



ESSAY

SOMALILAND

Africa's best kept secret, A challenge to the international community?

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This essay outlines recent developments in the Horn of Africa with particular focus on the emerging democratic state of Somaliland. It maps out the key political contours of Somaliland and Somalia. In this respect, the implications of recent developments for the international community and multilateral institutions are analysed. Somaliland has shown extraordinary determination to succeed. Those governing Somaliland have shown respect for democratic principles, begun to develop natural assets which will strengthen the economy, and rebuilt much of the capital city. The union with Somalia has proved difficult to say the least, while relations with Kenya, Djibouti and African multilateral organisations remain complex. Yet despite the advances the citizens of Somaliland have made, recognition of Somaliland as a viable independent entity by the international community remains an uncertain hope.

“Somaliland should be let to go its way, for it has resources to sustain itself. “The situation in Somalia now is a culture of rules without rulers, a stateless society.”

“There is order there [Somaliland], they have the potential to survive”. One day, he says, Somaliland will organise and get back to the larger Somalia.

Interview with Ali Mazrui

“The fact of the situation in Somaliland is that they have elected a government in the most democratic way possible, within the constraints of public finance; they have started the process of demobilization and disarmament; they have structured custom services in the port of Berbera and introduced an

audit system. None of this effort can be attributed to a single United Nations initiative”

John Drysdale¹

Transcending diplomatic purgatory?

Some major African players are taking a new look at Somaliland, that state on the strategic Horn of Africa that continues to pay the political and economic price for declaring independence twice: in 1960 and 1991.

Somaliland is labelled as a ‘breakaway state’ by some analysts, while others describe it as ‘the little country that could’. Professor Ioan Lewis, the doyen of Somali studies, accentuates this

latter observation in his seminal and up-dated book, *A Modern History of the Somali*. His conclusion in this revised study states:

For the moment, thus, it seemed that despite the reluctance to recognize the Somaliland Republic officially, this might actually be for some time the only viable Somali state on offer. It might accordingly prove necessary to recognize that, in this as in so many other cases, half a loaf is better than none.²

In fact, Somaliland did nothing more than end a union it had entered into as a sovereign independent state, and has since pulled itself up by its own bootstraps. Recently, Senegal, the European Union and Somaliland's neighbour, Ethiopia, have shown promising signs of wanting to end the impasse.

Ethiopia hosted Somaliland President Dahir Riyale Kahin on a state visit in 2002 and 2003, and President Wade of Senegal hosted the Somaliland president in early 2003. Somaliland's northern neighbour, Djibouti, has also shown signs of planning to mend fences with Somaliland. Recently, Somaliland President Kahin made a three-day official visit to Djibouti, where it was agreed to re-establish diplomatic links and to cooperate on border security.

A South African delegation paid a fact-finding visit to Somaliland in January 2003 and declared it to be "a challenge rather than a problem for the African Union".³ More recently, the South African department of Foreign Affairs sent a diplomat under UN auspices to explore the situation in Somaliland. In May 2003, South African Foreign Affairs Minister Nkosazana Zuma hosted the Somaliland Foreign Affairs Minister for talks on advancing peace and stability in the region. Law advisers from the South African Department of Foreign Affairs support Somaliland's argument for independence. "It is undeniable that Somaliland does indeed qualify for statehood, and it is incumbent upon the international community to recognise it," reads the DFA legal report.

As Fatima Ismail, a UN human rights expert notes:

The country has shown the African Renaissance spirit of self-reliance and resilience and has produced a sustain-

able government and constitution. ... They have got their act together while in the south (Somalia) the Transitional National Government (TNG) has been unable to do so. ... The international community must take notice of this. It cannot remain ostrich-like with its head in the sand⁴.

The energy that the international community has put into the process that led to the installation of the southern TNG government in Somalia has not produced the desired result. Kenya is currently hosting the 14th international peace conference on Somalia.⁵

Kenya's mediation of the peace process in Somalia

The Kenyan government appointed a new mediator to take over the Somalia peace talks in Eldoret, Kenya, which have been bogged down since they began in October 2002. Bethwell Kiplagat, a senior Kenyan diplomat, will replace Elijah W Mwangale, who was blamed by Somali warlords and Western diplomats alike for not properly managing the talks.

"Warlords continue to hold sway in Somalia and violence has resumed to a disturbing degree. The international community should be looking at the reality on the ground," according to Fatima Ismail.

