

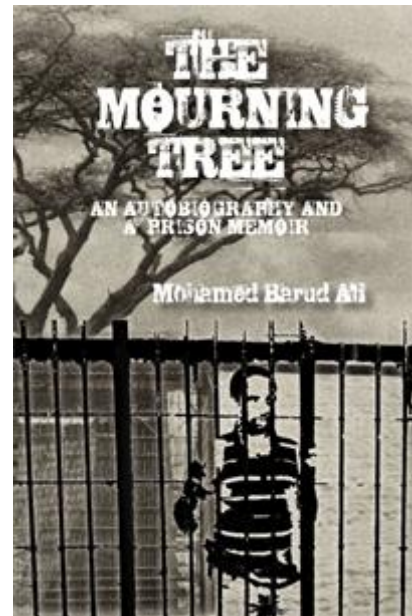
The Mourning Tree - An Autobiography and A Prison Memoir

Mohamed Barud Ali, February 2010

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In 1993, as a Minister of the Republic of Somaliland, “I was given the same office that the National Security Service interrogated me in the first night I was arrested [in 1982]. What can I say? All the demons have been exorcised from my life”. So ends, in characteristic modesty and generosity of spirit, the memoirs of **Mohamed Barud Ali**. The memoirs titled “*The Mourning Tree – An Autobiography and Prison Memoirs*” were launched on 20th February – an eventful date for the author and one which has since been commemorated in the Republic of Somaliland. The memoirs which have been published as the well chosen first book in a series titled “men and women” of Somaliland, are not just the story of a man, but also reflect the tale of a nation.

Born, in British Somaliland of the 1950s, under a tree (the Mourning Tree of the title) which was steeped in clan folklore, Barud attended one of the few elementary schools in Somaliland and joined the successive generations which left nomadic life. After independence, Barud attended the prestigious Sheikh Secondary School which was still staffed by redoubtable British teachers, and then, as one of the brightest pupils, he came to the United Kingdom for university education. With a keen eye for detail, Barud narrates amusing vignettes about the inevitable but innocent culture clashes and about the invidious racism of the 1970s seaside town “skinheads” who had never faced before young Somalis jealously guarding their honour. I can attest to the fact that the curious incident of the “black magic” (hot pepper) powder which reduced the tough Brighton “bover boys” into sopping jellies has gone down in the annals of UK Somaliland students’ folklore!



Unlike many other Somaliland students completing their overseas studies abroad in the 1970s, Barud returned to the Somali “Democratic” Republic, as the country was known then, at the end of 1978. By then the so called “bloodless” military coup of General Siyad Barre has already shed much blood. On his return, Barud had no choice but to go to Mogadishu “because it was the only place where there was an opportunity for employment in the country”. In 1980, however, he was lucky enough to find employment in his home town, Hargeisa, and soon a new chapter of his life unfolded.

Barud and other young professionals were concerned about the dire state of the British built Hargeisa Group Hospital. With no adequate electricity supplies, relatives of expectant mothers were asked to switch on the headlights of their cars so that midwives and doctors can deliver the babies. A voluntary committee started to improve the state of the hospital and the streets and kept the local officials apprised of their work. The dictator's extensive security apparatus could neither countenance any voluntary welfare activities that might be seen as highlighting the government's failings nor would it allow any meetings or gatherings of such volunteers. The dictatorship's idea of voluntary self help "iskaaw wax u qabso" was neither organised by volunteers nor undertaken voluntarily. Barud is very characteristically modest about his role and that of his colleagues, but both the nature and symbolism of their actions to the regime, on the one side, and to the long suffering "Somalileyn" people, on the other, set in train the events that followed and are narrated in the remainder of the memoirs.

It started with a portentous knock on the door late at night in November 1981. Five fully armed National Security Service soldiers took Barud away from his home. They reassured his anxious wife "with disarming civility" that he will be back home within the hour – an hour that stretched to eight and half years! 28 other Hargeisa professionals were arrested during the ensuing months. Barud describes the torture and the inhumane treatment to which he was subjected over a period of four months. This included indiscriminate and repeated beatings, various water torture, sensual deprivation, and hunger. In their continual efforts to extract confessions, the teams of interrogators even tried to condemn Barud and the others for absurd inferences drawn for their traditional names – Barud (gunpowder in Somali); Olad (struggle); Abby (defence) and Dagal (war)! Barud retorted by pointing their other names, such as Warsame (glad tidings), Dualeh (blessed) and Madar (nourishing rain)!

