

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF SOMALILAND

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The sorry state of Somalia has been regularly in the headlines in recent years. Reports have chronicled the rise to power in Mogadishu of a group of Muslim extremists calling themselves the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), their subsequent ejection by Ethiopian troops, and the repeated failures of peace conferences to reconcile the country's many factions. As media across the world also reported, the fighting and chaos in late 2006 and early 2007 even prompted U.S. military intervention.

The attention paid to the violent drama in the south of Somalia is perfectly understandable, but both the media and the international community are missing an equally important—and more peaceful—story in the north, where a remarkable political transformation is under way. Inattention to this northern success story is ironic given that it offers important lessons for the governments, scholars, and analysts who have made democratization the centerpiece of efforts to combat extremism in the Muslim world and to promote better governance in developing countries.

The Republic of Somaliland, the secessionist northwestern slice of Somalia that declared independence in 1991, has a far better democratic track record than any of its neighbors despite—or, perhaps, because of—a dearth of assistance from the international community. Abutting the Gulf of Aden just south of the Red Sea, across the water from Yemen and Saudi Arabia, and bordered by Ethiopia and the rest of Somalia, this strategically important territory is not even recognized by the international community but undoubtedly has the most democratic political system in the entire Horn of Africa. In contrast to the chaos and extrem-

ist threats that continue to plague much of the rest of Somalia—and unlike the authoritarian regimes that throng its neighborhood—Somaliland has held three consecutive competitive elections since its constitutional referendum in 2001, has a parliament controlled by opposition parties, and boasts a vibrant economy dominated by the private sector.

Somaliland has achieved these successes by constructing a set of governing bodies rooted in traditional Somali concepts of governance by consultation and consent. In contrast to most postcolonial states in Africa and the Middle East, Somaliland has had a chance to administer itself using customary norms, values, and relationships. In fact, its integration of traditional ways of governance within a modern state apparatus has helped it to achieve greater cohesion and legitimacy and—not coincidentally—create greater room for competitive elections and public criticism than exists in most similarly endowed territories. Far too many poor states are held back by administrative and political systems built separately from the societies that they are meant to serve, thus rendering those systems illegitimate, ripe for exploitation, and a major hindrance to democratization and development. Although Somaliland's fledgling state institutions are still fragile and have many weaknesses, if properly nourished they can become robust champions of a democratic system that is actually reflective of and integrated into the society that it is meant to represent—giving the country a far better chance to develop toward greater freedom and prosperity in the years ahead.

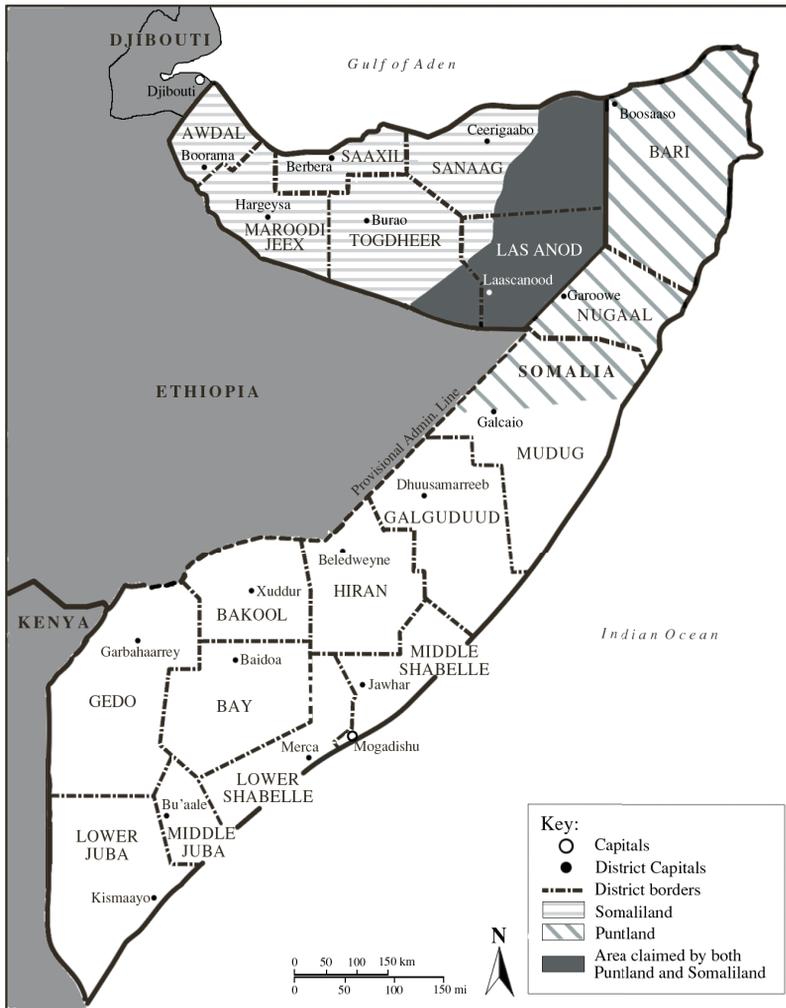
Somaliland thus offers important lessons, both for its neighbors and for other postcolonial states in the Middle East and Africa. The success of its society-led, bottom-up process of democratization stands in sharp contrast to the repeated failure of international attempts to construct a Western-style state in the rest of Somalia—and calls into question the fundamental assumptions underlying the top-down, unitary state-building exercises so commonly attempted in fragile states.

