INSTITUTE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

ISSUE 5 | OCTOBER 2015

# East Africa Report

## Somaliland at the crossroads

### Protecting a fragile stability

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**Summary**

In a conflict-prone region, Somaliland is a rare success story. Although the international community has not recognised the independence of this self-declared republic, the territory functions with complete autonomy. Over the last 24 years, it has built a functioning democracy and relatively strong institutions of government; a particularly impressive achievement in comparison to the repeated failures of Mogadishu-based administrations. This progress, however, remains fragile. Somaliland's continued stability is by no means guaranteed. It faces several challenges, both internal and external, which it must overcome if it is to continue its promising development – and if it is to have any chance of receiving the international recognition that is its holy grail. With presidential elections coming up, this report examines what those challenges are.

SOMALILAND OCCUPIES A strange place in the hierarchy of the international community – if, that is, it can be said to be part of the international community at all. It has all the trappings of a state – the flag, the national anthem, the presidency and the parliament, the armed forces and the central bank – but is not considered to be a state. In this, its position is roughly analogous to the likes of Taiwan or Western Sahara, which operate in a similar diplomatic limbo.

Officially, Somaliland is part of Somalia, and should answer to the Somali Federal Government based in Mogadishu. It has not done so since 1991, and Somalia is not strong enough to press its claim. Nor does Somalia look likely to be strong enough anytime soon.

Instead, Somaliland operates with *de facto* independence. By any measurement, its government, based in Hargeisa, has done a better job of governing the territory under its control than any administration in Mogadishu has achieved over the last two decades.

Somaliland is peaceful, by and large. It is stable. It has not been prone to civil war or serious conflict. Its government has functioning (if somewhat dysfunctional) judicial, legislative and executive branches, and is chosen through democratic elections that – although imperfect, and usually late – are widely considered the most free and fair in the Horn of Africa region. The government provides services, albeit at the most basic level. It is home to a thriving business community, and is beginning to attract significant foreign investment and development aid.

Above all, in stark contrast to Somalia proper, it is stable. 'We offer a credible example that stable, peaceful, and transparent democracy can succeed in the Horn of Africa,' said Somaliland's foreign minister Mohamed Bihi Yonis[1]. It's hard to argue with him. In a region where conflict and authoritarianism is the norm, Somaliland is a good news story.

So far so good. But Somaliland's democracy is still nascent, its development precarious, and its stability beholden to forces beyond its control. There is no guarantee that stability will continue, and several inter-related challenges threaten to unsettle the territory.

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This report is divided into three sections. The first examines Somaliland's political landscape ahead of the next presidential elections, looking at weaknesses in the political system and potential areas of instability. Most pressing is the territory's failure to organise timeous elections – both for its parliament, which has been sitting unchanged since 2005, and for its presidency. Presidential elections scheduled for June 2015 have been delayed indefinitely, with some critics arguing that President Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud Silanyo is unconstitutionally extending his term in office. This raises questions about the ruling party's intentions, and tests popular trust in the democratic process.

The second looks at internal threats to Somaliland's stability; destabilising factors that may be exacerbated during times of political change, such as elections. Most serious here is the frustration building at Somaliland's failure to be recognised as a state, or attain any kind of formal acknowledgment of its de facto sovereignty over its claimed borders. This is still the Somaliland government's main goal, and the quest for recognition has played a major role in unifying the country. What happens when Somaliland's patience runs out?

Finally, the report will assess external threats to Somaliland's stability, such as the squabbles with neighbouring Puntland, a semi-autonomous region of Somalia, over portions of Sool and Sanaag provinces, which manifest in the form of occasional incursions by both sides and low-level military skirmishes; and Somalia's unwillingness to consider a formal break-up of the state.

Nearly a quarter of a century after its self-declared independence, Somaliland finds itself at a crossroads. With little prospect of international recognition, and under threat from both foreign ideologies and the failures of its own government, the territory faces an uncertain future: can it continue in a kind of international limbo

SOMALILAND'S DEMOCRACY IS STILL NASCENT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT PRECARIOUS

as it has for the last couple of decades, or will something eventually crack?

## Somaliland's political landscape

### The self-declared republic

Any discussion on Somaliland requires historical context, because history still plays such a significant role in Somaliland's legal and moral case for independence and is so often cited by Somaliland's supporters.

As a modern political entity, Somaliland is an invention of the British Empire. An 1897 treaty announced the establishment of a British protectorate in northern Somalia, which became known as British Somaliland (the French had a presence in Djibouti, while the Italians claimed most of what is now Somalia). The main prize was the port of Berbera, a strategic partner to Britain's existing interests in Aden, the Yemeni port just across the Red Sea.

British rule lasted until 1960, when the Horn of Africa was caught up in the wave of independence that swept across the continent. Djibouti and Italian Somaliland were also independent, and Somali politicians began dreaming of fulfilling a long-held ideal: the establishment of a single, united Somali state. This would incorporate all five historic Somali areas, approximately equivalent to modern-day Djibouti, Somaliland, Somalia, the Ogaden region in Ethiopia, and Kenya's North-Eastern Province. The five-pointed star on the Somalia flag represents these five regions.

