

The Washington Post

Somali President May Quit, Advisers Say

Mounting Pressure, Resignation of Prime Minister Could Force Yusuf to Yield

By Stephanie McCrummen
Washington Post Foreign Service
Thursday, December 25, 2008; A15

NAIROBI, Dec. 24 -- Advisers to [Somali President Abdullahi Yusuf](#) said Wednesday that he would yield to mounting internal and international pressure and resign over the weekend, but officials close to him insisted the situation remained dynamic.

Talk of Yusuf's impending resignation came as the prime minister he appointed last week quit, saying he wanted to end the political infighting that has paralyzed Somalia's transitional government as an Islamist militia has advanced across the southern half of the country. The opposition had charged that the appointment was illegal.

The resignation of Yusuf's prime minister, Mohamed Mohamud Guled, "is a prelude to the overall Christmas present, which is Yusuf's resignation," said Abdirizak Adam Hassan, a former presidential adviser. "He will go."

Yusuf, 74, has been accused by his opponents of ruling brutally in the narrow interests of his clan, the Darod, and obstructing a political compromise to help end a two-year Islamist insurgency that is growing stronger.

More than a million Somalis have been displaced by the relentless fighting among Yusuf's Ethiopian backers, clan militias complaining Yusuf has alienated them, and an Islamist faction known as the Shabab. The United States has designated the Shabab a terrorist group and accuses it of having ties to [al-Qaeda](#).

The fighting has left the seaside capital of Mogadishu half-empty. Displaced and broken families have fanned out across a desert landscape, where meager rain and crop failures have left them on the edge of famine.

"Yusuf has fostered a mafia administration rooted in his own clan and was as big an obstacle to peace as hard-line Shabab elements," said [John Prendergast](#), co-chairman of the Enough Project, which seeks to end genocide and crimes against humanity. Yusuf's resignation would provide "a small but vital window to the peace process to build a real government of national unity from the bottom up to combat extremism and create a legitimate governing authority."

Citing an aide to the president, the [Associated Press](#) reported that Yusuf has called for a special parliamentary session Saturday, and that it is possible he will step down. The aide spoke on the condition of anonymity. [washingtonpost.com/.../AR200812240...](http://www.washingtonpost.com/.../AR200812240...)

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session Saturday, and that it is possible he will step down. The aide spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the news media.

Until recently, the [United Nations](#) and the United States had steadfastly backed Yusuf's transitional government even as his forces were accused, along with other parties to the conflict, of human rights violations. For its part, the United Nations had invested heavily in the success of the transitional government -- Somalia's first central government since 1991. Yusuf's Ethiopian backers considered him a friendly bulwark against any Islamist advance across its borders. And he had given the United States a free hand to conduct counterterrorism operations in Somalia against alleged al-Qaeda operatives.

But Yusuf steadily lost that support as he refused to accept a political deal backed by the United Nations and the United States that seeks to defuse the insurgency. The Djibouti agreement, as it is known, shifts some power to a rival clan, the Hawiye -- which is dominant across southern Somalia and Mogadishu -- and moderate Islamist leaders.

Backers of the agreement, including former prime minister [Nur Hassan Hussein](#) -- whom Yusuf fired last week -- are hoping that the deal, along with the withdrawal of Ethiopians, will undermine popular support for the Shabab, which means "youth" in Arabic.

The Islamist faction has used the presence of the Ethiopians as a tool to recruit young, jobless men across the traditionally moderate Muslim nation.

"Let us be optimistic" Hussein said in an interview Tuesday, explaining that the next step is to sell the Djibouti agreement at the grass-roots level. "If parents are mobilized, if job opportunities are created, it could mean a change of direction" for young people, he said. "I'm trying to focus on young people who are the backbone of the Shabab."

If Yusuf resigns, the speaker of parliament would become president until the parliament appoints a new leader. Some observers predict that Sharif Ahmed, a relatively moderate Islamist who led the Islamic courts movement ousted by the Ethiopians two years ago, might be elected president, with Hussein -- a widely respected humanitarian -- as prime minister. Both men are Hawiye.

Sharif recently returned to Mogadishu, where he has been meeting with clan elders and giving speeches on local radio in an effort to build the sort of support Hussein described.

But many worry that the imminent withdrawal of Ethiopian forces will leave a security vacuum that the Shabab will rush to fill.

Others predict that if Yusuf goes, his clan will go with him, retreating to the northern region of Puntland, which may declare independence. There is also the fear that Yusuf's Darod supporters will join the Shabab and fight a new government.

Hassan, the former presidential adviser, said his concern is that the new government will not be an inclusive one, but a Hawiye one. "Anything that makes peace with the Hawiye people is fine," he said. "But you need a national agreement, not a sub-regional agreement among the Hawiye."

Special correspondent Mohamed Ibrahim contributed to this report.

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