“The Very Definition of a Failed State”

Somalia embodies one of postcolonial Africa's worst mismatches between conventional state structures and indigenous institutions. Although a shared ethnicity, culture, language, and religion might seem to offer an excellent basis for a cohesive polity, in reality the Somali people are divided by clan affiliations, the single most important component of their identity. Traditional, customary methods of governance are ill suited to the centralized bureaucratic governing structures that colonizers and Westernized elites have repeatedly attempted to impose on the country. Those attempts have brought only chaos and conflict, creating what the Council on Foreign Relations has characterized as “the very definition of a failed state.”¹

Anthropologists typically describe traditional Somali society as stateless, characterized by a wide dispersion of power among clans and subclans. So-

MAP—SOMALILAND AND SOMALIA



malis' long history as pastoral nomads has made them fiercely independent, but also well accustomed to a variety of democratic practices.

The Somali population (some 13 to 14 million people, including those now living in neighboring states) is divided into six major clans and a number of minority groups. Each of the clans consists of subclans that join or split in a fluid process of "constant decomposition and recombination."²² These "clan-states" typically work through a diffuse and decentralized decision-making process that culminates in a community meeting open to all adult males—a *shir*—at which major economic, political, and social policies are determined. These societal institutions, and the customary law (*xeer*) that governs behavior within the community, are deeply ingrained and function independently of modern state structures. Although

Islam plays a major role in the lives of a socially conservative people, it is subordinate or complementary to clannism in shaping their outlook.

Starting in the 1880s, European colonialists divided Somalis among the British Somaliland Protectorate (today's Somaliland), Italian Somalia (the rest of Somalia), and French Somaliland (now Djibouti), as well as parts of Ethiopia and Kenya. This launched a process whereby outsiders and Westernized elites tried to create new, modern institutions that completely ignored traditional societal norms and relationships. In trying to marginalize long-established patterns, these modernizing efforts ended up permanently disconnecting the state, such as it was, from the society that should have been its foundation.

Somalia came into being on 1 July 1960, when the British Somaliland Protectorate, having gained its formal independence on June 26 of that year, joined with what had been its southern neighbor, Italian Somalia. Initial euphoria rapidly soured as signs of state dysfunction mounted. Corruption worsened, electoral politics became increasingly chaotic, and state programs delivered little public benefit. Clannism infected politics and administrative organs as each group sought to maximize the spoils that it could loot from the system.

This high level of disenchantment led many to welcome Mohamed Siad Barre's armed coup in 1969. Siad Barre's socialist regime made some popular reforms in the areas of education, health, and the status of women, but suffered a humiliating defeat by Ethiopia in the Ogaden War of 1977–78, and encountered growing dissatisfaction with one-party rule. Siad Barre fell back on members of the Daarood subclans linked to him by birth or marriage; all other groups were pushed out. He eventually came to depend on repression and foreign aid (development assistance peaked at a stunning 57 percent of annual GNP) to prop up his highly centralized and socially isolated state.³ Siad Barre's fall in 1991 left Somalia in the hands of warlords and militias whose grip was challenged but not broken by the ill-fated UN- and then U.S.-led military intervention that culminated in the October 1993 "Black Hawk Down" incident in Mogadishu.

