

Ballots and Bullets:

The Tale of the Two Somalia



New York (*Somalilandpress*) — Last week, Somalis marked the fiftieth anniversary of their achievement of independence from colonial rule. The contrasting manner in which two parts of the onetime Somali Democratic Republic observed the milestone give a telling indication not only of current realities on the ground in the Horn of Africa, but also the prospects for security and stability in that critical sub-region.

It should be recalled that historically “Somalia” was never a unified political entity. Traditionally among the Somali, social and political identity was rooted in patrilineal descent (*tol*) meticulously memorialized in genealogies (*abtirsiinyo*, “reckoning of ancestors”), which determined each individual’s exact place in society. The modern political history of the country begins with establishment of the British Somaliland Protectorate in the northwest in 1884 and the subsequent acquisition by Italy of various holdings along the eastern littoral of the Horn of Africa which were consolidated in 1908 as the colony of “Somalia Italiana.”

Somalia vs. Somaliland



On June 26, 1960, British Somaliland received its independence as the State of Somaliland, notification of the birth of the new state was duly communicated to the United Nations and some thirty-five members duly accorded it diplomatic recognition. On July 1, 1960, what had mutated into the Italian-administered UN trust territory of Somalia received its independence. The two states then entered into a hasty union that a number of legal scholars have argued fell short of the minimal standards for legal validity, and which the Somalilanders quickly regretted due in no small measure to the discrimination which the northerners,

predominantly members of the Isaq clan-family, suffered at the hands of the numerically-superior members of clans from other regions following the unilateral abrogation of the

act of union between the former British Somaliland and the erstwhile Somalia Italiana. The ill-advised union came about under the influence of the African nationalism fashionable during the period, even though, common language and religion notwithstanding, the two territories had never developed a common sense of nationhood and had very different colonial experiences.

Fast forward three decades to 1991 and the collapse of the dictatorship of Muhammad Siyad Barre, who had seized power in 1969 and attempted to stamp out clan identity with brute force in order to establish “scientific socialism.” While southern and central Somalia tore itself apart in paroxysms of violence which continue to this day, in the north elders representing the various clans of Somaliland met in the ravaged city of Burao and agreed to a resolution that annulled the northern territory’s merger with the former Italian colony and declared that it would revert to the sovereign status it had enjoyed upon the achievement of independence from Great Britain. Unlike other parts of Somalia, conflict in the region was averted when the Somali National Movement (SNM), the principal opposition group that had led the resistance against the Siyad Barre dictatorship in the region, and leaders of the predominant Isaq clan purposely reached out to representatives of other clans in Somaliland, including the Darod/Harti, Gadabuursi, and Ise. The then-chairman of the SNM, Abdirahman Ahmed Ali “Tuur,” was appointed by consensus to be interim president of Somaliland for a period of two years by the Burao conference. In 1993, the Somaliland clans sent representatives to Borama for a national *guurti*, or council of elders, which elected Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, who had briefly been prime minister of independent Somaliland in 1960 as well as democratically-elected prime minister of Somalia between 1967 and the military coup in 1969, as president of Somaliland. Interestingly, while the apportionment of seats at the two conferences was done along clan lines in a rough attempt to reflect the demographics of the territory, the actual decision making was by consensus.

Egal’s tenure saw, among other things, the drafting of a permanent constitution, approved by 97 percent of the voters in a May 2001 referendum, which provided for an executive branch of government, consisting of a directly elected president and vice president and appointed ministers; a bicameral legislature consisting of an elected House of Representatives and an upper chamber of elders, the *guurti*; and an independent judiciary. After Egal’s unexpected death in 2002, his vice president, Dahir Riyale Kahin, succeeded to the presidency. Riyale, a minority Gadabursi clansman from the western Awdal region near the Ethiopian border, was elected in his own right in a closely fought election in April 2003 – the margin of victory for the incumbent was just 80 votes out of nearly half a million cast and, amazingly, the challenger, Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud “Silanyo,” graciously accepted the results. Multiparty elections for the House of Representatives were held in September 2005 which gave the president’s United Peoples’ Democratic Party (UDUB) just 33 of the 82 seats, with the balance split between two other parties, Silanyo’s Peace, Unity, and Development Party (Kulmiye), and Faisal Ali Warabe’s Justice and Development Party (UCID).