> History still plays such a significant role in Somaliland's legal and moral case for independence

Somaliland, having been independent for just five days, chose to sign up to this pan-Somali vision, uniting under one flag and one capital, Mogadishu (Djibouti, largely thanks to Cold War dynamics, went its own way, while Ethiopia and Kenya held on to their territories). The exact details of this union are in some dispute, however. Somalia argues that there is an Act of Union binding the two entities together, and that this cannot be unilaterally repealed. Somaliland questions the validity of this legislation, noting that it was overwhelmingly rejected in a referendum in Somaliland in 1961, and that the respective Somalia and Somaliland delegations signed different versions of the Act.

It didn't take long for the first cracks in the union to emerge. In 1961, Somaliland army officers revolted against their perceived exclusion from the upper echelons of the new Somalia armed forces, although this was swiftly suppressed. Discontent festered, however, as Mogadishu became more and more powerful. Northerners had to go to Mogadishu for many basic services, such as trade licenses, passport issuing and higher education, and were marginalised from government jobs based there. According to a popular joke at the time, even 'the electric light has to be switched on from Mogadishu'.[2]

> Unlike most other Somali armed groups, the SNM was well-organised and ideologically cohesive

Feelings of marginalisation and discrimination intensified after Siad Barre's military takeover in 1969, even though members of the Isaaq, Somaliland's dominant clan confederation, held powerful positions in the new regime, and reached a head in the wake of the disastrous Ogaden war in 1977-1978. Barre's ambitious invasion of Ethiopia was met with stiff resistance and ended in humiliating defeat. Northern leaders criticised Barre for overplaying his hand and were unhappy with the sudden influx of refugees into northern Somalia.

Out of this discontent grew the Somali National Movement (SNM), formed in 1981. Initially, despite its predominantly Isaaq composition, it wanted to reform government on a national level, but by 1988 had developed into a separatist movement seeking secession for the north-west. Unlike most other Somali armed groups, the SNM was well-organised and ideologically cohesive, and its internal decision-making was characterised by a version of participatory democracy (one example: from 1981–991, the movement had five different chairmen, all elected[3]). These values would come to shape the Somaliland of the future.

In May 1988, the SNM launched offensives on the northern cities of Hargeisa and Burao. These came at a great cost, but proved to be a turning point for the SNM. Somalia's response to the attacks was vicious and indiscriminate; an estimated 50,000 civilians were killed. One Somali general, infamously, told his troops to 'kill all but the crows'.

More than anything else, this collective punishment – referred to by Somaliland today as a 'genocide' – allowed the SNM to secure popular support in Somaliland for its secessionist vision. Thus by 1991, when the Barre regime fell and much of Somalia disintegrated into chaos, the SNM was perfectly positioned to overrun the national army and take charge of the north-west.[4]

In May 1991, the Grand Conference of Northern Peoples – composed of rebel leaders, clan elders, religious figures,

intellectuals, artists and business people – was convened in Burao. After exhaustive discussions, a decision was made, and on May 17 the conference issued a declaration of independence, creating the Republic of Somaliland.[5]

### Building a state from the ashes

A declaration was one thing, building a functional state quite another. How Somaliland pulled it off, despite the devastation wrought by the Barre regime and even as the rest of Somalia imploded around it, is an impressive feat, and a testament to the vision and unity of its leaders.

Key to Somaliland's success has been its creative approach to state-building, characterised by an inclusive, bottom-up approach that combines elements of its traditional, clan-based society with representative democracy (in stark contrast to the top-down approach still being trialled, with dismal results, in Somalia proper).[6]

> Other key innovations included granting women the right to vote and hold political office

For two years after 1991, Somaliland was ruled by an interim military government. In 1993 another grand conference was called, this time in Boroma, where the foundations of the state were laid. Somaliland would be a democracy, with elected leaders, although the clan would still be strongly represented in the upper house of parliament (an appointed body known as the *Guurti*, or House of Elders). This conference culminated in the appointment of Mohammed HI Egal as president, and resolved to draft a new constitution.

Egal was re-elected in 1996, via another national conference – his administration hadn't passed a constitution yet, and there was therefore no basis for popular elections. This was Somaliland's fifth and final such conference, and proved to be a watershed moment for the nascent state, easing tensions between clans and granting representation in Parliament to minorities – another example of Somaliland's inclusive, consultative approach to dealing with internal difficulties.[7]

Still, Egal took his time with that new constitution. After numerous delays, it was overwhelmingly approved (by 97.9% of 1.18 million voters) in a referendum in 2001. This was the first democratic vote in the whole of Somalia for three decades[8].

