**Meet Djibouti’s opposition leader who’s been imprisoned over 20 times**

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By: Fleur Macdonald

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During dinner, I tell Daher Ahmed Farah, the main opposition leader in Djibouti, that I mostly write about culture. His eyes light up. Have you heard of Awaleh Aden? He calls out from the other side of the table. He’s a singer who was recently voted one of the best singers in the whole of East Africa. You have to find him on YouTube, he tells me.

I do: the pop song blares tinnily from my mobile in a rather traditional British restaurant in central London. The Djiboutians around the table bop in their seats to his latest hit *Tamashleyn*. We like to party more than Somalians, a thirty-or-so-year-old woman opposite tells me.

Discussing his country’s music and culture rather than the political situation seems to be a welcome change for DAF. Leader of the Movement for Democratic Renewal and Development party (MRD), he is also the author of Splendeur éphémère, the first novel published by a French-speaking Djiboutian in 1993. He is in London for some interviews with the BBC before going to celebrate Ramadan with his family in Brussels. Then he will return to Djibouti to face imprisonment most probably, and routine intimidation most certainly. He has been imprisoned over twenty times.

I interview him the next day, in the Starbucks before his appearance on the BBC. He is slight and gently spoken and he uses his hands to accompany his points which become much more lively when he speaks in French. His visit to London is intended to raise awareness about the recent elections. In April President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh pushed for a fourth term. The opposition boycotted the elections, and despite allegations of governmental bribery and mismanagement, the president won 87 per cent of the vote.

DAF was about 15 when Djibouti won independence from France in 1977. ‘I was a teenager when I was protesting for independence. We thought that after independence things would be rosy. But we were disappointed. I was disappointed by the regime and how things were being managed.’

In 1977 Hassan Gouled Aptidon became president and twenty-two years later, after Djibouti became a one-party state in 1981, power transitioned to his nephew. In 1992, during civil war, a constitution allowing for a limited multiparty system was formulated. DAF became involved in official politics and, since then, he has united most of the opposition parties under one banner.

I ask him if he recognises his younger self in the young people fighting for democratic change today.

‘Today, young people are like us before independence – ready to fight but they are without much hope when they see how the regime treats Djiboutians. And there is a lack of hope when they see how the international community treats the plight of Djiboutians.’

During the latest elections, there was little comment by foreign powers; in this instance, at least, stability seems more important than human rights or democracy.

Hardly a surprise. Due to its position on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, at the gateway of the Suez Canal, and as Ethiopia’s access to a port, the small country is the lynchpin of the area. US, Japanese and French foreign military bases are currently stationed there. China have agreed to pay USD$20m million a year for their base on the coast. It is also seen an oasis of calm between the north of Somalia and war-ravaged Yemen across the strait. Saudi Arabia is also planning a military base there.

But despite this, young people are vital to any change, DAF tells me – and he speaks to me as if he is appealing directly to them. ‘The democratic cause is your cause because the future is young people. It’s for you that we fight. If there is a democratic change today it’s you that are going to benefit, it’s you who will benefit from the good governance we want to establish, of the progress we want to realise. Instead of being spectators, you must be at the heart of change.’

The situation at the moment seems dismal. UN statistics reveal a country where young people seem to have little chance of reaching their potential; over half of Djiboutians cannot read and 70 per cent of young people under 30 are unemployed. 6 per cent of young adults aged 15 to 34 have HIV according to UNICEF.

‘Young people see what role young people played in Burkina Faso and Tunisia and that inspires them. The Arab Spring inspired them,’ DAF is positive. I later talk to the young woman I met at the dinner. She tells me she left Djibouti in 1995, returning several times in the late 00s. After the repression of protests in 2011, sparked partly by those across the Arab world, she decided to become politically engaged. It was then no longer safe to return – she doesn’t even want me to use her name.

‘There are more and more young people who are fleeing. They talk about feeling suffocated … Their country has become a prison without walls.’ All young people want is ‘a little freedom.’ But current events mean it is increasingly difficult to get a visa. She speaks to many young people but one thing a young man said to her sticks in her mind. ‘The country is not at war but I have the impression that they are at war against the young.’ She has many friends whose friends, family, girl-friends, children have died en transit to Europe.

According to the Danish Refugee Council who have a post there, Djibouti has one of the [highest per capita rates of refugees in the world](https://drc.dk/where-we-work/east-africa-and-yemen/djibouti). I ask DAF what he thinks about these people who leave their home desperate for more opportunity. It is a difficult question but he is clear on it. ‘It’s sad to see those youngsters dying on the sea, dying on their roads. I think young people should stay in their home and drive change from there.’

The lack of freedom within the country ensures that political protest often means exile. Here the diaspora has a huge role to play and under DAF the party has set up bases in Belgium, France, UK, Canada and the US. ‘The diaspora must take part in the struggle and relay it to others in the country in which they live. They must help it reach the media and support financially. It’s an essential component of the struggle. The diaspora organised the first and biggest demonstration in London in 2013.’

And these young people in the diaspora have witnessed huge change. He thinks they are learning from this and their own experience. ‘The young people that protested in 2013 are not the same as today; they have more than three years of experience. They know what to do.’

In the political movements DAF references, culture has played a huge role and he seems happy to return to the subject. ‘We are first of all our culture.’ He tells me he has some short stories that he is considering publishing and has 100 pages of prison literature and it seems likely he’ll have the opportunity to work on more.

‘Culture is a fearsome weapon in the struggle. It was part of the fight for independence. Artists, singers – there weren’t many writers but singers in particular – and Somali and Afar playwrights played a big role in the struggle for independence and today they play a big role in the struggle for democratic change. With sketches, songs, plays.’

‘Some are more active than others. Among the new generation, there is Awaleh Aden, of course.’ I ask him if he knows him personally.

‘We are both in opposition so we are on good terms and we are both in exile – so it shows the risks that we face.’