

## LAANTA BUUR: My Political Prison

**MAHAMUD MOHAMED YAHYA – SOMALIA / KSA**

( FORMER DEPUTY MAYOR OF MOGADISHU )

[mm2yahya@yahoo.com](mailto:mm2yahya@yahoo.com)

### PREFACE (by N. Gharaibeh, MD )

This article is not an academic or research study. The reason it is in this issue is that Correctional Psychiatry was not addressed. There are around 370 thousand prisoners in the Arab world and about 150 thousand prisoners with mental illness, addiction, or both.

This account by Dr. Yahya, a highly educated Somali was included just to give a glimpse into the mental suffering in Arabic prisons and a first hand account of the conditions there. The situation today may be no different than 20 or so years ago in Somalia (may be even worse).

Psychiatrists have some ethical burden to at least document the suffering of prisoners especially those with mental illness who cannot advocate for themselves.

In the view of many witnesses of Somalia's recent history, an important element of the terrible abuse of power and authority during the dictatorial regime of the late Gen. Mohamed Siad Barre was the arbitrary and widespread detention of dissidents, political opponents and even ordinary Somalis who would just express an honest opinion on the state of affairs of their country. These incarcerations were usually without any charges, whatsoever, and without trial. For this reason, men like Gen. Mohamed Abshir Muse, former Commander of Somalia's Police Force, the late Mr. Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, ex-President of self-declared Somaliland Republic and former Prime Minister of Somalia, Col. Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, current President of Somalia, the late Gen. Mohamed Farah Aideed, former USC leader, the late Sheikh Mohamed Ma'alim, the famous Islamic scholar, Col. Jama Ali Jama, former leader of the Puntland autonomous region of Somalia, and many others, each had to spend 5 to 12 years behind bars, mostly in solitary confinement.

These great injustices which had turned many Somalis against that repressive government - despite its popularity at the beginning of its reign in 1969 – were, in my opinion, the main cause behind the start of the armed rebellion against the old regime and its eventual downfall in 1991. However, these insidious atrocities and this gross violation of the human rights of the Somali people have never, to the best of my knowledge, been chronicled or adequately recorded, with the possible exception of a small booklet in Somali, entitled Xabsigaygii (My Imprisonment) which was published in 2000 by Prof. Yusuf Hersi Ahmed, the renowned TB specialist (who now lives in exile in Pakistan). I think this record-keeping is of paramount importance so that future Somali generations will draw useful lessons from it, because it is my firm belief that this malicious exercise of absolute power was one of the catalysts for the catastrophe that followed later and led to the collapse of the Somali State and the devastating civil war that

Somalia has been undergoing in the past 17 years or so. That is why I have decided today to recount my story as a former political prisoner under Barre's loathed regime, the great suffering I had endured and how this painful experience had later helped me enormously in rebuilding my life. Again, our former political prison, Laanta Buur, is currently in the news because it is one of the main bases for the armed militias of the notorious Mogadishu warlords who now claim that they plan to pacify that unlucky city after failing to do so in almost two decades of a pernicious civil war.

I was imprisoned one night in May 1976, one of the saddest and most memorable dates of my entire life. I was first taken to the Mogadishu branch of the dreaded Nabad-Sugidda Soomaaliyeed (i.e., National Security Service or NSS) where the officer in charge, the fearsome Col. Ahmed Jili'ow (from Mogadishu), gave orders for me to be thrown into jail without even asking me about my name or place of work. On that night, about 50 of us, ordinary civilians, most of whom from Galcaio, Bossaso, Hargeisa, Burao and Hobyo were rounded up and dumped early in the morning at Laanta Buur Prison, situated in the middle of nowhere (about 45 km to the west of Mogadishu on the road to the coastal city of Merca). This was an extremely harsh detention center which was built by the "Revolutionary Government" in that remote area specifically to punish dissidents or political prisoners more severely, as they were not allowed to be visited by families and friends or be brought decent food and reading materials from home.