The new constitution created 'a restricted form of multiparty democracy in which the head of state, the legislature and district councils were to be elected by secret public ballot, rather than selected by an electoral college of elders'. Other key innovations included granting women the right to vote and hold political office, and allowed for the creation of political parties for the first time – although, importantly, the Constitution only allows for three official political parties to exist at once, chosen from the most popular of a number of 'political organisations' permitted to contest local elections.[9] All laws were to be grounded in and not contrary to Islamic sharia law.[10]

Egal died unexpectedly in 2002, shortly before his term expired. His deputy, Dahir Riyale, would succeed him and go on to contest and win Somaliland's first popular elections in late 2002, which really marks the start of Somaliland's modern political era. Riyale was voted out of office in 2010, and replaced by Somaliland's current president, Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud, known popularly as Silanyo (Somalis are often known by nicknames; Silanyo means lizard, apparently because the president was very skinny in his youth). These last elections were considered credible by international observers, and Somaliland's political establishment was widely praised for facilitating a peaceful handover of power.[11]

### Democracy deferred

The next milestone in Somaliland's democratic development was originally scheduled for 26 June 2015, when President Silanyo's five-year term is due to expire. This deadline was not met.

In March, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) formally recommended a nine month delay. An NEC spokesperson explained this was for technical reasons: despite its best efforts, the NEC had been unable to begin voter registration and needed more time to complete the process.[12]

> Observers recommended that Somaliland institutes more comprehensive and secure voter registration processes

This recommendation was rooted in genuine technical difficulties. A western diplomatic source in Addis Ababa said that the international community was sympathetic to Somaliland's difficulties in this regard, and is encouraging the territory to get the process right rather than rush it. Following the last 2010 local elections, international observers recommended[13] that Somaliland institutes more comprehensive and secure voter registration processes, to prevent multiple voting. Somaliland has ambitious plans to achieve exactly that. In September last year, the country began with a civil registration drive to issue citizens with smart identification cards containing biometric information.

However, the civil registration drive is still underway and Somaliland's authorities are reluctant to begin voter registration until it is complete.

However, when the *Guurti* met to discuss this in May 2015, they took this recommendation much further – unilaterally extending the government's term in office by 22 months, and indefinitely delaying both presidential and parliamentary elections.[14]

Neither opposition parties nor donor governments were impressed with this decision. 'The announcement prompted widespread popular protests in the capital, Hargeisa, and in the cities of Berbera and Burco. Security forces detained thirty members of the opposition (though most were later released)…' said Crisis Group's Cedric Barnes.[15] Meanwhile, under the banner of the International Community and Democratisation Steering Committee, Somaliland's international partners said the decision 'places Somaliland's democratic credentials at serious risk' and 'not only threatens to undermine stability and the democratic process within Somaliland; it would also damage Somaliland's public image and undermine our long-standing partnership'.[16]

> The civil registration drive is still underway and Somaliland's authorities are reluctant to begin voter registration until it is complete

In March, foreign minister Mohamed Bihi Yonis was worried about exactly this: 'It will reflect badly on us,' he said[17], mindful perhaps of the criticism that Nigeria received when it delayed its vote by six weeks, earlier this year.

It's important to note that Somaliland's constitution allows for elections to be delayed in extenuating circumstances. Article 83.5 reads: 'If on the expiry of the term of office of the president and the vice-president, it is not possible, because of security considerations, to hold the election of the president and the vice-president, the House of Elders [*Guurti*] shall extend their term of office whilst taking into consideration the period in which the problems can be overcome and the election can be held.'

Alleged insecurity, however, was not the *Guurti*'s only motivation. 'It cited insecurity in the eastern regions, but other factors, including the legality of NEC's original pronouncement, some outstanding but not critical legislation, and even the weather, were also invoked in the 11 May 'House Decision on Extension'. Even when taken together, these factors hardly justify a full additional year. Instead many Somalilanders recognise the *Guurti*'s decision as heavily influenced by Kulmiye's the ruling party's internal succession crisis, ongoing tussles between the executive and parliament, and the divided opposition's inability to agree on a common stance,' said Barnes.[18]

### History of delays

The lengthy election delay was not entirely unexpected. Somaliland does have a track record when it comes to election delays, which might provide some clues as to how both government and opposition parties might handle this one. In fact, Somaliland has never held an election exactly on time.

The last presidential elections were originally scheduled for March 2008. Again, technical difficulties with voter registration made this date unattainable, and in June

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2008 all political parties met and agreed to postpone elections to any time before April 2009. Voter registration was disturbed by a series of bombings in Hargeisa and neighbouring Puntland in October 2008 (al-Shabaab were the suspected perpetrators)[19], and the NEC requested yet another extension until May.

This new date was not accepted by the Kulmiye party, then the largest opposition party, which caused foreign donors to withdraw funding – they had begun to lose faith in the electoral process, concerned that the technical and security issues cited were a smokescreen for an unconstitutional extension of the government's term in office. The political tensions boiled over into civil society-led protests in Hargeisa on 12 September 2009, which erupted into violence. At least four people were killed and 12 injured in clashes between protestors and government security forces.[20]

Presidential elections were eventually held on 26 June 2010 – more than two years behind schedule.

> Delayed elections have become part of the political culture in Somaliland; a trend exacerbated by the prohibitive cost of elections

But it gets worse. Somaliland's last parliamentary elections were held in 2005, effectively giving this batch of representatives two terms for the price of one. Opposition parties have not raised much of a fuss about these delays, perhaps because so many top opposition figures are also members of parliament who risk losing their seats. It's expected that parliamentary elections will be conducted at the same time as the new presidential election.