Professor Hussein Bulhan, head of the Somaliland Academy for Peace and Development and former head of the Anti-Apartheid Movement at Boston University notes:

If the international community plans to apply the principal of territorial unity and the fiction of a 'sovereign Somalia' without understanding the history, facts on the ground and the genocide experienced, it would be planting the seeds for conflict more deadly than previously seen in Africa.

The expectation of the Somaliland people has rightly been raised by the success of their democratic and modest economic development. To frustrate this expectation and to force a union with the South, against the will of the people, is also to court a deadly conflict.

Supporting peace in Somaliland only where it prevails, providing an incentive to it and extending it, is a worthwhile and realistic target. Ethiopia, which makes increasing use of the Somaliland port of Berbera, has opened a diplomatic trade-liaison office in the capital of Hargeisa, as have numerous other EU and UN agencies. The United States and other Western powers, mindful of the strategic importance of the Horn, continue to investigate establishing an interest office in Somaliland—something that would be impossible in the ungovernable Somalia.

Somaliland's major problem is that is too small to wield any muscle against the international organisations that ignore it. It requires a country willing to be a facilitator for its cause of reconstruction and diplomatic recognition.

Somaliland's background

As the African focus moves increasingly off the Great Lakes and onto the Horn of Africa, this country of three and a half million people may well become an example of stability, good governance and economic discipline. Geographically, Somaliland covers an area of 137,600 square kilometres and forms the top of the 'figure seven' shape made by the Horn of Africa. It is roughly the size of England and Wales put together. It was formerly British Somaliland whereas Somalia (the bottom of the seven shape) was an Italian colony. Both colonies gained independence in 1960. Somaliland decided shortly after independence to form a union with the south. Before taking this step, however, it had already been recognised by 35 countries. This partnership was decidedly biased in favour of the south.

When southerner Siad Barre took power in a coup, he brutally crushed northern opposition. This included flattening the Somaliland capital of Hargeisa, using a combination of artillery, South African mercenaries and bomber aircraft that took off from the airport on the outskirts of the city. On the outskirts of the capital there are a number of UN-acknowledged mass graves as testimony to southern brutality.

After Barre's fall in 1991, the Somalilanders wasted no time in ending the union with the

south. After months of deliberations attended by many sectors of society, the grand conference of Burco as well as the second conference at Borama (similar to the South African Codesa) revoked the act of union and reinstated the independence that their territory previously enjoyed.

This action raised hackles in the then Organisation of African Unity, ever nervous about secession and determined, for better or worse, to maintain colonial boundaries. In fact, Somaliland's declaration of independence transgressed neither of these. The country was not breaking some pre-independence bond with the south. It was merely breaking a union that it had entered into as an independent state, for which there are numerous African precedents. Somaliland has not violated colonial boundaries. It has occupied no more than that territory once occupied by the British, and recognised as independent in 1960 by the international community.

Not only are Somaliland citizens disenfranchised with the uneven arrangement and traumatised by the civil war that killed more than 50,000 of their compatriots and displaced around 500,000 of them. They also see no inducement to return to formal ties with what is to all intents and purposes an anarchic state.

The TNG of Somalia

The TNG of Somalia, that holds the seat at the United Nations, the Arab League and the African Union, cannot pretend to control anything more than a few blocks of Mogadishu. What caused this rush towards recognising a government with neither territory nor administration, after having ignored what is arguably a real and effective government in Somaliland? Strangely, the TNG's mandate expired in August 2003, yet it continues to attend international summits such as the October 2003 Summit of the OIC in Malaysia. The remainder of the country remains ungovernable and in the control of warlords.

Following the withdrawal of UN peace-keeping troops from Somalia in 1995, the international community, and particularly the United States that pulled out a year earlier,

wanted nothing to do with anything bearing the label 'Somali'. However, security considerations since 11 September 2001 have reinforced the strategic importance of the Horn that is now being patrolled by a German-led European force.

Somaliland's emerging democracy

The rebuilding of Somaliland's capital Hargeisa, which Barre reduced to rubble and turned into a minefield, has happened without assistance from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The economic development has been supported largely by Somalilanders in the Diaspora. Proven oil reserves, coal and gemstone mining, livestock and fisheries production, remain untapped although some South African businessmen are beginning to explore these opportunities.⁶

More importantly, Somaliland has built a reasonably strong democratic society that passed the test of transition last year when President Mohamed Egal died and a successor was needed. Within hours of the confirmation of his death at One Military Hospital in Pretoria, Vice President Kahin was sworn in as national leader. Both Egal and Kahin had been nominated by a council of elders in 1993 that re-elected Egal in 1997. Kahin faced a full electorate in the country's first presidential elections on April 14 this year. International observers, including South Africans, declared the presidential elections as "peaceful, orderly and transparent".⁷

Somalilanders had their first taste of democracy in May 2001 when an internationally observed referendum confirmed their wish to remain apart from Somalia and endorsed a new constitution. Highly successful municipal elections, also internationally observed and the first since 1969, were held on 15 December 2002. Somaliland is undergoing a full house of democratic procedures with parliamentary elections due to follow the presidential ballot.