The report of a 2005 African Union fact-finding mission led by then African Union (AU) Commission Deputy Chairperson Patrick Mazimhaka concluded that “*the fact that the*

union between Somaliland and Somalia was never ratified and also malfunctioned when it went into action from 1960 to 1990, makes Somaliland's search for recognition historically unique and self-justified in African political history” and recommended that “the AU should find a special method of dealing with this outstanding case.” In 2008, the AU’s special representative for Somalia, Nicolas Bwakira, reported: “This nascent democracy in Somaliland provides a sense of pride and needs to be learned by the rest of Somalia. It is a very encouraging and rewarding socio-political development prevailing in Somaliland compared to the rest of the country whereby insecurity, piracy and insurgent activities are rampant.” Despite these positive assessments, no country stepped forward to recognize Somaliland’s independence.

The official notice of the election, displaying a sample ballot, affixed outside a polling station.

Undeterred, Somalilanders concentrated on building their domestic institutions while assiduously avoiding the warring militias, Islamist extremism, and rampant piracy that become the hallmarks of their former countrymen to the east and south. While they have experienced a number of hiccups in the last two years due to the repeated postponement of elections that were due in 2008, the hurdles were eventually overcome with the assistance of international partners, including Ethiopia, whose minister of state for foreign affairs, Dr. Tekeda Alemu, shuttled back and forth to successfully broker an agreement between Somaliland’s three political parties last year; and the European Union and the United States, whose aid agencies channeled resources to the reconstituted National Election Commission (NEC) and various national and international nongovernmental organizations for political training and voter education.



With technical assistance from a British-based consultancy, the NEC finalized a voter list of some 1.07 million electors (out of an estimated population of 3.5 million), removing duplicate and other problematic entries. In May, new voter registration cards which, in addition to a photograph of the bearer, carried biometric data and could function as national identification card, an important symbolic achievement for a nascent state. The date of June 26, the fiftieth anniversary of independence, was set for the poll and twenty-one days of campaigning were scheduled. Interestingly, the three political parties were each allotted seven specific days on which to conduct their activities with no two parties campaigning on the same day to avoid even the possibility of violence breaking out between overly enthused supporters of the competing candidates.



Dr. Pham meeting with Silanyo before election.

I observed the election as part of a multinational nineteen-member delegation organized by the International Republican Institute and led by Ambassador Richard Williamson, former Presidential Envoy for Sudan, and Constance Berry Newman, former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs. My teammate, Dr. Christiana Thorpe, Chairwoman of Sierra Leone's National Electoral Commission, and I monitored voting at more than a dozen and a half polling stations in Somaliland's third-largest city, Borama, in the Awdal region. Our conclusion, together with our colleagues who deployed to three other population centers in the country, was that the peaceful poll, which took place without major incident, met international standards and, as our [statement](#) noted, *"the international community should credit such democratic progress and the example it sets for others."*

This judgment was reinforced when, five days after the polls closed, the NEC announced that Silanyo, a British-educated economist who was leader in the SNM from 1984 to 1990, during the decisive phase of the struggle against the Siyad Barre dictatorship, and subsequently served as Somaliland's minister of planning and coordination under President Egal in the 1990s, won the first-past-the-post contest with 49.59 percent of the 538,266 votes cast to President Riyale's 33.23 percent and UCID leader Faisal Ali Warabe's 17.18 percent. The defeated incumbent promptly and graciously promised that he would step down and hand over power peacefully before his mandate ends on July 26: *"This was a friendly match and at the end somebody had to emerge as a winner. I congratulate President Ahmed Mohamoud Silanyo and his Kulmiye party for winning the presidential election. I will remain in the country as an opposition leader and I will hand over my responsibilities immediately, in accordance with the law."*