Delayed elections have become part of the political culture in Somaliland (a trend exacerbated by the prohibitive cost of elections). This threatens the territory's democratic credentials and has given rise to instability. Also, crucially, it makes it hard for the international community to accept Somaliland as the bastion of democracy that it likes to sell itself as.

### The three-party system

The nature of Somaliland's political party landscape is defined encapsulated by a quirk in its constitution. Article 9 states, unequivocally, that 'the number of political parties in the Republic of Somaliland shall not exceed three (3), and that these parties shall not be based on regionalism or clanism.' This article was designed to lessen the influence of individual clans on the political process, preventing each clan from forming its own political party. It is a stratagem designed to prevent party politics from mirroring clan politics (although, of course, clan politics still plays an important role).

A special law governs how these parties are selected[21]. 'Political associations' are allowed to contest local elections and there is no limit to the number of these organisations. The three most popular, according to a complicated algorithm that takes both number of votes and geographical spread into account, become the three official parties. Winning candidates from unsuccessful political associations are then obliged to join one of the political parties.

This means that the stakes at local elections are very high, because local elections determine who can contest national elections. The last local elections were

26 June 2010

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS WERE EVENTUALLY HELD ON THIS DATE, MORE THAN TWO YEARS BEHIND SCHEDULE

conducted in 2012 and saw 2,368 candidates contesting 379 positions. This included 140 female candidates, although only 10 were elected (this is still a vast improvement on the 2002 local elections where only five females candidates ran, and none won).

The vote proceeded smoothly, and credibly, although it was marred by problems with multiple voting, ballot box tampering and indelible ink that was less indelible than advertised. Of greater concern was that voting was suspended in some areas as a result of tensions with neighbouring Puntland in disputed areas of Sool and Sanaag provinces.[22]

The three political associations that became political parties were the ruling Peace, Unity and Development Party (Kulmiye); the Somaliland National Party (Waddani); and the Justice and Welfare Party (UCID). These results were not uncontested: in particular, the Xaqsoor political association condemned 'vote rigging' by the ruling party, and refused to accept the results. Protests in early December 2012 led to violent clashes with police, with three people killed and seven injured. 'The intractability of the dispute over the election results is a clear indication of the depth of underlying tensions,' said election observers Michael Walls and Steve Kibble, adding that the tensions were rooted in clan affiliations.[23]

The identity of the three successful political parties came as no surprise. The first, Kulmiye, is the ruling party led by President Silanyo. It had been the main opposition party during President Riyale's term, and came to power promising sweeping changes to government – particularly in terms of efficiency, service delivery and fighting corruption. Silanyo himself is a former chairperson of the SNM, and a giant of the liberation struggle, occasionally described as 'Somaliland's Nelson Mandela'. Silanyo's decision to contest presidential elections again is controversial: he has promised on several occasions to run for just the single term. Silanyo is also getting old – he is 79 years of age, and it is beginning to show. Rumours abound that he is sick or becoming senile, although this is just speculation; it is obvious though that he has become less involved in cabinet meetings and is no longer the energetic public speaker he once was.

The second, Waddani, is the main opposition. Its leader Abdirahman Mohamed Abdillahi is known as Irro, meaning grey, because his hair turned grey early in life . Thanks to the delayed parliamentary elections, Irro is still the speaker of parliament – his election was supported by Kulmiye when it too was in opposition. He is a veteran politician and served as a senior diplomat in the Barre regime (as did Somaliland's second president Riyale).

The third, UCID, also known as new UCID, is a new iteration of the UCID party established in 2001. At the time, UCID was the first opposition party in Somaliland. UCID's presidential candidate is Jamal Ali Hussein, who is cut from a very different cloth to the other two candidates; he is relatively young, foreign-educated and charismatic, and has made a sincere effort to stay out of clan politics, preferring instead to mobilise youth through social media. While admirable, this is likely to hurt his chances of election.

## Traditional democracy

The influence of clan politics was not ignored by Somaliland's founding fathers. For example, the *Guurti* was established specifically to give clan leaders a voice in government, and the three party system is designed to force different clans and sub-clans to work together (as they can't each compete in elections under their own banner). The incorporation of these traditional elements means that Somaliland's political system is often described as a hybrid political system.

This 'best of both worlds' approach has been a major factor in Somaliland's stability and development. 'In spite of a heavily under-resourced, post-conflict government and the need to grapple with challenges as fundamental as the accommodation of the competing interests of representative nation-state democracy and a social structure based on egalitarian male kinship affiliation, Somali traditions of discourse and negotiation have enabled genuine progress. Since 1991, community- and clan-based reconciliation conferences and meetings have enabled the iterative construction of a resilient system of state, gradually widening the ambit of political consensus through sequential popular congresses and wide, albeit largely male, debate,' said Walls and Kibble.[24]

> The influence of clan politics is an important factor in almost every political decision

