

# **As the Kenyan Somali 'Peace' Conference falls apart in confusion, Recognition of Somaliland's Independence is overdue**

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## **From colonial partition to post-colonial revolution**

'Somaliland' came into being as a British Protectorate in the late 19th century, as treaties of 'protection' were signed with the local Somali clans.

Britain had, at this time, two primary objectives in the Horn: first to safeguard the supply of Somali mutton for its recently established garrison at Aden, and secondly in the European scramble for control of this region, following the Egyptian withdrawal, to keep the French out!

With claims of the untold riches of the region, the famous English explorer Richard Burton had long tried to persuade his government to establish a proper colony in Somaliland. But HMG did not share Burton's optimistic enthusiasm for this project. Indeed, British reluctance from the outset bred a tradition of colonial parsimony and neglect that dominated British policy virtually throughout Somaliland's existence. The saving grace was the integrity and energy of many of the expatriate British officials, who later came to serve there.

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British administration was initially limited to the coast and began very modestly with three 'vice consuls', stationed at Berbera, Bulhar and Zeila. L. Prendergast Walsh, undoubtedly one of the most flamboyant of these pioneers, described his administration as 'parental'. He instigated a rather original form of peace-making, whereby combatants who started a fight with weapons in Berbera were forcibly separated by the police and forced to dig a grave. Their weapons were then returned to them and they were invited to resume their battle, on the understanding that the victor would bury his adversary. This seems to have worked surprisingly well, leading in most cases to the assailants putting down their weapons.

Against this background of a very modest and minimal British presence, the fierce and extremely costly twenty years war (1900-1920) against the *Jihad* proclaimed by the remarkable Somali sheikh and poet Mohammad Abdille Hassan and his Dervishes was an unexpected and terrible aberration.

This left a permanent scar on the imperial perception of Somaliland . Following the jihad, no missionary activity was permitted by the British, and the colonial office insisted that no action likely to disturb the Somalis should ever again be undertaken. This was of course in many ways a negative development. But it had the positive effect of making the Protectorate sympathetic to Somali interests. Here, to put it simply, the colonial office was pro-Somali while, in the wider Horn of Africa context, the Foreign office was pro-Ethiopian. In consequence, social developments were pursued with extreme caution. Modernisation, especially in the controversial area of education , thus proceeded at a very modest pace. Somaliland was accurately described as a 'Cinderella of Empire'.

Nevertheless, by the 1950s progress was in train. Western education was being introduced on a small scale, with attention gradually paid to girls as well as boys, and a few bright graduates from the schools were sent for university study to Britain and the Sudan . In 1955, when I arrived in Somaliland, to carry out PhD research on Somali social and political organisation, there were already a handful of professionally qualified Somali senior police officers, assistant district commissioners, and veterinary officials as well as paramedics. Based in Hargeisa, I met most of these officials and my first-born child ( *urud k a reerka*) was born in the old group hospital, not in Edna's splendid maternity hospital. At this time, for a Somali population estimated at about three quarters of a million, expatriate staff numbered just short of some 200.

There were now two new major political factors encouraging political development and social change. One was the bitterly opposed transfer to Ethiopian control of the vast Haud grazing zone on the southern borders of the Protectorate. This action was contrary to the sentiments and advice of the Protectorate administration. Such, indeed, was the furore, that an unsuccessful attempt was subsequently made by the Foreign Office to buy the Haud back from Ethiopia . This powerful stimulus to nationalist aspirations in the Protectorate was boosted further, and given specific form, by the impending independence of neighbouring Somalia , under a UN mandate administered by Italy . It was now clear that Somalia would indeed become independent in 1960, which increased the pressure in both territories to prepare to unite as soon after that as possible.

From the mid 1950s onwards, both the Haud issue and Somalia 's impending self-determination, fuelled nationalist aspirations in the slow-moving Protectorate, and political power began to be gradually devolved through a succession of increasingly representative legislative councils. Somali nationalism was becoming a potent force which even a bush-whacking anthropologist like myself felt compelled to try to document and analyse.