In the 1990s, disaffected clans began to carve up the country. The Haarti grouping (a subset of the Daarood) created a semi-autonomous region in the east called Puntland, while in the northwest the Isaaq clan led the effort to build Somaliland.

The international community has launched at least fourteen peace initiatives since Siad Barre's dictatorship collapsed, yet Somalia remains divided and without a functioning central government—the longest-running example of state failure in the postcolonial period. If anything, the authority and cash that outsiders have repeatedly tried to give some central body have distorted the traditional relationships that undergirded a robust society for centuries, while helping to entrench warlords and their private armies. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG)—a

reed-thin affair produced by a 2002 regional initiative and based mainly on a clique from the Daarood clan—had never controlled more than a small area around one city near the Ethiopian border before Ethiopia's 2006 invasion. The TFG, nonetheless, receives recognition from the international community as Somalia's legitimate government.

The ICU, which won armed control of large areas of southern Somalia in 2006, naturally also had strong clan ties. The Hawiye group, never fond of the Daarood-dominated TFG, is a close ICU supporter. The Islamists were able to expand so rapidly both because of their ability to supply a measure of order—something prized by residents weary of years of chaos and strife—and because they coopted various subclans by giving them significant stakes in local administrations. Even though scattered in the wake of Ethiopia's assault, the ICU and its Islamist leaders have vowed to fight on via an Iraq-style guerrilla campaign. Ethiopian forces have faced suicide attacks and remotely detonated bombs, making Mogadishu dangerous enough to deter foreign states from sending peacekeepers. The current anarchy resembles the one out of which the ICU first grew, suggesting that the group's prospects can by no means be called bleak.

Ordinary Somalis have paid the highest price for these repeated failures at state formation. They are among the world's poorest and hungriest people, with an average life expectancy of only about 42 years and a mortality rate for children under five that exceeds 25 percent. The adult literacy rate may be lower than 20 percent in some parts of the state.⁴

Another Model in the North

While the south has been caught up in the cauldron of competing factions, a different model has emerged in Somaliland. Whereas attempts to build stable state structures in Mogadishu have mostly been top-down, with outsiders in the lead, Somaliland has constructed a functioning government from the bottom up, on its own, with little outside assistance.

When Somaliland broke away, it took with it six of Somalia's eighteen regions, encompassing slightly more than a fifth of Somali territory and between a quarter and a third of the total population.⁵

Northern discontent goes all the way back to the formation of Somalia in 1960. Subsumed into the larger, southern-dominated state structures, in which unfamiliar Italian laws and colonial-era elites predominated, northerners felt like a people apart. When the new administration discriminated against them in sharing out top posts and other state resources, the northerners' sense of grievance grew larger still.

Serious challenges to the union began as Siad Barre's grip weakened in the late 1970s. No fewer than ten clan-based resistance movements sprang up across the country. The most notable among them was the Somali National Movement (SNM), a group formed in 1981 and closely

affiliated with the Isaaq clan that makes up some 70 percent of Somaliland's population.⁶ In 1988, civil war erupted. Siad Barre bombed Somaliland's two largest cities to rubble, killing an estimated fifty-thousand people and making refugees of a million more. This brutality convinced northerners that they should find their own solution to the challenge of state-building.

Somaliland has profited from a unity conferred by its comparatively homogeneous population, modest disparities in personal wealth, widespread fear of the south, and a lack of outside interference that might have undermined the accountability that has been forced on its leaders.⁷ This cohesiveness—which makes Somaliland sharply distinct from both Somalia and most other African states—has combined with the enduring strength of traditional institutions of self-governance to mold a unique form of democracy.

From the onset of Somaliland's independence movement, traditional democratic methods have predominated in efforts to create governing organs. The SNM was notable for its internal democratic practices, changing its leadership no fewer than five times in the nine years that it spent fighting the Siad Barre regime. A Council of Elders established during this time to resolve disputes and distribute food among the refugees quickly gained legitimacy. When the war ended, it came to play a key role in promoting a process of representative decision making. Within two years of the SNM's victory, it had turned power over to a civilian administration.

From the time independence was declared, a wide-ranging and inclusive process of national dialogue sought to construct a consensus on the system of political representation that should govern Somaliland. Between 1991 and 1996, interclan dialogue went on despite conflicts and interruptions, eventually yielding the broadly legitimate government that has delivered security and growing prosperity since 1996.