The influence of clan politics extends far beyond its formal representation in the political system, and is an important factor in almost every political decision. Ministers are carefully selected to maintain a clan balance in cabinet, even if they are not the best candidate for the job[25]. Most government positions are distributed on a similar basis. Government contracts often go to businessmen with the right clan connections and projects can stall if this is not taken into account. (A good example of this is the still-defunct Berbera cement factory, which can't be restarted until competing clans resolve their conflicting interests in the project)[26]. The judiciary play second fiddle to clan justice mechanisms, which relieves pressure on overburdened courts – but also makes it hard for the government to enforce laws.[27]

At the level of political parties, clan influence is particularly pronounced. Each party is perceived to represent a particular combination of clans and sub-clans, but this combination can and does change, based on various factors, including but not limited to: evolving personal relationships, distribution of patronage, local disputes over land or business, and competition with other clans. This has a major impact on voting patterns: although it is far from a hard and fast rule, with plenty of exceptions, clan members tend to vote as a bloc.

Although it quickly gets confusing, a rough overview of Somaliland's clan structure is important. The majority of Somaliland's population belongs to the Isaaq clan confederation, which is in turn dominated by the Habr Jelo, the Garhajis (including the Habr Yonis) and the Habr Awal (including the Saad Muse). The main minority clans include the Gadabursi, the Issa, the Dhulbahante and Warsengali, who belong to different clan confederations. These minor clans play a significant role: Former President Riyale, for instance, is Gadabursi.

> Clan justice mechanisms relieve pressure on overburdened courts – but also make it hard for the government to enforce laws

At the moment, Kulmiye is primarily associated with the Habr Jelo (President Silanyo's clan) and the Saad Muse. Its support is the most geographically diverse, putting it in a particularly strong position for parliamentary elections. Waddani is associated with the Habr Yonis and most of the Gadabursi, while UCID is predominantly aligned with a sub-clan of the Garhajis.

Despite the benefits that Somaliland has accrued from its hybrid system, there are question marks about whether it remains useful. Abdirahman Ahmed Hassan, a lecturer in political philosophy at Hargeisa's Gollis University, notes that the nature of clan leadership has changed, and that those traditional values that have been so important – such as the emphasis on negotiation and compromise – are eroding. 'Now, clan leaders are politicians. Driven by greed, not etiquette. This has led to fragmentation – clan leaders have multiplied. Clan leadership lives in city, not with the clan. The corruption of traditional leadership and the corruption of modern-style politics has interacted in a way that's impossible to control. Formally clan structures and political structures are separate, but actually they are very close.'[28]

POLITICAL PARTIES USE CLAN STRUCTURE AS A TOOL OR WEAPON TO GAIN POWER

Mohamed Farah, Executive Director of Somaliland's oldest think tank, the Academy for Peace and Development, notes that the hybrid system was never intended to be a long-term solution. Although it served its purpose – filling in the huge gaps in state when it comes to institution-building, capacity and internal democracy, it is now in danger of holding the country back. 'Look at our political parties: they don't have policies, ideologies, or a strong structure. They are more about clanship, they use the clan structure as a tool or weapon to get power. This hybrid system is a short-term strategy for Somaliland, to overcome conflict, build peace, etc. Our long-term strategy is to strengthen institutions to make traditional systems redundant.'[29]

## Internal threats

### Running out of patience

On 18 May 2011, at the 20th anniversary celebration of Somaliland's declaration of independence in Hargeisa, President Silanyo gave his keynote speech in front of a

banner that read: 'The international community is obligated to accept the wishes of our people.' The banner referred, of course, to Somaliland's long and so-far fruitless quest for international recognition as an independent, sovereign state. This is a national obsession. It is advocated at every opportunity by politicians and discussed endlessly in local media; often, children who know not a single other word of English will be able to say 'recognition'.

Somaliland occupies a grey area in the international community. Some links do exist. For instance, both the United Nations and the European Union maintain offices in Hargeisa to oversee aid programmes; it has signed several memoranda with Denmark and the United Kingdom relating to the repatriation of failed asylum seekers; and Somaliland cooperates with western intelligence services on counter-terrorism issues.[30] Ethiopia is the only country to maintain a diplomatic presence in Hargeisa, in the form of a consulate.

No other state has recognised its claims of independence, effectively excluding it from a formal seat at the table: Somaliland is not a member of the United Nations or the African Union, or even the regional body the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development. Worse, the lack of recognition prevents Somaliland from entering into bilateral agreements with other states, or from benefitting from World Bank investment or development policy loans.[31]

Officially, Somaliland is still part of Somalia proper and answerable to the Somali Federal Government in Mogadishu; this relationship is tense and will be explored further below.

There's a strong argument that, counter-intuitively, this lack of recognition – and the attendant lack of international engagement – has been a crucial factor in Somaliland's progress. Not only has this dream of *de jure* independence been a potent unifying tool, encouraging both government and opposition groups to behave, but it has forced Somaliland to come up with its own solutions to its problems, rather than internationally-imposed policies. Some argue that this has led to more effective and durable development.[32]

However, no matter how impressive Somaliland's accomplishments, international recognition remains a mirage. Global powers defer to the African Union on the subject and the African Union has been reluctant to even put it on its summit agendas. This is despite an African Union fact-finding mission concluding in 2011 that Somaliland fulfils many of the criteria for statehood; that the union between Somalia and Somaliland was never properly ratified; and that it's unique circumstances means that 'the case should not be linked to the notion of 'opening a Pandora's Box''[33].

