

5. POSTSCRIPT: Reflections of an International (Election) Observer

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Somaliland or, more accurately, Somalilanders have achieved a remarkable amount in the past twenty years. In fact, those achievements are so significant, and hold such potential to help all of us – Somali and non-Somali – to understand what is possible elsewhere in the Somali Horn and even more widely. It is worth taking a hard and objective look at what has happened.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency in some quarters to romanticise Somaliland's achievements – which has the rather counter-intuitive effect of obscuring both their nature and importance. For example, in mid-2011 the UK's *Daily Mail*¹ eagerly picked up on a paper by a Stanford PhD candidate² to support an argument that Somaliland is “proof” that aid does not work – a theme that was also pushed in *The Economist*³. The line ran that huge sums of aid have been committed to successive efforts in southern Somalia to form and support a government, with little obvious success; whereas Somaliland has received no external support but has been successful in establishing peace, then a government, and – in the past decade – a viable multi-party democracy. This proposition is echoed by some Somali commentators who suggest that Somalis will succeed only when they are left alone.

There is a germ of truth in there, but it is not a particularly helpful argument. The reality is that Somali society has long been heavily oriented towards trade. Linkages with many “external” communities – whether economic, political, religious or personal – are long-standing, deep and vital. That is as true for Somaliland as it is for Puntland, Mogadishu or any of the other Somali areas.

So, what has happened over the past two decades in Somaliland? Focusing particularly on the political realm, we need to start a little further back. The Somali National Movement (SNM) was one of the first movements established in the early 1980s to resist the increasingly dictatorial regime of General Mohamed Siyad Barre. Right from the start, the SNM built a notable degree of democracy into its governance structure.

The SNM were criticised at the time, and since, for their domination by the Isaaq clan family. That sentiment still permeates Somaliland politics. Again, all is not quite what it seems.

The SNM, in fact, preferred to form alliances with non-Isaaq clans, or to allow membership of non-Isaaq individuals in a personal capacity rather than as representatives of their clans. However, that did not stop the two largest non-Isaaq clans in Somaliland from taking a lead in the early formation of Somaliland. In 1993, one of the most important peace conferences took place in Borama, the principal town in territory of the non-Isaaq Gadabursi clan. When Isaaq clans have fought amongst themselves, it has fallen to the likes of the Gadabursi and, to the east, the Dhulbahante, to step in and broker peace.

Herein also lie the roots of what remains one of Somaliland's greatest political challenges. While it was at the outset a project of a broad group of clans, the Isaaq clans have always held a numerical dominance. When several of the Isaaq clans have found some way of working together, the others have become marginalised – and enthusiasm for the Somaliland project has waned. In 2013, there is a relatively strong alliance of Isaaq clans at the heart of power, and many outside those groups are feeling increasingly disgruntled with their status.

Returning briefly to the theme we started with, the periodic intervention of non-Isaaq clans epitomises a way in which “outsiders” have in fact been critical to Somaliland's stability. In much the same way as it was the involvement of two clans who were not part of the fractious core that allowed Somaliland to establish its

1. Ian Birrell, “Somaliland: The former British colony that shows Africa doesn't need our millions to flourish”, Daily Mail website, July 23rd 2011.
2. Nicholas Eubank, “Taxation, Political Accountability, and Foreign Aid: Lessons from Somaliland”, unpublished paper, March 26th 2011.
3. Baobab blog, “Aid and Somaliland: Mo money mo problems”, The Economist website, June 24th 2011.

relatively plural political system, both Somali and non-Somali outsiders have played important roles over the years in helping to mediate conflicts and support peace initiatives. The difference between political processes in Somaliland and Somalia lies in the nature and scale of external intervention. Somaliland has succeeded because the political process has been led by those in the country – but also because there have been timely interventions from people outside the immediate crises and conflicts that have arisen from time to time.

Narrowing the focus to the past few years, until the presidential elections in 2010 Somaliland politics were dominated by the governing party established by late President Egal. It drew support from a range of clans and – significantly – Egal himself was never part of the SNM struggle. When he died in 2002, Egal’s Gadabursi vice-president, Dahir Riyale Kahin, assumed the presidency in a peaceful transfer of power. President Dahir Riyale then won an election in his own right a year later – albeit by a wafer-thin majority. Many of those associated with the long SNM struggle were heavily involved with the losing party, Kulmiye, and it was to their credit that – after some tense negotiations – they conceded defeat.