Meanwhile the president-elect moved quickly to establish a fifteen-member committee to help him form what he described as *"a consensus government."* The committee includes not only members of the winning party, but also features a number of prominent non-Kulmiye political figures, including the formidable Edna Adan Ismail, who served as for foreign minister of Somaliland from 2003 to 2006 in the outgoing president's cabinet and is the founder of well-regarded [Edna Adan Hospital](#) in Hargeisa, and Dr. Mohammed Rashid Sheikh, vice-chairman of UCID, as well as religious leaders like Sheikh Mohammed Ali Gadhle and business representatives like Munir Haji Abdullahi "Abusite," head of Daallo Airlines, which serves more dozen destinations in the Middle

East and East Africa. Calling on Dahir Riyale Kahin on Sunday, President-elect Silanyo warmly praised his soon-to-be predecessor “for his services to the nation, including the holding of democratic elections,” noting that “It is the sign of a true leader who comes forward and concedes defeat.” In a neighborhood where free and peaceful elections – to say nothing of consulting with one’s political opponents, much less handing over power to them – is sadly still a rather exceptional occurrence, the apparently smooth transition in Somaliland is nothing short of extraordinary.

If the northern Somalis in Somaliland marked the golden anniversary of their June 26 independence by queuing to cast ballots, their kinsmen in the southern and central parts of the onetime national territory observed their July 1 anniversary amid a hail of bullets. For the latter occasion, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, head of the self-appointed and utterly ineffective “Transitional Federal Government” (TFG), donned an *ersatz* uniform cut out of camouflage fabric more suitable for a tropical jungle than his dusty capital and briefly appeared before his troops atop a tank. Meanwhile, the TFG’s paltry forces, backed by more than five thousand Ugandan and Burundian troops from the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), tried to extend the regime’s writ beyond the tiny enclave in Mogadishu within which Islamist insurgents from the al-Qaeda-linked *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (“Movement of Warrior Youth,” al-Shabaab) and their *Hisbul Islam* (“Islamic party”) allies have largely kept it boxed. Evidently the TFG leader’s visit was not sufficient to inspire his troops to achieve the intended result since the long-promised offensive petered out almost as soon as it started, albeit not before it cost the lives of at least two dozen people, including a dozen civilians who died when a shell lobbed by regime forces hit the building they had taken shelter in.

By the weekend, Sharif Ahmed, an allegedly “moderate” Islamist cleric who owes his position not to any electoral mandate but to the machinations of the recently-replaced special representative of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, was back in mufti and headed out of the country yet again, this time to attend, along with the heads of real governments, a summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, of the subregional Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). At the meeting, hastily convened to discuss the failures of his regime, the TFG leader pleaded for yet more foreign troops to hopefully accomplish what he has been unable to rally Somalis to do. Meanwhile, back in Mogadishu, he left a “government” that is more in disarray than ever: in the last month alone, three of the TFG’s ministers, including Defense Minister Sheikh Yusuf Mohamed Siyad “Indha’Adde,” have quit. On his way out, Indha’Adde even [told the Reuters news service](#) that “the government cannot do its job” of restoring order and, hence, “there is no need to stay in office.” Meanwhile, in a further blow to the tottering regime – to say nothing of the wishful thinking of its foreign backers – Sheikh Abdullahi Sheikh Abdirahman Abu Yusuf al-Qadi, spokesman for the clerical leadership of the *Ahlu Sunna wal-Jama’a* (roughly, “[Followers of] the Traditions and Consensus [of the Prophet Muhammad]”) militias which had entered into a deal with the TFG several months ago, declared on Sunday that the TFG’s power-sharing accord with his group was “dead.” As Bronwyn Bruton noted succinctly in her [Council on Foreign Relations report](#) earlier this year, not only has the TFG “failed to generate a visible constituency of clan or business

supporters in Mogadishu,” its very physical survival “now depends wholly on the presence of AMISOM forces.”