The conditions at Laanta Buur were extremely appalling: the food was awful - but we had to consume it in order not to starve to death - and health services were practically non-existent. We were deprived of radios - let alone TV which was not then available in Somalia as a whole - and visits from our families and loved ones. We were also deprived of all means of reading and writing, and we were not allowed to do any work – something

that would have kept us a bit busy at least for a few hours every day. (But to be fair to the regime, we were never tortured, physically, or even interrogated). In comparison, the living conditions of the common criminals at Mogadishu's central prison – some of whom might have committed murders or stolen public funds - were much better than ours, because they had all kinds of privileges.

Even detention under the very despicable apartheid system in South Africa was much more merciful and humane, because Nelson Mandela and his other colleagues at Robben Island Prison – who, like us, were imprisoned for political reasons - were allowed one letter and one visit every three months! Not in Siad Barre's cruel prison at Laanta Buur or the more miserable concentration camp at Labaatan Jirow (near Baidoa city). In this latter dungeon, all detainees had to spend their sad days in solitary confinement, in terrible individual cells with no amenities; the only relief they had was for each political prisoner to walk for mere 20 minutes per day in the corridor outside his cell under the strict watch of a prison guard.

I did not mind being deprived of food and sleep, but the thing that bothered me most at Laanta Buur was sitting idle, day in, day out, and not knowing why was I being imprisoned? What were the specific charges against me, and how long would I remain over there? If you commit a crime that you know of, you easily accept your fate and you just start counting the remaining years of your sentence, irrespective of its length. Not in political imprisonment. I can, therefore, summarize the most difficult part of a detention experience in one word: boredom, boredom, and boredom. This reminds me about a famous Egyptian journalist, the late Mustafa Amin, who wrote in one of his books, after spending several years in Nasser's prisons: If the year of an ordinary person consists of 365 days, the day of a prisoner equals 365 years!

We were detained indefinitely, because in the jargons of those "revolutionary" days we were simply known as "lahayeyaal" (people in custody), without any charges against us and without access to lawyers or courts of justice or any of these legal niceties. Now you may wonder why the Siad Barre's regime and its hated NSS were treating their citizens in such an extremely cruel and sadistic manner? The answer is simple: it was part of the regime's coercive control method and its main instrument for keeping absolute power forever. As such, the purpose behind this very merciless and inhumane detention was to break the will of dissidents and those who oppose or even dare to criticize Siad Barre's military tyranny or its policies. It also aimed at terrorizing other Somalis who knew that this might happen to them as well.

The presence of older and wiser men like Prof. Yusuf Hersi, Yusuf Samatar "Barda'ad", Abdirahman Aswad and Ali "Ambe" among us was very helpful, because they used to counsel us and help us in enduring our ordeal. We were also lucky because Mr. Adan Bahnan (from Burao), who was imprisoned with us at Laanta Buur for a normal criminal case, was often allowed to go to Mogadishu and would bring books with him and then he would smuggle some of them to us. Thanks to Adan Bahnan's great and compassionate efforts, I was able to read several good books by Shakespeare, Nobel Laureate, the Nigerian Wole Soyinka, etc., and to survive this gruesome internment.

On the other hand, I was fortunate, because I was released from prison after four painful months due to the intervention of Siad Barre, after my family and relatives appealed to him. (But

even after almost 30 years, I don't know till now the real reason behind my imprisonment). Prof. Yusuf Hersi and others had to spend around three more years in jail, some of it in the notorious Labaatan Jirow detention camp. And although I could have gone back to my old job, as Deputy Mayor of Mogadishu, I refused to do so. I asked instead to be transferred to the then Somali Institute of Development Administration and Management (SIDAM) - an entity that was set up by the previous civilian governments with the help of the UN to train the country's civil servants - to be a simple lecturer in accounting and financial management. I took the latter option, because I wanted to totally cut off my ties with this absolute dictatorship and not to assume any more high position within its ranks.