Very fortunately for me, my arrival in Somaliland (including visits to Somalia beginning in 1956) occurred at this crucial phase in the gestation of modern Somali politics. I attended political party rallies in both Somaliland and Somalia (the SNM, SYL and HDMS). In the north, on my return there, I even had the temerity to make a few tactless comments, in my rough bush Somali, at party meetings. I remember contrasting the speed of political progress in the south with that in Somaliland, saying: '*Halkan waa habeyn, hagaas waa maalin*'. How the tables are turned today!

This rather cheeky behaviour on my part, may serve to illustrate the remarkable freedom I was allowed, as a lone anthropologist, both by Somali politicians, and by the local administration. I thought at the very least I might be ticked-off by the administrative authorities. As far as I could tell, however, the official responsible for Protectorate security had no report of my activities. In any case, he was a rather remarkable character, reputed to have been a member of the British communist party and well-known for his extremely pro-Somali sentiments and behaviour. He refused to join the elitist administrative officers' club in Hargeisa, on the grounds that, at that time, it was closed to all but expatriate officials and the highest-ranking Somali civil servants.

### **From suppression to renewed independence**

Prior to Somaliland's successful war against Siyad's dictatorship, which concluded in renewed independence in 1990, my last visit under the old dispensation was in 1985. I was then in charge of a highly controversial UNHCR mission to enumerate (or more tactfully, 're-enumerate') the refugee population. I thus saw what conditions were like in Somaliland at the height of Muhammad Siyad Barre's military dictatorship. I met Morgan and his sinister predecessor General Gani, at that time installed as military ruler of Somaliland. The towns were filled with members of Siyad's security police (the NSS), the general atmosphere suggesting a prison camp reminiscent of Apartheid South Africa, or the Belgian Congo at its most oppressive. It seemed inevitable that this level of oppression could not but provoke a reactive liberation struggle.

In the meantime, in his desperation to cling to power, after the Russians abandoned him, Siyad forlornly turned to the West for support, hastily jettisoning his 'Scientific Socialism' and presenting himself as an ally of the US. The 'Good Conductor's' new role, as a champion of Democracy, proceeded at many different levels. I was involved in a minor instance of this. I had written an account of Siyad's scientific socialism for a massive three volume reference book called 'Marxist governments of the World' (edited by a Polish political scientist named Chaikovski). The publishers conceived a cover design, with pictures of the Presidents of each of the regimes included in the book. The Somali ambassador in London was consequently telephoned, and politely asked if the publishers could have a photograph of the Somali head of state to put on the book cover. 'What book' the ambassador demanded. After the publisher explained, there was a long silence. Eventually he was informed, brusquely, that if a book was published with this

title, the publishers would be taken to court and sued for libel. Unfortunately, the potentially diverting spectacle of rival expert witnesses defining the nature of a Marxist regime, was never realised. A new ambassador was appointed who did not pursue the issue. The President's assessment of me was even more unequivocally indicated in his comments on an article of mine about him called 'Kim Il Sung in Somalia' forwarded by the Somali embassy in London for his delectation. The President's comments scrawled in the margins, and passed to me by a friend in his office, included the question : Haarkan wamahay ( Who is this shit?). I took this as an important, if rather coarse, endorsement of my analysis.

Whatever he did, Siyad's days were of course numbered and no substantial Western support was forthcoming. In the last days of apartheid South Africa did, however, supply pilots to bomb the Somaliland freedom fighters. Although there were terribly civilian casualties, the struggle continued until at the end of 1990 Siyad was overthrown by loosely co-ordinated guerrilla operations in the north and south.

### **Building the Somaliland Republic**

With the liberation struggle over in Somaliland , energies turned to the gradual restoration of the country. Peace-making and social reconstruction has followed a bottom-up path, starting at the grass roots with small local clan groups, and building up gradually in ever widening circles.

This slow and often irregular process which, not without setbacks, has taken several years is reflected in Somaliland 's contemporary two-tier parliament:

A house of elected party representatives, and an upper house of nominated clan elders. This arrangement ensured a widely representative parliament and a government whose ministers similarly reflected Somaliland 's diverse clan composition. As everyone here knows, there have been impressively conducted national elections favourably judged by international observers.

