Opinion – Is Somaliland Defying the Odds, or Are the Odds Based on a Flawed Premise?

https://www.e-ir.info/2024/12/17/opinion-is-somaliland-defying-the-odds-or-are-the-odds-based-on-a-flawed-premise/

JAMAL ABDI, DEC 17 2024

Since Somaliland unilaterally declared independence in May 1991, the unrecognized state has established a democratic track record which only a few countries in the developing world can match. On November 13, 2024, Somalilanders cast their votes at two thousand polling stations across the country. Wadani, the largest opposition party led by Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (Cirro), secured a clear victory with 63.92 percent of the vote, while the incumbent president received 34.81 percent. Shortly after Somaliland's National Electoral Commission (NEC) called the election for Cirro, President Muse Bihi Abdi magnanimously conceded defeat, calling for national unity and expressing his willingness to ensure a smooth transition of power. On December 12, 2024, the outgoing and incoming presidents symbolically arrived together, laughing, at Cirro's inauguration, marking yet another smooth and peaceful transfer of power following a democratic election in Somaliland. Since 1991, Somaliland has held four multi-party general elections, all of which have been described as free and fair by international observers. Most recently, international observers described the latest elections as "free, fair, and credible, despite the constraints of Somaliland's financial and institutional resources". Why is it then, that democracy works in Somaliland?

Since the publication of his 1961 ethnographic study *A Pastoral democracy*, British anthropologist I.M. Lewis has profoundly shaped the outside world's understanding of Somali society, culture, and history. Throughout his long career, Lewis maintained that Somali society is best understood through the lens of the segmentary clan system, in which corporate groups conflict, leading to endemic violence. This interpretation construes Somalis as a fundamentally warlike people, with loyalty to their clan taking precedence over all else. According to the Lewisian interpretation, this ultimately explains the root causes of the civil war and the subsequent disintegration of the central state in 1991. Although anthropologists have long argued that cultures, customs, and traditions constantly evolve and change, Lewis stubbornly denied the possibility that colonialism negatively impacted Somali culture and society.

Despite obvious flaws in the Lewisian interpretation, Lewis' influence can hardly be overstated, as his framework has profoundly shaped mainstream scholarship on Somaliland. Michael Walls, for instance, asserts "one way another 'we are all now Lewisites', we will start with clan". In a *Festschrift* honoring I.M. Lewis, Markus Hoehne and the late Virginia Lulling go even further. According to them, the 'career problem'—i.e., "the problem of how to contribute something to Somali studies which Lewis has not already touched upon"— remains an enduring problem. Replying directly to this, Ali Jimale Ahmed writes,

to explain away intellectual, disciplinary and methodological disagreements as a 'career problem', is simply ludicrous…to argue as if nothing has changed over the years in the configuration and meaning of clan identity is to ignore the dialectical nature of reality.

Even a cursory examination reveals that the existence of Somaliland, a centralized democratic state, is at odds with the principal assumptions of the Lewisian interpretation. According to the latter, an inclusive and democratic Somali state should not be possible as it would inevitably be corrupted by the pervasive and enduring clan system. Despite the recent local conflict in Somaliland's eastern Sool region, it is widely recognized that Somaliland's peace and state making process involved the voluntary participation of all communities. Self-led peace and state formation, achieved through voluntary cooperation between groups that had fought on opposing sides of a bloody civil war, is

fundamentally irreconcilable with Lewis and his followers' interpretations and characterizations of Somali society and culture.

As noted above, critics of Lewis highlight the negative impact of colonization, arguing that it profoundly altered society and politicized cultural identities (kinship). As Abdi and Ahmed Ismail Samatar, the pioneering critics of Lewis, have recently put it: "in essence, old cultural relations and identities were emptied of their economic and social contents and rewired into a new order totally at odds with the ethos of self-reliance, justice, and equality". While the critique of Lewis, which emphasizes the impact of colonization, offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. Given its foundational assertion that colonization fundamentally eroded the ethos of pre-colonial culture, it offers little in terms of explaining successful self-led peacebuilding in Somaliland.