Another reason why I chose being a simple lecturer was that I planned to do graduate studies either in Britain or USA, because I knew the UN used to give yearly scholarships to the teaching staff of SIDAM to pursue further studies. Sure enough, after 3 years, I was awarded a scholarship and I enrolled at one of the finest universities in America, i.e., University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) where I obtained an MBA and a Ph.D., after spending five of the best and most rewarding years of my entire life. Upon finishing my studies, I went back to Somalia, because I felt that I owed a great deal to my homeland and I wanted to repay that debt in any way or capacity possible. However, after spending another 6 months in Mogadishu, I realized that the situation in the country was extremely hopeless and that serious troubles were looming on the horizon. That is why I decided to jump on a job opportunity which I found in Saudi Arabia and I left Somalia for good in Oct. 1985.

Although I was initially bitter about my political imprisonment in Somalia, I don't feel it that way anymore, because I have now come to terms with this unfortunate but preordained incident. Due to this traumatic experience, I was able, by the grace of Allah, to change the course of my life and rebuild it from scratch and to obtain degrees and jobs that I would have never dreamed of. (But I still suffer, after almost 32 years, from a chronic insomnia that I had developed during that painful imprisonment). Another important factor which helped me come to terms with my traumatic experience was a visit I paid to South Africa in October 2002. When I called on Robben Island and saw the miserable 2x3 meter cell where the great Mandela had spent 20 out of his 27 years in the apartheid prisons, I was really humbled and then my old wounds were healed.

That is why I have decided long time ago to forgive Siad Barre and his dictatorial regime, because there is no point in dwelling on a past that you cannot change. Moreover, I forgave that tyrannical administration because the notorious warlords who followed it, and who caused the death of at least half a million innocent Somalis according to some reliable estimates, were much worse. I even at times feel thankful and offer prayers or "duco" to Col. Ahmed Jili'ow, the man who was instrumental in my imprisonment – mainly out of tribal animosity – because he offered me, unintentionally, a crucial wake-up call that changed my life for the better. (Incidentally, I was told that Jili'ow is now stuck in lawless Mogadishu where he survives by spying on students of Islam in Somalia, on behalf of USA and other foreign governments, kidnapping some of them occasionally and selling them to the highest bidder).

Finally, if I had not gone through this very painful prison experience and learned from it, I would probably have today been squabbling with unscrupulous and tribal-minded former car

drivers, ex-police sergeants and former office messengers over a position in Somalia's new transitional federal government in anarchic Mogadishu, if I was not already murdered for tribal reasons. (It is really Somalia's great misfortune that these semi-illiterate men, none of whom has ever run a village or even a small government office, have the audacity to insist nowadays on leading a whole nation, simply because they belong to a certain clan or they possess a few guns).

**Dr. Mahamud M. Yahya, Ph D.**

(Former Deputy Mayor of Mogadishu)

*During the 1960s and 1970s, Dr. Mahamud Yahya had worked for the Somali government in various capacities, having studied in Somalia, Egypt and USA. After his imprisonment, he left Somalia and worked in Saudi Arabia for about 22 years for the international financial institution, the Islamic Development Bank. The present article is an updated version of an article posted on the Somali website, "Mudug On Line", in 2006. Mahamoud may be contacted by e-mail at [mm2yahya@yahoo.com](mailto:mm2yahya@yahoo.com)*

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[boufoulab@yahoo.fr](mailto:boufoulab@yahoo.fr) - [bbboufoula@hotmail.com](mailto:bbboufoula@hotmail.com)

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أ. د. مصطفى العيسى: مينوسوتا، أميركا ( [malabsi@umn.edu](mailto:malabsi@umn.edu) ) أو برئيس التحرير د.

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[abd.s.ibrahim@gmail.com](mailto:abd.s.ibrahim@gmail.com) ; [ar.i@laposte.net](mailto:ar.i@laposte.net) ; [dr.abd.ibrahim@gmail.com](mailto:dr.abd.ibrahim@gmail.com)