the collapse of the Siad Barre regime in 1991, Somalia strives to reach peace, political stability and prosperity for its people. In the absence of effective formal state institutions, the organizations of civil society has taken steps to fill a governance gap in the social sectors. Particularly, Islamic NGOs promoted by the Islamist Movement Al Islah in the early 1990s are setting up hospitals, schools, Universities, technical training institutes, research centres.

This paper describes the strategy of Islamic civil society organizations to restore governance in the ungoverned lands of Somalia. It presents the phases of Islamic NGOs engagement in State-building, briefly starting from the humanitarian impulse in the 1990s, to the intervention in the social services for the population through networks of civil society organizations during the early 2000. The paper then shows how, in the last decade, networks of civil society organizations moved to a more open political approach through the establishment of platforms of civil society organizations, financed by the European Union in the framework of its development approach in fragile states contexts. From 2006, three geographical platforms of civil society organizations facilitated the participation of representatives of Islamic NGOs, of the business and diaspora community to the peace processes supported by the international community in Djibouti. The shift from networks to platforms provided the channel for Al Islah to enter the political domain and to pave the way for winning the Presidential elections in 2012. The Peace and Development party that brought Hassan Sheikh Mohamud to the Presidency in 2012 is in fact an emanation of Al Islah movement that used the politics of Islamic NGOs and civil society organizations to build national institutions.

The paper is the outcome of a PhD research concluded in 2011 and based on first hand interviews to one of the (then) underground Islamist movement Al Islah in Somalia. The findings have been updated to 2012 through literature search and analysis, and further elaborated.

The conceptual framework used in the research is the social movement theory applied to the Islamist movements. The Islamist movement Al Islah is presented as a political actor who creates, acquires, borrows and makes use of Islamic NGOs or civil society organizations to achieve its political objective. The approach of the political opportunities, that further details the social movement theory, easily explains the shift from networks to platforms of civil society organizations, with a defined geographical basis, and a clear political aim. The development funds of the European Union to support civil society organizations in a fragile state context is here presented as the external variable that gave the opportunity to the Islamist movement Al Islah to gain international legitimacy through the platforms of civil society organizations, downplaying the religious identity.

AUTHOR'S SHORT BIO AND ACADEMIC PROFILE: Valeria is an academic in the field of international cooperation for development with a strong practical field-experience in Africa as development worker. She holds a PhD in African Studies and a Master in International Cooperation.

Valeria teaches International Cooperation for Development at University L'Orientale of Naples and conducts research in Somalia on the Islamic NGO sector and its role in State building. She also researches on the role of civil society in fragile settings, and on the Migration-Development Nexus. As development worker, Valeria served NGOs, UN agencies and governmental offices in Kenya and Somalia and directly testified the role of Islamic NGOs in Somalia from 2003 to 2006. Among her recent publications on the same subject: *Rebuilding the State from below. Networks of NGOs and the politics of Civil Society in Somalia* (2014); *The Rise of Islamic Resurgence in Somalia* (2013); *"From Charity to Governance: Islamic NGOs and education in Somalia"* (2011).