Of the many interclan meetings, all financed by local businesspeople and community leaders, the 1993 Boorama *shir beeleed* (clan conference) was the most important. From it came a Peace Charter—based on the traditional law of social conduct between clans—that established the basis for law and order, and a National Charter that defined the political structures of government. The Boorama gathering, attended by five-hundred elders, religious leaders, politicians, civil servants, intellectuals, and businesspeople, set the pattern of institutionalizing clans and their elders into formal governing bodies, something that is now referred to as the *beel* (clan or community) system of governance.

This “dynamic hybrid of Western form and traditional substance”⁸ formalized the role of elders in an upper house of elders (known as the Guurti) responsible for security and managing internal conflicts, and allocated seats in the legislature based on clan numbers. A conference in 1996–97, after the war, increased the number of seats available to non-Isaaq clans. The 2001 Constitution, approved by an overwhelming

majority of the population in a national plebiscite, sought to minimize clannism and entrench consensus-based decision making by limiting the number of political parties to three and requiring them to have significant support in each of Somaliland's six regions.

Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, who had been Somalia's prime minister before the 1969 coup and who became Somaliland's president in 1993, provided inspired leadership during the breakaway state's formative years. His government negotiated with the relevant subclan in order to gain access to revenue from the port of Berbera, rebuilt government buildings, reopened the central bank with a new currency (the Somaliland shilling), created a new civil service, melded militiamen into a national army, and removed roadblocks and informal "taxes" from major roads. Somaliland now has many of the trappings of modern statehood, including not only its own currency, army, and cabinet ministers, but also license plates and even a national air carrier, Daallo Airlines.

The Uses of Tradition

This remarkable process of bottom-up state-building using traditional forms, now reinforced by three successful democratic elections, has yielded a system in which the public feels it has a strong stake together with a robust sense of national identity and patriotic pride. It has produced

[A]n unprecedented degree of interconnectedness between the state and society . . . in stark contrast to the past when previous regimes received enormous infusions of external assistance without which they could not survive, and as a result became completely divorced from the economic foundations of their own society.⁹

The success of this bottom-up state-building process is evidenced by the high sense of security that Somaliland's people feel, and by the growing buoyancy of their economy. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have returned home and tens of thousands of landmines have been removed and destroyed. The capital city of Hargeysa, reduced to a mere ten-thousand people in 1991 by Siad Barre's bombings, is now home to more than half a million. Its peacefulness and economic vitality draw migrants from Ethiopia and southern Somalia. Markets throughout Somaliland are filled with products from around the world; telephone charges are among the cheapest in Africa; and the private sector, not the government, provides electricity, water, education, and health care. Three new universities have been built, privately funded hospitals and schools proliferate, and a number of nongovernmental organizations are working to improve administrative capacity. Members of the Somali diaspora, more than a hundred thousand of whom live in the United States and Europe, support these efforts with extensive international

networks, expert knowledge of how modern societies operate, and monetary contributions thought to be worth US\$500 million a year.¹⁰

Although many of its governing structures need work and many of its politicians, bureaucrats, and judges lack experience, Somaliland has already passed a number of democratic milestones that few states in Africa and the Middle East have reached. Altogether, the country has successfully managed the May 2001 constitutional referendum, the December 2002 local elections, the 2003 presidential campaign, and the September 2005 legislative poll. (The next round of voting includes local and presidential elections, scheduled at the time of this writing for October and December 2008, respectively.) The 2005 House of Representatives elections saw 246 candidates contest 82 seats in an undertaking that involved 982 polling stations, 1,500 ballot boxes, 1.3 million ballot papers, 6,000 party agents, 3,000 police, 700 domestic observers, and 76 foreign observers. The latter “were fairly unanimous in their views that [the elections] were, on the whole, the freest and most transparent democratic exercises ever staged in the Horn of Africa.”¹¹

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) has rightly been widely praised as the most competent of Somaliland’s government institutions. In dealing with the many challenges of running an election in a poor, war-scarred, and semiliterate country—one that lacks not only electoral wars, but even reliable estimates of the number of eligible voters—the NEC has repeatedly chosen a highly transparent method of engaging political parties and other key stakeholders in decision making, has debated problems and possible solutions openly and at length, and has sought outside assistance. The use of indelible ink on voters’ fingers to prevent double voting, the presence of representatives from all parties at every site where votes are cast or counted, and the participation of a significant number of observers have ensured elections that are remarkably free and fair.