The same constitutionality obtained in the smooth succession of President Dahir Rayaale Kahin when Mohammad Haji Ibrahim Egal died suddenly in South Africa . As is also well-known, there has recently been a dangerous confrontation on the eastern border with Puntland , involving the Dulbahante clan who have long successfully exploited their position as frontiersmen with multiple loyalties. But this potentially serious clash has been resolved peacefully with both the Somaliland and Puntland forces exercising discretion. Anyone who knows anything about Somali society will appreciate how this outcome indicates good judgement and effective control by the authorities on both sides.

For different reasons, it is of course in the interests of neither party to become embroiled in fighting at this juncture when so many other interests are at stake.

These locally evolved Somaliland political institutions have delivered a degree of political stability and democratic government so far unattained in any other part of the defunct state of Somalia( with, perhaps, the brief exception of Puntland in its founding years). Today Somaliland is an effective functioning state, based on good governance, to an extent that is sadly now rare in Africa . The restoration of civil society is well underway, schools and hospitals are under construction with help from diaspora Somalis and some friendly NGOs. Much has been achieved in demobilising former militias and retraining those who cannot fruitfully be absorbed into the local police or army. Police training, incidentally, now includes learning reading, writing and maths—and even human rights.

Although there have undeniably been serious ups and downs in the process summarised above, the overall achievement so far is truly remarkable, and all the more so in that it has been accomplished by the people of Somaliland themselves with very little external help or intervention. The contrast with fate of southern Somalia hardly needs to be underlined.

Far from seeking to applaud or encourage these developments in spontaneous Somali democracy, the outside world has taken little interest and remained largely indifferent. This, of course, contrasts strikingly with the frequent pronouncements by Western leaders of their concern to promote good government and democracy in Africa . As the chairman of the politics department at Princeton University has recently put it: ‘One would think that the natural response of the outside world to the extraordinary achievement of the Somalilanders would be respect and recognition’—especially in contrast with Somalia !.

### **Barriers to Recognition**

Here, up till the present, Britain —the obvious patron and advocate for diplomatic recognition—has been especially remiss. True, British officials in the FCO Horn of Africa department and our embassy in Addis Ababa have consistently offered encouragement and support. But the major political breakthrough has yet to be achieved. The path-breaking recent visit to Somaliland by British MPs and the subsequent debate in parliament are important milestones.

And it is gratifying that these developments have so quickly been followed by the present visit to London of ( Somaliland ) President Dahir Rayaale Kahin, and Foreign Minister Edna Aden and other cabinet colleagues.. I naturally hope that the ensuing discussions with British Ministers will tangibly advance the process towards diplomatic recognition.

Some of us think it is long overdue, especially on the part of a government that talks so virtuously about promoting democracy in the Third World . The contrast between their lack of interest in Somaliland and excessive intervention in Iraq speaks volumes.

Now, as in the past, the situation is complicated by the persistent problem of anarchy in southern Somalia despite no less than fourteen high level UN and now EC attempts to cobble together a government in Mogadishu. This has been going on for almost fourteen years and the current fourteen months' long effort in Kenya is evidently falling apart amid fierce allegations of corruption, fraud, and bias directed at the local organisers and their external backers.

This colossal waste of effort and money (reputed about \$10 million and some of it diverted from EC aid allocations already promised)) was, in my opinion, misconceived from the start. Cannot any of the policy makers involved learn from the past? What contribution to peace is achieved by enabling Somalia 's warlords, and sundry self-appointed representatives of 'civil society', to holiday in luxurious hotels in Kenya ? A century ago, the Ethiopian emperor would have treated these people rather differently. They would have been invited to an imperial banquet and poisoned! (Today they should have been arrested in Kenya as suspected war crimes perpetrators.) More appropriately, all the negotiations should have been held inside Somalia with, if necessary, an external force in Mogadishu to maintain the peace. Of course that is the real difficulty, no one wants to undertake that high risk role. If the mighty warlords were incapable of doing that, what chance is there that they could establish a viable regime in southern Somalia ?

Even if the current talks achieved nominal success, serious doubts would remain about the representative status of any so-called 'government' based on them. Lacking any demonstrable mandate from the people of southern Somalia , how could the outcome of such a conference claim democratic legitimacy? It would be even less authentically representative than the TNG! The EC, and others involved in this dubious venture, seem to have lost sight of this crucial requirement. Or don't they care? Instead of wasting months in Kenya debating highly artificial laws and theoretical constitutional niceties—which have little chance of ever being implemented—diplomatic efforts should have concentrated on forcing the warlords in situ to agree on power-sharing in Mogadishu, and getting on with somehow living together.