In 2010, the balance of power shifted when the Kulmiye candidate, and past chairman of the SNM, Ahmed Mohamed “Silanyo”, won the presidential election. He has managed to keep together a coalition strongly centred on his own Habar Ja’lo clan – one of the Isaaq clan family – and a number of other key Isaaq partners. The local council elections which took place on November 28th 2012 consolidated this power shift. UDUB collapsed as a political entity before the election – leaving the way open for Kulmiye to win many councils that it had not held before.

One of the consequences of the power shift has been an increase in opposition to Somaliland’s continued independence in the east and, to a lesser extent, the western areas of the country. However, Xaqsoor, the

political association that drew the strongest support from the non-Isaaq clans in the east, and from a smaller non-Isaaq clan in the west, failed to achieve the number of votes it had been hoping for because polling could not proceed in some of their stronghold towns. Much of the protest after the election, some of which turned violent as police cracked down heavily on demonstrators, was about the failure of some of the clan groups who had been at the heart of the formation of Somaliland in 1991 to achieve electoral success.

The local elections demonstrated the importance of some sort of new voter register in the future. This time around, the register used in the 2010 presidential election was abandoned. The process of counting and registering voters in the lead up to that election had proven extremely divisive. It was, after all, the first time there had been a concerted effort to count voters by region in many decades, and the results of that count effectively determined relative clan populations – and therefore voting weights. As a result, there was no appetite after the 2010 poll for updating or improving the register.

In 2012, the primary insurance against multiple voting remained the inking of fingers – much the same as in the 2002 council elections. However, by popular demand an open list was employed in 2012, whereas in 2002 parties operated closed lists of candidates – voters simply selected the party of their choice. For most Somalilanders, it certainly felt more democratic to be voting for specific candidates; but this had the unintended consequence of significantly increasing the incentive for each candidate to throw resources into their campaign. Many spent huge sums of money. On election day, funds were spent on hiring trucks to shift voters to polling stations, buying bleach to remove ink from fingers and other election “expenses”. Not all of this activity was fraudulent, by any means. For some, trucks were required to bring isolated nomadic groups to polling stations. But there is no doubt that many people voted more than once, and finger-cleansing with bleach was openly practised and common.

Women continue to comprise the majority of voters, yet it remains extremely hard for women to enter formal politics. Perhaps a quota is the only way to achieve this, and that possibility remains a work in progress. The *Guurti* still lacks a formal selection process. At the moment, new members are selected by the family of those who die or are otherwise unable to continue to serve – hardly a transparent or accountable system. The constitution says new members should be elected, but offers no detail on how that might happen.

None of this renders Somaliland's remarkable successes any less impressive. Peaceful elections, the smooth transition in 2010 of power from a losing incumbent president to his successor – these are huge milestones in any new multi-party democracy which have been successfully negotiated. But some of the fault lines that have existed for many decades continue to influence political processes today. So far, these are probably the kinds of conflict that are inevitable as a political entity struggles to define itself, both to the full breadth of those who live within its claimed borders and to the outside world.

Past experience offers some cogent pointers to future challenges. Clan is not everything in Somaliland – but it remains critically important. Sometimes its role is positive, sometimes divisive. Alliances also shift, so the fact that the current government draws support from a number of key clan groups does not mean that will continue to be the case in the future. A way needs to be found to give non-Isaaq clans a real engagement in the political scene, and in the development process more generally. Clan must be seen as part of the answer, and there is plenty to build on.

Most importantly, if Somaliland is to consolidate recent achievements, its leaders will need to continue to develop their relationships with neighbouring clans and countries – and with the wider world – to expand trade and investment, to build infrastructure, and to start to reduce astonishingly low rates of employment and

high dependence on remittances. Aid certainly has a role to play, but not in a manner that dominates local processes. If Somaliland's success shows us anything, it is the importance of external links – but also the importance of real local “ownership” of political and development processes.