Somaliland’s democracy has repeatedly surprised outsiders with its robustness. When, in May 2002, President Egal died abroad, power was smoothly passed to Vice-President Dahir Riyale Kahin, even though Riyale is from the small Gadabursi clan and had fought for Siad Barre against the Isaaq. The April 2003 presidential poll was possibly the closest ever fought in Africa, with Riyale winning by only the slimmest of margins—just eighty votes out of almost half a million ballots. The opposition contested the result in the courts, but when its judicial appeals failed, it accepted the outcome peacefully.

Constitutional governance has not been completely free of glitches and has deteriorated to some degree over the past two years. The Guurti election scheduled for August 2006, the last stage of the democratic transition begun in 2001, was postponed in May 2006 because Parliament could not agree on issues such as how to distribute seats and choose members—tricky issues in an institution based on traditional structures and delicately divided among the clans. Extending the term of the cur-

rent Guurti to October 2010 provoked fierce controversy. Similarly, the Guurti's unilateral April 2008 attempt to extend the president's term for a year, supposedly because of security concerns, was highly controversial. (At the time of this writing, it is unclear when this election will actually take place.) In 2007, three politicians were jailed for almost five months for attempting to form a new political party. Although women have the same rights to vote and run for office as men, only 2 out of 379 municipal councilors and 2 out of 82 members of parliament are female. Some legislative, executive, and judicial procedures have not been followed according to the letter of the law. The electoral-management system, despite its relative success, contains much room for improvement.¹²

The country also suffers from many of the maladies common to all poor, underdeveloped states: The rule of law and civil society are weak, corruption is rife, nepotism and clannism sway many official appointments, the executive towers over the other branches of government, Parliament lacks the power to initiate legislation, the poorly trained and underfunded judiciary can do little to check the administration, and competent officials of all kinds are in short supply. As in many countries—underdeveloped and developed alike—the government has shown itself tempted to sacrifice civil liberties in the name of security. Somaliland's print media are relatively free and criticize the government, but a weekly magazine that dared to discuss the idea of Somaliland reuniting with Somalia (a particular sore point for the government) was banned, and in early 2007 the chairman of Haatuf Media Network and two of his journalists spent two months in jail for having written about presidential corruption. Meanwhile, the executive branch continues to operate a Security Committee that has sweeping powers of arrest and sentencing despite calls from the legislature, judiciary, civil society, and the diaspora to disband the body.

The *beel* system of government, though responsible for bringing peace and democracy to Somaliland, also places significant limits on the development of a fully representative and effective democracy. As Somalilanders who advocate fuller modernization have complained, clan elders hold disproportionate power. People from powerful lineages have an edge in obtaining government posts, and clannism has hobbled efforts to make the civil service more meritocratic. Compromises intended to ensure that the smaller clans are fully included in the system have given them a disproportionately high number of seats in Parliament. The government has been unable to finalize the delineation of regional and district boundaries because these are closely associated with traditional clan territories. Women remain excluded from traditional governing structures, and hence from the regime that is built on them.

Despite these problems, however, Somaliland has achieved much with very little outside assistance. In fact, the dearth of external involvement has been in many ways a blessing, for it has kept foreign in-

terference to a minimum while fostering self-reliance, self-confidence, and a distinct Somaliland identity.

Needed: International Recognition

Notwithstanding Somaliland's success at building a stable democracy in a region better known for instability and authoritarianism, the international community continues to refuse to recognize Somaliland as a state. Although this lack of recognition did not significantly hamper (and as noted above, may even have helped) Somaliland in its formative years, its hopes of consolidating and expanding its political and economic gains hinge now on winning international acceptance as a sovereign state, with all the rights and benefits that such a status confers.

Somaliland's isolation hurts in a number of ways. Governing organs cannot receive bilateral technical assistance from other countries; the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the African Development Bank, and bilateral development agencies cannot offer it loans and financial aid; banks and insurance companies will not set up branches within the country; the cost of living is higher because local firms cannot directly import goods without local banks to issue letters of credit; international investors (and the jobs that they would create) stay away because insurance and other investment protections are lacking. Many diaspora professionals—whose return would help to invigorate Somaliland's legal, accounting, health, and educational systems—are reluctant to come home for fear of Somaliland's uncertain legal status. The threat of continued unrest and even factional fighting or an increase in terrorist activities in the south will continue to hamper Somaliland's development as long as its future is held hostage to events in Somalia.