Djibouti: Credible neighbour?

Relations with northern neighbour Djibouti were chilled when that French-dominated enclave hosted a conference that parachuted

the Transitional National Government into power in Mogadishu, Somalia. By all credible accounts, the President of Djibouti, interfered in this process quite considerably and some concluded that the process had been hijacked and driven by his specific interests.

Observers have rightly questioned where in history a president has enjoyed the right to nominate delegates to the parliament of a neighbouring country?⁸ In addition, the election of a long-standing minister in the scorned Barre regime to the post of TNG president was received with shock in Somaliland. This gut-wrenching shock is captured by a Somali refugee in Kenya who said "Mogadishu has fallen into the clutch of thugs, no better than hyenas, who have no idea what honour is, what trust is, what political responsibility means". When asked whether he would go back to Mogadishu he went on, "Would you ask a hyena to watch over your beef stew? Because you would be a fool if you trusted a hyena, wouldn't you?"⁹ By contrast, a recent UN 2002 review declared Somaliland as "the exception to the violence" and the prevailing anarchy in Somalia.¹⁰

Territorial integrity versus justice and Nepad

South Africa's state lawyers agree that "any efforts to deny or delay would not only put the international community at the risk of ignoring the most stable region in the Horn [of Africa], it would impose untold hardship upon the people of Somaliland due to the denial of foreign assistance that recognition entails."

The South African state law advisers address this issue too, noting that,

The interest of world peace and stability require that, where possible, the division or fragmentation of existing states should be managed peacefully and by negotiation. But where this is not possible, as is the case with Somalia, international law accepts that the interests of justice may prevail over the principle of territorial integrity."

This South African legal document is supported by the assertion from the Brussels-

based think tank, the International Crisis Group (ICG), that Somaliland's demand for recognition presents the international community with stark choices. "The question confronting the international community is no longer whether Somaliland should be recognised as an independent state, but whether there remain any viable alternatives," the ICG report says.

It says that the international community could either "develop pragmatic responses to Somaliland's demand for self-determination or continue to insist upon the increasingly abstract notion of the unity and territorial integrity of the Somali Republic". It warns that the latter course is likely to lead to a new round of civil war in Somalia.

The ICG says an international fact-finding mission should visit Somaliland to assess the situation and "recommend policy options". It also calls on the African Union to grant Somaliland "observer status pending a final decision on its international status".

Clearly, Somaliland's extraordinary indigenous conflict-resolution methods may provide an example to the southern Somalis. But now, the international community and especially African agents of peace and security cannot be delicately silent on supporting Somaliland's success story and its emerging democracy. Nor can they hold Somaliland citizens hostage to the chaotic developments of Somalia in the south. Are we ready for this critical NEPAD imperative to consolidate peace, stability and governance? Or do we ignore a "Somaliland [that] can claim to be more democratic than any country in the region"¹¹. Recent field analysis of Somaliland's developments and its emerging democracy has been described as "tremendous progress by any developing country's measure"¹².

As Dianna Games has noted,

The international community should not underestimate Somaliland's determination to succeed ... Recognition is as much a question of security as it is economic development. The longer Somaliland remains unrecognised, the greater its vulnerability¹³.

Finally, do we care to nurture a reasonably successful and emerging democracy in a stark

environment where, as Professor Ali Mazrui notes, "African democracy is in intensive care"? In this respect, Africa requires more success stories. Will emerging democracies be supported, and allowed to breathe, or will the plug be pulled on the patient by neglect and diplomatic purgatory? (14)