On 19 February 1982, Barud was served, for the first time, with a charge sheet alleging that he committed offences under Siyad Barre's Security Law, which were punishable by death. Barud already knew that the people accused of serious offences were executed promptly with or without short "trials" in special security courts and states that this was indeed the worst week of his life. On the following day (20th February 1982), Barud heard from his prison cell gun fire that continued spasmodically for three days. This was the regime suppressing and killing unarmed students and young people who came on the streets when they learnt that Barud and 28 other detainees were to be sentenced by the dreaded National Security Court. Young students (and others) in Hargeisa and other cities came out into streets in defiance of the might of the dictatorship, and their stones and pebbles were answered with a hail of bullets, and reportedly some artillery fire. 45 were killed and a considerable number were arrested.

The ensuing show trial of Barud and the other 28 men took only 10 hours, including a break of one hour for lunch. The lawyers brought for them from Mogadishu two days

earlier met them only for 10 minutes each on the eve of the trial. Two of the three judges of the court and the prosecutor were all military officers and the inevitable show trial conviction of almost all of them on the same day was no surprise to anyone, except for the fact that there were no death sentences. Barud states that this was simply because the regime was terrified of the continuing demonstrations and uprising from 20th February. Barud and another were given life sentences and the others prison terms ranging from 3 to 30 years.

The second half of the book is a copy of the transcript of “decision” and an English language translation done in 1986 by Dr Ahmed Hussain Esa. I am not aware of any other written record of Siyad Barre’s Security Courts pronouncements which has been preserved and this is a testament to the pivotal role that this show trial has played in the history of the Somaliland people. Apparently also one policeman, at a considerable risk to his life, secretly taped the proceedings!

In October 1982, Barud and the others were transferred to the secret maximum security prison, Labatan Jirow, thousands of kilometres away from their home town. They were held there in solitary confinement in a two square metre cells. It is extremely humbling to read how they coped in such trying circumstances, and Barud recounts the horrors of a prison run directly by the dictator and staffed by military members of his clan. Barud narrates the small acts of defiance and the secret ways they have communicated with each other through the walls without incurring the wrath of the jailers, the games they invented and the methods of collecting and sharing what little medicines they got. All these acts helped them keep their sanity and spirit through the 2375 days they spent in this prison in isolation.

Barud explains that he found physical torture easier to bear than the isolation of solitary confinement. He points out that we all have more strength and resources than we use, which we can be tap into when forced to do so, but he is being much too modest about his own strengths in the same way that he also decried, when released, the admiration of his countrymen. Barud and his colleagues were released in March 1989 when they were suddenly moved out of the jail and taken directly to Siyad Barre, who called them traitors and blamed them for the destruction and loss of life that he unleashed on “Northern towns”. Having been in solitary confinement for over 6 years, none of them even knew the details of what Siyad Barre’s army did to their own people.

None of the perpetrators of the carnage and destruction mentioned in these memoirs has been made to account for their acts. Many of them are living comfortable lives in western countries and others are still in Somalia colluding with others to keep their benighted country mired in anarchy. There may soon be a small but significant dent in this wall of impunity made by (among other victims of Siyad Barre’s war against the Somaliland people) one of Barud’s fellow prisoners, Bashe Abdi Yusuf, who, having settled in the United States, is bringing a civil claim against former General Mohamed Ali Samatar. The case to be heard at Supreme Court in March will establish whether those who presided over torture, destruction and death of civilians can continue to claim

immunity on the basis of the very positions that allowed them to direct such inhuman acts. Although this is neither a criminal trial nor a substantive hearing on liability, it is indeed the first time any of the perpetrators or their masters have been called upon to account for their actions.

Barud points out that the death, devastation and exile visited on the Somaliland people has served as a kind of shock therapy to help them not to dwell too long on their own experience, but we are all glad that he and the others have shared with us their experiences. We value their indomitable spirit and are humbled by their sacrifice. Barud and Bashe and the other young professionals who came to be known (after the title of a secret journal of the period) as “UFFO”, the breeze that precedes the rainstorm, were indeed the early wind that gained momentum through their suffering and those of others and finally brought down the dictatorship. The events of February 1982 were indeed the beginning of the end of the tyranny in Somaliland and it is fitting that 20th February is now officially a date commemorated in Somaliland every year. These memoirs will serve as a reminder of what has happened to us and as a warning of what must never happen again!

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For more details about the forthcoming US Supreme Court hearing of the case of *Yousuf v. Samantar*, visit [the Centre for Justice and Accountability](http://www.theCentreforJusticeandAccountability.org) website.