Somaliland can make a strong case for recognition on a variety of grounds. It existed as a separate territory with internationally recognized borders during more than seven decades of colonial rule, and even its brief interlude of independence at the end of June 1960 was enough to garner it recognition by thirty-five sovereign states. Somaliland's authorities argue today that they are dissolving an unsuccessful marriage rather than seeking secession, and that therefore their case is analogous to the breakup of Sénegambia (Senegal and Gambia) and the United Arab Republic (Syria and Egypt). They also draw parallels with Eritrea, their neighbor to the north, which was originally a colony separate from Ethiopia and which gained its *de jure* independence in 1993.

The political case rests on widespread dissatisfaction with and even rejection of the union from its inception in 1960, the discrimination that northerners faced within it, the brutality that the Mogadishu government showed during the civil war, and the Somaliland people's repeated expressions of its desire to live independently of Somalia. The May 2001 constitutional referendum was effectively a plebiscite on independence.

Although opponents in Sool and eastern Sanaag refused to participate, 97 percent of those who did vote approved the document in a ballot widely deemed to have been free and fair.

Somaliland actually—and ironically—does a far better job than Somalia of meeting the criteria of the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, which include having a permanent population, a defined territory, a functioning government, and the capacity to enter into relations with other states. Since 1991, Somalia has not come close to having a functioning administration able to assert its control over a significant part of the country's territory.

Although *de jure* recognition remains elusive, Somaliland has achieved *de facto* recognition in a number of ways. In January 2008, Somaliland's president led a delegation to Washington and London and met with officials in both capitals.¹³ Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Kenya, Italy, and Yemen have also welcomed official visitors from Somaliland. Ethiopia, the state that has worked most closely with Somaliland, has a quasi-embassy in Hargeysa with a staff of twelve.¹⁴ Ethiopia and Djibouti accept Somaliland passports. Britain, the European Union, and the United States have financed programs to help train parliamentarians and conduct and monitor elections. The UN and many international aid agencies operate programs throughout Somaliland's territory and deal with its government. All of this suggests a "creeping informal and pragmatic acceptance of Somaliland as a political reality."¹⁵

The biggest internal challenge to the state's legitimacy stems from problems that it has had in gaining the loyalty of two eastern subclans. Each belongs to the Haarti grouping that dominates neighboring Puntland and supports a unified Somalia. On 1 July 2007, the subclan that controls the disputed area in eastern Sanaag proclaimed the semi-autonomous state of Maakhir in order to distance itself from both Hargeysa and Mogadishu. That October, Somaliland captured Las Anod, the capital of the Sool region, from Puntland forces, consolidating Hargeysa's control over most of this province, at least for now. Although the restive eastern subclans are not enough to derail independence, Somaliland authorities would strengthen their case for recognition if they could entice discontented local leaders to join the administration and thus extend Hargeysa's formal authority over all of what was once British Somaliland. Offering a handful of central-government posts to the leaders of these groups and making a greater effort to redress whatever inequities they perceive in the services that they receive might prove a good start.

Given its strong case, why has no country recognized Somaliland? The argument most often heard is that recognition would set a bad precedent in a region where weakly cohesive states struggle to hold together. Some fear that international recognition of Somaliland will trigger the balkanization of the rest of Somalia. Others mention the possibility that any change in the status quo will derail peace efforts in the south or may

ignite conflict between the two states, as has happened in the case of Ethiopia and Eritrea. However, Somaliland's history as a separate state with recognized boundaries gives it a status that few other territories (and no other territories within Somalia) can claim, reducing the chances that others could use its independence as a precedent. Somaliland's refusal to participate in any post-1991 peace conference means that its permanent withdrawal should not hamper the prolonged and unsuccessful venture of bringing peace to Somalia. In fact, the rise of the ICU in the south led some security analysts to argue before the Ethiopian invasion that Somaliland's independence could avert what threatened to become a civil war between the former British protectorate and southern Somalia.¹⁶

The African Union (AU) reviewed many of these issues during a fact-finding mission in 2005 and concluded that Somaliland's case was "unique and self-justified in African political history" and that "the case should not be linked to the notion of 'opening a Pandora's box.'" It even admitted that a "plethora of problems confronting Somaliland [are in part] the legacy of a political union with Somalia, which malfunctioned, [and] brought destruction and ruin."¹⁷