Political engineering should have been pragmatically directed from the bottom, with the aim of establishing widening circles of peace and co-operation, as in Somaliland . Although I have no particular brief for warlords Morgan and Abdillahi Yusuf, I think they are right to have quit Kenya to set up their own conference on the edge of Mogadishu . Nothing positive can ever be achieved unless the southern Somali warlords can agree on how to carve up their political turfs in and round Mogadishu

The recent Kenyan efforts at Somali reconstruction have been based, as usual, on the wrong top-down hierarchical model. There is the additional draw-back that the title 'Peace conference' is an unfortunate misnomer. Here it is not a question, as in the Sudan , or between Eritrea and Ethiopia , of mediating between two hostile parties. The international dispute-settling bureaucrats, who come out in force on such occasions, need to develop more sophisticated models for handling fragmented multi-stranded situations like Somalia .

What is clearly at issue, here, is the division of power and economic interest among a squabbling bunch of predatory gangsters. The Italians, who haunt these Somali meetings with their grandiose dreams of a resurrected Somalia , might make a more useful contribution if they applied some of their expertise in dealing with the Maffia to sorting out Mogadishu .

### **Recognising Somaliland helps Somali unity**

Let us also note how all this frustratingly unproductive attention given to southern Somalia has increased Somaliland 's international isolation and delayed appropriate recognition of its achievements. What is in effect happening here is that the bad guy is being rewarded and the good guy punished! This is certainly how the international response must strike a neutral observer. But, in my view, this has not actually helped to remedy the situation in Somalia itself that, as a long-term supporter of Somali self-determination, also concerns me deeply. My guess is that recognition of Somaliland at this juncture would have a tonic effect in Somalia . It would administer a brisk wakeup call, shaking the southern politicians out of their prolonged self- indulgent torpor, and thus help to dispel their wild political fantasies so unwisely promoted by the hasty UN recognition given to the undemocratic and insubstantial regime of Mr Abdulqasim, whom Puntland web sites call the 'defunct' transitional president.

Some southerners will protest that Somaliland 's recognition is a blow to Somali unity. But this is sheer nonsense and sounds hollow coming, as it does, from people who in the last fourteen years have done nothing to advance Somali unity and even less to further human rights and democracy. Somali 're-configuration' as the British foreign office blandly calls it, has already happened. The people of Somaliland have demonstrated that their independence is a fait accompli whatever outsiders choose to think.

Nor does this in any way endanger or diminish the ethnic identity of the Somali people and their socio-economic cohesion that reaches into Djibouti , Ethiopia and Kenya —an un-disruptive political dismemberment already accepted within the Somali nation. Thus, the attitude to Somaliland 's independence, of those southern Somali politicians who

oppose it, is akin to that of a person who has had a limb amputated, but still claims to feel it as part of his body.

If as I hope Somaliland soon receives the international recognition to which it has long been entitled, I hope equally that this action will provide a new impetus to social reconstruction in Somalia . It is obvious that a new approach is needed, and one that is better informed about Somali political realities and less biased by extraneous external interests. These biases on the part of the principal external actors are acutely obvious.

Thus, Djibouti has politico-economic interests in both north and south, Ethiopia worries about Islamic fundamentalism, and Kenya has serious Somali refugee problems which are shared to varying extents by EC countries generally. Both countries share bad memories of Somali iridentism. For its part, Italy nourishes fantasies of her former African empire, and the Italian political parties sorely miss the subsidies they illegally derived from the national aid budget. Caught in an earlier time-warp, Egyptians retain their Pharaonic obsession with Ethiopia as a threat to the Nile . On a more distant frontier, Arab states tend to favour Somali clients who carry an Islamic banner.. What I find most striking in the attitudes of the spokesmen for many of these countries, including others in Africa, is their ignorance and complete indifference to the actual condition and aspirations of ordinary Somalis, an attribute they share with depressingly many of the self-declared leaders of Somalia

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