Diplomatic sources suggest that the 'Pandora's Box' argument is the real sticking point for African Union leaders: the argument is that if the African Union recognises Somaliland, then this might create a dangerous precedent for the plethora of other secessionist movements on the continent. It may also have something to do with the African Union's substantial financial and military investment in Somalia proper (through the African Union Mission in Somalia), which has created close links between the AU and the Somalia Federal Government. In other words, as long as Mogadishu presses its claim on Somaliland, the territory stands no chance of receiving recognition – and Mogadishu is indeed pressing that claim.

So where does this leave Somaliland? 'The lack of recognition and development is an impediment on all issues related to development and aid. It might trigger hostilities

THE LACK OF RECOGNITION PREVENTS SOMALILAND FROM ENTERING INTO BILATERAL AGREEMENTS

of some kind. We have a lot of unemployment, a lot of poverty, people can't wait forever. We don't know what to expect,' said foreign minister Yonis in a March 2015 interview[34]. Nonetheless, Yonis said his government is going to continue with its strategy for recognition, which is to turn Somaliland into such a model of democracy that it can no longer be ignored. 'Of course we are running out of patience. We have been waiting for 25 years. At the same time we have to be realistic, have to keep pushing, working on our stability, our institutions.'

> Officials and advisors worry that Somaliland could implode once people realise that recognition is unattainable

Other government officials and advisors worry that Somaliland could implode once people begin to realise that its national goal of recognition – the territory's main unifying force – is unattainable (even if it is worth questioning whether what, if anything, will change in the event of recognition). In particular, this could lead to widespread disillusionment with the democratic system as it has failed to deliver this goal, creating fertile ground for more radical ideologies.

### The changing nature of Islam

Of particular concern is the potential for a more radical brand of political Islam to flourish in Somaliland, of the type that has so destabilised Somalia proper.

Somaliland is already a deeply conservative state, and Islam is entrenched in its politics. Article 5 of the Constitution states that Islam is the religion of Somaliland, and the promotion of any other religion is prohibited; that all laws should be grounded in Sharia law; and that the state should promote religious tenets.[35]

However, the nature of Islam in the territory has changed dramatically over the past two decades. Where once Somalilanders overwhelmingly belonged to the relatively moderate Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam, with strong Sufi influences, many are now associated with the very puritan Salafist school, which demands that the Quran be interpreted as literally as possible and that followers work towards the creation of an Islamic State. It's important to note that most terrorist organisations – including al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and al-Shabaab – have their roots in Salafism, although these make up only a small sub-set of Salafists.

Like in many other parts of the world, Salafism spread in Somaliland with the help of substantial funding from the Arabian Gulf, particularly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The link between money and Salafism still exists. Many private schools are funded by religious associations in the Gulf, and these come with ideological strings attached. Salafists are said to dominate trade and commerce too.[36]

'Political Islam is a very important issue. We are not an island. Political Islam in the Middle East has an influence in Somaliland. But political Islam is not unified, and extremism of any kind has not had any space here,' said Farah of the Academy for Peace and Development. 'It could be a long-term challenge, but not in the coming 20-30 years. We don't see any formal political structure that these groups might represent. They have a great influence in business and education, but less in politics.'

Dr Hussein Bulhan, President of Hargeisa's Frantz Fanon University and adviser to the foreign ministry, agrees that the threat is not immediate – although it is serious. 'Salafism is a very serious threat. It's not obvious or openly organised as a political wing, as it is in most Muslim societies. Somaliland is not an immediate hotspot. But it will become one if the democratic system is not seen to work.' This is an important point: successful elections in Somaliland are not just about forming a new government, but also about protecting the political system itself.

> The nature of Islam in the territory has changed dramatically over the past two decades

Ironically, Somaliland's unique political system might exacerbate the threat. Currently, none of the three official political parties is explicitly Salafist. As Farah said, there is no formal political structure in which Salafists are represented, and this could be dangerous: without any stake in the democratic process, they may be forced to operate outside its rules and norms and this could encourage extremism and radicalisation within the Salafist community. That said, Salafist leaders have the power to make or break politicians by preaching for or against them in mosques, giving them plenty of influence over day-to-day politics.

'Sufism is dead, Salafism is now dominant, and politicians are too scared to confront it, for fear of condemnation in mosques,' said Guleid Ahmed Jama, a lawyer with the Human Rights Centre. 'There will be a day of reckoning – they want power. Will they use democratic mechanisms to do so? Or will they use violence?'[37]

Of interest in this context is the relationship between Somaliland and al-Shabaab, the Islamist militant group which has contributed so much to destabilising Somalia in recent

years. During this time, Somaliland has largely escaped unscathed from al-Shabaab's attentions, with the notable exception of the 2008 suicide bombing attacks in Hargeisa which killed 25 people (this attack is usually attributed to al-Shabaab, even though the group has not officially claimed it).