Rwanda, South Africa, Zambia, and several other African states support Somaliland's independence, yet the AU has been paralyzed because of opposition from Somaliland's neighbors, each of which has a vested interest in the country not gaining recognition. Ethiopia, for example, concerned about the irredentist claims of its own Somali population, has tried to divide and weaken Somalia since the Ogaden War three decades ago, and considers any attempt to strengthen Somaliland as inimical to Ethiopian interests. Tiny Djibouti sees Somaliland as a threat to the port that powers the economy of that former French colony. Western countries have tended to see the whole matter as an internal African affair. Arab countries—especially nearby Egypt and Saudi Arabia—have vehemently opposed independence; the Saudis have even sought to sabotage Somaliland's economy by refusing to import any of its livestock since 1997. Many of these neighboring countries would prefer a united Somalia acting as a counterweight to Ethiopia, a Christian-majority country that is the Horn of Africa's predominant local power.

Success and Its Lessons

Somaliland's success so far in building its region's most accountable and open political system holds important lessons about how states can develop and democratize—and why most countries in its region have not.

First, Somaliland's evolution shows that states should look inward for their resources and institutional models and adopt political structures and processes that reflect the history, complexity, and particularity of their peoples and environment. Instead of mimicking a Western-style

top-down system of governance, which typically ignores or suppresses indigenous traditions and customs, Somaliland has been forced by its isolation to build a state enmeshed in its surrounding society. Far too many postcolonial regimes have looked outward for their governance models and resources—often becoming dependent on foreign aid and advisors and ensuring that their domestic roots will never run deep enough.

This means not that Western political models have no relevance to non-Western societies, but rather that those models must be adapted to accommodate local political, economic, and societal customs and conditions. Robust states are unlikely to be built with centralized regimes, Western-style laws, and a democracy defined solely in terms of regular elections; instead, capable, inclusive, participatory, responsive, and accountable governments should be promoted no matter what form they take.

In a similar vein, international assistance efforts are more likely to succeed if they bolster rather than distort local capacities and institutions. Undisciplined injections of foreign money all too often undermine or overwhelm local processes, especially given the tendency of many international programs to focus on easily quantifiable targets for financial aid or poverty reduction and to promote the importation of generic, centralized state models. Helping underdeveloped countries should not be about propping up the state from outside, but rather about connecting it—and making it accountable where possible—to its surrounding society.

A second lesson to be gleaned from Somaliland's experience is that a population's cohesiveness and the success of democratization efforts are closely related. States made up of competing ethnic, religious, and clan groups—Iraq, Kenya, and Nigeria come to mind—are often torn asunder by zero-sum battles over who will control the state and its resources. By contrast, cohesive societies such as Somaliland's, with its strong sense of common history, identity, and destiny, are more likely to reach consensus as to how the government should work, how changes in that government should come about, and how the state should spend its resources. The governments that such societies produce are also much more likely to appear legitimate and representative in their citizens' eyes. Moreover, recent studies have shown that homogeneous populations are more likely to invest in public goods such as roads, schools, and health centers—all necessary for development.¹⁸ These cohesive states' social glue is far more likely to accommodate the competitiveness intrinsic to democracy; the fractured societies common to divided countries are more likely to break down—perhaps violently—in the face of electoral combat.

Of course, Somaliland is not entirely free of such divisions. The country's difficulties in negotiating a fair distribution of seats in its Parliament, in demarcating the boundaries between regional and district administrative territories, and in limiting the political space to a set number of actors all show the challenges that it must meet in order to reconcile competing clan interests. It has similarly experienced problems

(reflected in disagreements over acceptable levels of media freedom and political activity) in trying to strike a balance between individual rights and group rights—a perennial problem for young states as they strive to craft the terms under which multiple identity groups can live together. Somaliland’s struggles with secessionist groups, moreover, remind us that even those new countries where most people support the national idea will face opposition to the whole state-building notion.

