

The Wind That Blows Before the Rain

Acts of Defiance and Care in Northern Somalia in the 1980s

Thesis summary

In northern Somalia in the 1980s, teachers, doctors and other professionals came together to restore a hospital and volunteer in schools. The professionals were arrested and faced the possibility of execution. On the day of their planned trial, 20 February 1982, secondary school students together with other residents, started to protest despite the high risks of repression. This marked the first street-protest against the Siad Barre regime in northern Somalia. The resistance continued, also in violent forms, and eventually led to the self-proclamation of Somaliland in 1991.

The professionals' volunteerism and the student uprising show that there are examples of people who begin to mobilize collectively to care for others and to non-violently resist injustice also in repressive and violent contexts, where the political space is severely limited and the risks of engaging in collective action are high. A meticulous investigation of this moment in Somali history allows this study to address the research puzzles of why and how early risers, who face the biggest risks, initiate collective action and resistance at historical junctures, as well as the related puzzle of why state repression at times encourages increased resistance, rather than discouraging it.

This thesis attempts to address gaps in, draw on, contribute to, and bring together several relevant strands of literature, particularly studies on social movements and the related research strand on non-violent resistance. The thesis departs from structure-centred approaches that dominate in these research strands and situates itself within a branch in social movement scholarship that focuses on agency-based approaches, including moral, emotional, and cultural dynamics. In particular, it investigates insights from scholars of social movements in the Global South and in repressive settings across the globe. The thesis answers to these scholars' calls for studies on movements from across the globe that study these movements on their own terms. In addition, the thesis draws on theoretical tools from non-violent resistance studies that have had a larger focus on movements' actions and strategies in authoritarian settings. These approaches, together with the bottom-up research design focused on personal narratives – with a great appreciation for the unique context – may take us further in understanding 'the first stirrings' of collective action in authoritarian settings, why repression sometimes promotes, rather than inhibits, resistance, as well as the multitude of responses that exist to address and challenge repression. 20

The thesis asks: *Why and how do early risers – and their immediate followers – initiate collective action and resistance in contexts of authoritarian repression?* The question is addressed in a qualitative enquiry based on fieldwork in Somaliland that resulted in over 100 in-depth interviews, oral histories and conversations with the key people involved. The transcribed and coded interview data was combined with archival data, such as the trial protocol from 1982, reports, and political poetry from the time, and co-creative methods, including a historical comic and a TV show.

The thesis' in-depth approach, focused on a case of collective action in an authoritarian environment in the Global South, has allowed it to contribute to and bring together relevant literatures in several core ways. First, it has illustrated the crucial roles that strongly felt moral and emotional motivations play in enabling early risers and their followers to surmount their fears and act collectively despite high risks. The thesis supports scholars who argue that a dramatic increase of 'extra intense' grievances – or a moral shock – can explain the sudden urge to act collectively. The thesis has shown how people's positions and relationships, together with the presence of regime-critical discourses embedded in the popular culture, are vital for the experience of moral shocks. The thesis encourages future research to pay greater attention to the role of compassion, love, and acts of care in relationships, thus highlighting the added value of drawing on the ethics of care theory.

A second contribution is that the personal narrative approach has allowed the thesis to shed light on the role of past socialization processes in developing strongly felt values and critical discourses. The thesis illustrates the value of continued dialogue between political socialization research and research on social movements and resistance, especially including cases from outside the Global North.

Third, the dissertation's bottom-up research approach has enabled the thesis to detect and study more ambiguous, yet powerful, forms of collective action and resistance, including locally driven initiatives in the health and educational sector and poetry performances. Hence, the dissertation illustrates how people are able to carve out spaces for action in landscapes full of restrictions and risks, thereby demonstrating the creative potential of agency and spontaneity. The thesis lends credibility to the recent call by scholars of 'resistance studies' to focus on constructive forms of resistance that create alternatives and enact values, which are different from the more confrontational forms of 'contentious resistance'. 21

Fourth, the thesis has emphasized the role of political poetry in the early resistance in northern Somalia in the 1980s. Oral poetry was instrumental in the spread of emotionally engaging and regime-critical discourses in a context of state censorship. In this setting, which was also prior to the introduction of social media, oral poetry functioned as a powerful force of mass communication in the society. In this way, the thesis has demonstrated the crucial role that framing, and communication can play also in an authoritarian setting where there is state propaganda and censorship. Poetry further supported the building of bonds of solidarity, a prerequisite for collective action to emerge.

Fifth, the thesis has illustrated the interactions between resisters and the state, which played out in both informal and formal arenas. The thesis shows the moral and cultural dimensions alongside the strategic-pragmatic dimensions of non-violent actions and strategies. To understand these interactions, and the choices and (mis)calculations that were made, one must account for the larger context of previous colonization and the Cold War, where both the US and the Soviet Union channelled large amounts of military aid and training to Somalia.

Sixth, the thesis adds nuance to the term 'political jiu-jitsu' by arguing that, in this case, it was not only the actors' *non-violent* character, but more essentially their *non-political*, *humanitarian*, and *relational* character that brought about the jiu-jitsu effect. The thesis has thus provided an example of how humanitarian volunteerism can have significant political consequences that drive societal transformation.