Recently, Abdi Ismail Samatar, rejecting the idea that traditional governance institutions have been better preserved in Somaliland than in south-central Somalia due to indirect British rule in the former as opposed to direct Italian rule in the latter, partly attributed Somaliland's success to the acumen of its second president, Mohamed Hagi Ibrahim Egal. First, Somaliland's peace and state making trajectory involved a multitude of actors and stakeholders, including traditional elders, businessmen, intellectuals, women's groups, religious leaders, ordinary citizens etc. Second, Egal was absent from the political scene until shortly before the Borama conference in 1993. Third, the acumen of anyone person or group cannot explain the overwhelming pro-sociality that enabled successful peace and state formation in the absence of external assistance. Consider the following example: when conflict erupted in 1995, a group of Somaliland expatriates voluntarily organized themselves, left their comfortable lives in Europe and North America, returned to Somaliland, and played a significant role in resolving the conflict.

In a forthcoming article, I suggest a third interpretation which pragmatically bridges the competing perspectives in Somali studies. In doing so, the article rejects the idea that Somaliland remained impervious to nearly eight decades of indirect British rule, while it also harbors reservations to the contention that colonization led to a complete breakdown of the ethos of pre-colonial culture, given the well-documented utility of culture-specific practices in Somaliland's peacebuilding trajectory. Following this line of reasoning, peacebuilders in Somaliland benefitted from the remnants of the culture-specific factors that have historically induced pro-sociality.

Given Somaliland's status as a *de jure* unrecognized state, it is tempting to infer that it has adopted democracy strategically to meet external normative demands. Advancing this argument, Rebecca Richards writes "achieving recognition of statehood has become a primary goal of the government in the territory, with the creation of a democratic state at the centre of Somaliland's strategy". A careful study of Somaliland's history, however, reveals a lack of causality between democratic governance and the ongoing quest for recognition. Shortly after its inception in 1981, the Somali National Movement (SNM), which fought the dictatorship of Maxamed Ziad Barre from 1982 to 1991, published a political manifesto titled *A Better Alternative*. This manifesto proposed "incorporating traditional institutions of governance into government in a bicameral legislature with an upper house of elders". Somaliland's current hybrid regime, which was formally institutionalized in 1993, was thus first articulated in 1981. Until independence was declared in 1991, the SNM maintained that its primary objective was to free Somalia from the dictatorial rule of Maxamed Ziad Barre and to reinstate democracy. In 1986, for instance, the SNM stated, "the primary goal of SNM…is to do away with Siad Barre's dictatorial, decadent and destructive regime in Somalia and to restore the democratic principles of government. Even in May 1991, the leadership of the SNM opposed the declaration of independence but was eventually swayed by elders representing all communities in Somaliland.

In a nutshell, political separation from Somalia was not seriously considered until 1991, while democracy was indeed part of the plan from the beginning. There is hardly any evidence suggesting that Somaliland, during its peace and state-building trajectory, conformed to external normative demands. On the contrary, it deliberately deviated from the idealized Weberian state model by creating a bicameral parliament with an upper house of elders (*gurti*). The primary reason why democracy works in Somaliland is that it is not an externally imposed or alien system of governance. It is important to note that Somaliland was governed by democratic principles long before the arrival of colonial powers. In the post-1991 period, Somalilanders themselves built a democratic state tailored to their culture and societal structures, rather than seeking to appease external audiences. While Somaliland evidently emphasizes its democratic achievements in advocating for *de jure* recognition of sovereignty, it is evident that the explanatory power

of this ongoing quest is limited in understanding the design and function of state and society in Somaliland.

About the author:

Jamal Abdi holds a MSc in European and International Relations from Linkoping University. He is currently a PhD Candidate in Politics and International Relations at Keele University, UK. Drawing on extensive field work, his research focuses on peace and state building in Somaliland. He can be reached on X.