A third lesson that Somalia offers the international community is the importance of institutional design. Because cohesiveness figures so largely in the building of robust and democratic countries, the international community needs to do more to foster such governing bodies and systems as will best promote cohesiveness in a given context. A good first step would be for the international community to stop insisting on political models that are clearly unable to advance cohesion—or that even undermine it. Persistent efforts to reequip Somalia with a centralized state—carried out despite the repeated failures of such efforts in the past—show a lack of appreciation for the informal institutions that drive Somali society. Bolivia, Congo (Kinshasa), Iraq, Sudan, and other divided countries are unlikely to build successful democracies unless and until they shift governmental resources and responsibilities away from the center and toward local bodies that are more likely to be responsive to relatively cohesive groups of people. In practice, this will usually best be accomplished by adopting some form of federal arrangement and by accommodating diverse forms of self-government. In a few instances, however, the only way to leverage local capacities and loyalties to build a strong state may be secession.

The standard development paradigm gives “little thought . . . to the possibility that existing state structures might . . . be the cause of instability” in many postcolonial countries, even when “state-like entities such as Somaliland are more viable in terms of their ability to manage their own territory, to provide basic services, and in terms of their internal cohesiveness.”¹⁹ Such an approach to state building disregards the many vast differences between countries, and ignores the people’s desire to choose not only their leaders but also their institutions. The international community would do better if it focused on retailoring and leveraging traditional forms of governance that have evolved to suit local conditions instead of trying to squeeze societies into inappropriate Western models of what a modern state is supposed to look like. Development and democratization work best when a state’s institutions are genuine reflections of an organic historical process.

NOTES

The author thanks Lulu Farah-Todd for her help in organizing his trip to Somaliland.

1. See www.cfr.org/publication/10781/somalias_terrorist_infestation.html.
2. My description of the clan system of governance owes much to Virginia Luling,

"Come Back Somalia? Questioning a Collapsed State," *Third World Quarterly* 18 (June 1997): 292.

3. Ken Menkhaus, "Somalia: Political Order in a Stateless Society," *Current History*, May 1998, 220.

4. Roland Marchal and Ken Menkhaus, *Somalia Human Development Report 1998* (Nairobi: UN Development Programme, 1998), 12.

5. There is no census data for either Somaliland or Somalia, but Somaliland's population is generally estimated at between 2.5 and 3.5 million. See International Crisis Group (ICG), "Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership," *Africa Report*, No. 110, 23 May 2006, 4.

6. Asteris Huliaras, "The Viability of Somaliland: Internal Constraints and Regional Geopolitics," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 20 (July 2002): 158.

7. This last point was mentioned repeatedly in interviews conducted by the author in Hargeysa in September 2006. See also Matt Bryden, "The Banana Test: Is Somaliland Ready for Recognition?" (unpubl. ms.), 6; and Mark Bradbury, Adan Yusuf Abokor, and Haroon Ahmed Yusuf, "Somaliland: Choosing Politics over Violence," *Review of African Political Economy* 30 (September 2003): 462.

8. Academy for Peace and Development (APD), "A Self-Portrait of Somaliland: Rebuilding from the Ruins" (unpubl. ms., APD, Hargeysa, 2000).

9. Carolyn Logan, "Overcoming the State-Society Disconnect in the Former Somalia: Putting Somali Political and Economic Resources at the Root of Reconstruction," USAID/REDSO, September 2000, 20.

10. Huliaras, "The Viability of Somaliland," 162.

11. Bradbury, Abokor, and Yusuf, "Somaliland: Choosing Politics over Violence," 475.

12. For a specific list of how this might be done, see APD and International Peacebuilding Alliance (Interpeace), *A Vote for Peace: How Somaliland Successfully Hosted Its First Parliamentary Elections in 35 years* (Hargeysa: APD, 2006), 49–52.

13. See Ann Scott Tyson, "U.S. Debating Shift of Support in Somali Conflict," *Washington Post*, 4 December 2007, A17.

14. Author's interview with Somaliland's foreign minister, Abdillahi M. Duale, Hargeysa, 17 September 2006.

15. Bradbury, Abokor, and Yusuf, "Somaliland: Choosing Politics over Violence," 458.

16. This discussion borrows from ICG, "Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership," 19–21.

17. African Union Commission, "Resume: AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland, 30 April to 4 May 2005," Addis Ababa, 2005.

18. Eduardo Porter, "The Divisions That Tighten the Purse Strings," *New York Times*, 29 April 2007.

19. Ian Spears, "Reflections on Somaliland and Africa's Territorial Order," *Review of African Political Economy* 30 (March 2003): 94.