There are three main theories explaining why Somaliland has not been targeted to the same degree as the governments in Somalia and, increasingly, Puntland. The first is that Somaliland's security apparatus, including intelligence-gathering and counter-terrorism units, is simply more effective; the second is that Somaliland is funding al-Shabaab, either as protection money or to further destabilise Somalia proper (the latter allegation was most recently espoused by the Puntland government, forcing an official Somaliland denial[38]); and the third is that because elements of the al-Shabaab leadership, including the late emir Ahmed Abdi Godane, are Isaaq, with roots in Somaliland, they are reluctant to attack their homeland. Another possible factor is that, unlike the Somali Federal Government which would not exist in its current form without the support of foreign actors, Somaliland's government is has far fewer international ties and therefore presents less of a target.

> Somaliland has largely escaped unscathed from al-Shabaab's attentions, with the notable exception of the 2008 attacks in Hargeisa

Whatever the reason for the absence of an al-Shabaab threat, every analyst and government official who spoke to the Institute for Security Studies for this report expressed the fear that the growing influence of Salafism in Somaliland may open the door to increased al-Shabaab activity, especially if the group continues to be pushed out of south-central Somalia.

## External threats

### Border disputes

The further east one gets from the centre of power, Hargeisa, the less Somaliland's government is able to exert its authority. In these remote and underdeveloped areas, its presence can be non-existent. This is especially true in areas of Sool and Sanaag provinces and, to a lesser extent, Cayn/Toghdeer, where the Somaliland government's authority is not taken for granted. In these areas, a mixed constituency with divided loyalties answers to various different power centres.

Currently, there are two other entities jostling for control of these areas?: Puntland State of Somalia, another autonomous region to Somaliland's east, and a secessionist movement that calls itself Khatumo State.

Like Somaliland, Puntland effectively self-governs, and has set up a parallel government and institutions, although these are not as well developed as Somaliland's equivalents. Unlike Somaliland, Puntland is not pressing for complete independence; it is happy to remain part of Somalia proper as a state within a federal system.

Puntland is, however, pressing its claim over disputed portions of Sool and Sanaag provinces, including Sool's capital Las Aanood. On the map, these areas are within the borders of British Somaliland, which are the same borders claimed by Somaliland today. However, the majority of the inhabitants of these disputed areas are from the Warsangeli and Dhulbahante, associated with Puntland's dominant Darod clan; these

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THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE KILLED IN THE 2008 SUICIDE BOMBING ATTACKS IN HARGEISA

ethnic ties, plus the disputed areas' proximity to Puntland, form the basis of Puntland's claim.[39]

Since 1998, when Puntland was formed, there has been a low-intensity conflict between the two autonomous regions over the disputed areas. These typically take the form of military incursions into disputed territory, with occasional outbreaks of fighting that claim a few lives.

An incident on 25 September 2014 was typical: according to Somaliland media sources, a well-armed militia from Puntland attacked the town of Dhahar, where they were repelled by Somaliland security forces, shortly after a prominent Warsangeli leader had been hosted by Puntland's President Abdiweli Gas. One policeman from Somaliland was killed in the attack.[40]

> Despite stuttering peace talks, it seems unlikely that border tensions will dissipate any time soon

Perhaps a more convincing explanation for Puntland's interest in the area comes from a contract it signed in October 2005 with Texas-based oil exploration company Range Resources. The deal gives Range Resources 50.1% of exclusive prospecting rights in Puntland, including in the disputed areas. Somaliland has also granted prospecting rights to those areas, to Norway's DNO and Turkey's Genel.

Either way, and despite stuttering peace talks between the two territories, it seems unlikely that border tensions will dissipate any time soon. It is equally unlikely, however, that they will develop into a more serious conflict. Both Puntland and Somaliland seek external support, and some form of international recognition; they know that a full-on war could destroy these ambitions, not to mention their all-too fragile societies.[41]

A little less predictable are the actions of Khatumo State, a secessionist movement which does not recognise Somaliland's independence and claims regions of Sool, Sanaag and Cayn provinces for itself. It was established in 2012 as an alternative to control by either Puntland or Somaliland, and is thought to be supported by the Somali Federal Government. It is primarily composed of members of the Dulbahante clan.

To bolster its claim, Khatumo State has established a governing structure complete with a flag and a president, Dr. Ali Khalif Galeydh. Galeydh has vowed to wage war against Somaliland until its forces leave what he describes as occupied territory. He is reported as saying: 'Our ultimate aim is to liberate all the territory being forcibly occupied by Somaliland armed forces although we would prefer a peaceful coexistence with our neighbours…[but] it seems peace is not achievable until we create a firestorm to wipe out Somaliland.'[42]

These are not entirely empty threats. Militias acting under the banner of the Khatumo State have been involved in a number of attacks against Somaliland forces. Most recently, fighting broke out near the town of Buhoodle when Somaliland's troops tried to enter a village in search of Khatumo State leaders. No casualties were reported.[43]

On its own, Khatumo State is little more than a few disgruntled militias mostly concerned with local issues, and does not pose much threat to Somaliland. The big question mark, however, is the extent of the involvement in Khatumo State of the Somali Federal Government, and whether it could be used by Somalia to destabilise Somaliland in the future.