Notes

1. *John Drysdale, What Ever Happened to Somalia?* London: Haan Associates, 1994, p 147. See also the interview with Professor Ali Mazrui in the Kenyan newspaper, *Daily Nation*, Monday, July 21, 2003, "Foreign powers stalk Somali talks" at <http://www.nationaudio.com/News/DailyNation/21072003/News/News_Spotlight210720031.html>.
2. See <<http://www.csis.org/africa/ANotes/ANotes0211.pdf>> for an insightful overview article by David Shinn with the title: "The Little Country that Could" and IM Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 2002, Oxford: James Curry, p 310. See also IM Lewis, "Mohamad Siyad Barre's Ghost in Somalia" at <<www.waltainfo.com/Conflict/Articles/2002/April/article8.htm>>. Another text of importance is the recent International Crisis Group report on "Somaliland: Democratisation and Its Discontents", Nairobi/Brussels, 30 July 2003. Its press releases on this report can be viewed at <<http://www.crisisweb.org/home/index.cfm?id=2097&l=1>>.
3. This fact-finding visit was undertaken by Mr Welile Nhlapo, Head of the Presidential Support Unit in the Presidency of South Africa. The Unit primarily focuses on conflict resolution in Africa. Deputy Director Sarel Kruger also visited Somaliland. See the press report "SA assessment Mission look for Somaliland entry points" on his visit: <www.jamhuriya.info/index.php?art_id=884&category=2&file=view_article.tp>. See also the Mail and Guardian report on the South African state legal report on Somaliland's case for independence at <<http://www.mg.co.za/Content/13.asp?ao=18892>>. See also F Kornegay at: <<http://www.businessday.co.za/bday/content/direct/1,3523,1422201-6096-0,00.html>> and "Sound AU alarm on destabilisation of Somaliland", Business Day, 10 November 2003, <<http://www.businessday.co.za/bday/content/direct/1,3523,1478683-6078-0,00.html>>. See also the press statement of the Somaliland Foreign Ministry on the official visit to South Africa of May 2003 <<http://somalilandtimes.net/2003/72/7203.shtml>>.
4. Amnesty International, while not the favourite of all political activists, called recently for acknowledgement of Somaliland's record of stability, political pluralism and media openness. It recently convened its regional conference in the Somaliland

- capital of Hargeisa. See its press release of 21 February 2003 at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAFR520022003?open&of=ENG-SOM>
5. See the recent report of the International Crisis Group, "Negotiating a Blueprint for Peace in Somalia" at www.intl-crisis-group.org/projects/showreport.cfm?reportid=911. The report depicts the situation on the ground and has noted that the TNG has collapsed and shows no sign of life on the streets of Mogadishu.
 6. See S Field, "Somaliland elections boost oil prospects", *Sunday Independent*, April 20 2003, p 7, and JJ Cornish, "Hope in the Horn of Africa", *Mail & Guardian*, April 25 2003, p 20. South African businessman, Mr Tokyo Sexwale, has shown interest and has bought four oil block concessions from the Somaliland government. See also the report by S Field, "Somaliland: the little Country that Could", *Global Dialogue*, p 6. www.sirag.org.uk/thelittlecountrypage1.htm.
 7. "Interim Statement of the South African Observer Mission on the Somaliland Presidential Elections of 14th April 2003", issued on 15th April 2003. The ten person South African election observer team included members from the Johannesburg-based Electoral Institute of Southern Africa. See http://www.news24.com/News24/Africa/News/0,,2-11-1447_1348911,00.html > See also the report of the Norwegian electoral observer mission by Berit Nising Lindeman and Stig Jarle Hansen at: http://www.humanrights.uio.no/forskning/publ/nr/2003/08/nordem_report-contents.html
 8. Anonymous. "Government recognition in Somalia and regional political stability in the Horn of Africa", *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40, 2 (2002). The recent visit by Somaliland President Kahin to Djibouti is an attempt by Djibouti to mend fences with Somaliland and a subtle acknowledgement that the Djibouti induced TNG administration in Mogadishu has not delivered. See "Kahin Trip Set to Strengthen Somaliland - Djibouti Relations" <http://allafrica.com/stories/200310150110.html>
 9. F Nuruddin. *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*. London, Cassell, 2000.
 10. See "Somalia: Review of 2002", dated 17th January 2002 on the website of the United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network www.irinnews.org.
 11. See International Crisis Group media statement on Somaliland at: www.crisisweb.org.
 12. G Mills, "Aid could be doing more harm than good", *The Sunday Independent*, November 2, 2003, p 9. See G Mills, "Somaliland's pursuit of independence", *Janes Intelligence Review*, December 1, 2003.
 13. D Games, "Somaliland: Painful push for recognition", *Business Day*, October 30, 2003, p 13 See also her article, "Perhaps Somalia should be left to sort itself out", *Business Day*, November 20, 2003
 14. Ali A Mazrui, "Democracide: Who Killed Democracy in Africa? Clues of the Past, Concerns of the Future", October 2003, unpublished paper, p 19.