### The Somalia talks

Somalia remains Somaliland's biggest existential threat, at least in the eyes of Somaliland's political and civil society leaders. 'The foremost threat is that Somalia still thinks that Somaliland belongs to it. Somalia may try and get Somaliland back by force, once it is stronger, and this would be a popular decision for any government in Mogadishu,' said Jama from the Centre for Human Rights.[44]

Bulhan, adviser to the foreign minister, concurred. 'The fear is that Somalia is buying time to come up and force its government on Somaliland and bombard the city. It's déjà vu in the making,' he said, referring to the devastation wreaked by the Barre regime.[45]

For this to happen, the situation in Somalia would have to drastically improve. For now, the Somali Federal Government is kept in power by African Union troops, and is still battling to assert itself over the territory that is not in dispute. It simply does not have the resources, personnel, equipment or political power to seriously challenge Hargeisa.

However, this position of relative weakness has not stopped the SFG from attempting to assert its rights over Somaliland, exacerbating tensions between Mogadishu and Hargeisa. Over the past three years, Turkish-brokered talks have sought to ease those tensions, with minimal results.

There have been six rounds of talks so far, all in neutral countries. Despite some initial progress, especially on minor issues such as over-fly rights, the latest round in Istanbul in March failed dismally. The Somaliland delegation pulled out before the talks had even begun, angry that the Somali delegation included individuals originally from Somaliland. 'Sadly, the talks have been paralysed, have not borne fruit,

and have been undermined by Somalia whose leaders have reneged on all agreements,' said President Silanyo.[46]

In fact, neither side is willing to compromise. Both approach the talks from mutually incompatible positions. Somalia refuses to let go of Somaliland, while Somaliland refuses to countenance even a symbolic reunion with Mogadishu. It completely rejects the idea of Somaliland becoming a largely-autonomous state within a federal Somalia. If Somalia gets stronger, this disagreement is likely to become more pronounced, and potentially more serious.

> The international community should reconsider Somaliland's bid for recognition

## Conclusion

For Afro-optimists, Somaliland is a Good News Story: proof, where it's needed, that peace and democracy can thrive in the Horn of Africa; that power can change hands peacefully; and that clan politics are compatible with good governance. Its development over the last two decades is lauded as a model for other African governments.

Somaliland deserves this praise. Of course, it's easy to find flaws, but the overall picture remains positive – especially for a country that doesn't technically exist. With a thriving economy (although official figures are hard to pin down) and an elected government in place, its progress is a stark reminder of just how badly Somalia proper has failed.

This doesn't mean, however, that its continued progress and stability is guaranteed. Somaliland is built on precarious foundations in a particularly fragile part of Africa. There's still plenty of hard work to be done – but if anyone can do it, it's Somaliland.

Since 1991, Somaliland has consistently confounded expectations, maintaining its steady progress in the face of obstacles which would have derailed plenty of other developmental states. History, therefore, is on its side. Long may the good news story continue.

## Recommendations

Somaliland's government must present a clear timetable for the delayed presidential and parliamentary elections. The uncertainty surrounding the polls is not conducive to a stable political environment, and is damaging the territory's international reputation.

Somaliland's National Electoral Commission needs to use the election delay effectively to roll-out its new and improved voter registration system, and safeguard against issues such as the multiple voting and inadequate ballot boxes that marred the last vote. If, on the other hand, the delay becomes simply a means to extend President Silanyo's term in office, tensions between political parties are likely to rise. Previously, this situation has resulted in violent protests with fatal consequences.

The territory's most significant long-term challenge is its failure to achieve international recognition, especially if citizens lose faith in the ability of a democratic government to deliver full independence. Given that the situation is unlikely to change, Somaliland should be thinking about an end goal that is not full independence, and perhaps be working towards shaping a federal Somalia that gives it near-complete autonomy.

With this in mind, the international community should reconsider Somaliland's bid for recognition. In particular, the African Union should follow the recommendations of its own fact-finding mission, which argues that Somaliland has a legal basis for independence and should get a fair hearing. This is surely the least Somaliland deserves – even if, ultimately, the decision is political rather than legal.

There are several issues that could undermine Somaliland's progress, including: radical Islamists who have come to dominate religious space in the territory, and who are hugely influential in education and business (thanks to Somaliland's three-party system, Islamists don't really have any stake in the democratic system, and may be forced to operate outside it to effect the change they want); border disputes with neighbouring Puntland, which will worsen if there really is oil in the disputed areas; and Hargeisa's strained relationship with Mogadishu. Both Somaliland and the international community need to monitor these issues very closely.

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## About the ISS

The Institute for Security Studies is an African organisation that aims to enhance human security on the continent. It does independent and authoritative research, provides expert policy analysis and advice, and delivers practical training and technical assistance.

## Acknowledgements

This report has been made possible with support from the governments of the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. The ISS is also grateful for support from the other members of the ISS Partnership Forum: the governments of Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Japan, and the USA.

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ISS East Africa Report
Issue 5

ISSN 1026-0404

9 771026 040004