Even analysts, like my colleague Professor Ken Menkhaus of Davidson College, who previously could be relied upon to support the conventional policy of bolstering the TFG now acknowledge that not only have “*continued external efforts to breathe life into the moribund TFG have also had the unintended but very real effect of prolonging political conditions within which a radical Islamist insurgency has thrived,*” but they have “*actively undermined our own long-term security interests.*” In an about-face from the position he advanced just a year ago in the *RUSI Journal* and which I contested in those pages, Dr. Menkhaus [testified before a Congressional subcommittee three weeks ago](#) that:

Six years into its initial five year transition, the TFG has utterly failed across the entire range of tasks it assumed in late 2004. It has failed to establish itself as a minimally functional government, advance key transitional tasks, broaden itself as a unity government, and extend its authority beyond a few neighborhoods of Mogadishu protected by African Union peacekeepers. It has done nothing to improve the security of its citizens or provide them access to basic services. It has not improved conditions for the private sector. It has not facilitated the flow and planning of international development aid and humanitarian assistance. And it has not proven to be a useful partner for external states seeking to monitor and reduce the security threats emanating from Somalia.

All of this bolsters the argument which I have consistently made, most recently [a little more than three months ago in this very column space](#):

If, after more than five years since its inception, hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid, and the lives of hundreds of valiant Ethiopian, Ugandan, and Burundian officers and enlisted men who have given their lives defending it when its own ministers won't commit their own sons to the effort, the TFG is still unable to rally to its banner the very people it purports to represent, there is nothing that any outside power can or should do to impose it upon clearly unwilling Somalis. Rather, it is high time that the United States and Somalia's other international partners look after their own legitimate interests and refocus their energies on minimizing and containing the harm caused by the interim regime's ineffectiveness and corruption, while strengthening those functional parts of the former Somali state and integrating them into the framework for regional security and stability.

The recent peaceful election and upcoming democratic transition highlight Somaliland's moral and strategic appeal to the United States and other members of the international community. Whatever their shortcomings, the people of Somaliland have demonstrated over the course of nearly two decades a dogged commitment to peacefully resolving their internal conflicts, rebuilding their society, and forging a democratic constitutional order. Their achievements to date are nothing short of remarkable in a subregion as challenging as the Horn of Africa, especially when one considers the lack of international recognition

under which they labor. Somaliland needs increased engagement, not just politically, but economically. Even if the United States and the European Union are unwilling to move ahead with diplomatic recognition until African states are ready to proceed, at the very least some sort of interim status needs to be found to give Somaliland access to the global economic system so that its people can benefit from their land's vast potential in agriculture, fisheries, and mineral resources. The incoming governing party's foreign policy posture, as articulated in a [statement](#) by its foreign affairs secretary Dr. Mohamed Omar, is reasonably realistic:

Our main foreign policy goals are security, self-determination, economic development, and peaceful co-existence. The Kulmiye government will actively seek to become a member of international bodies, preserve Somaliland national sovereignty, and achieve political recognition. We will also promote free economy and encourage foreign investment ... [However] promoting Somaliland interest internationally will require positive home stories. Therefore, we will consolidate our democratic system and deny extremist groups the opportunity to find a safe haven in our country.

In summary, it is not only prejudicial to our interests, but also antithetical to our ideals, to keep this oasis of stability hostage to the continual conflict which afflicts its neighbors to the south, rather than to hold Somaliland up as an example of what the other Somali regions might aspire to – and could readily achieve if their unelected so-called leaders weren't so busy fighting tooth-and-nail over the decayed carcass of an utterly collapsed state and the pitiful scraps which some members of the international community stubbornly continue to toss at it in the hope of somehow reanimating a corpse that has been dead for almost two decades. It is high time that the international community dedicate its resources to strengthening the viable, rather than wasting them on the defunct.

— *J. Peter Pham is Senior Vice President of the [National Committee on American Foreign Policy](#) in New York City. He also hold academic appointments as Associate Professor of Justice Studies, Political Science, and African Studies at [James Madison University](#) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and non-resident Senior Fellow at the [Foundation for the Defense of Democracies](#) in Washington, D.C. He currently serves as Vice President of the [Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa \(ASMEA\)](#) and Editor-in-Chief of its refereed [Journal of the Middle East and Africa](#).*

Dr. Pham has authored, edited, or translated over a dozen books and is the author of over three hundred essays and reviews on a wide variety of subjects in scholarly and opinion journals on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to the study of terrorism and political violence, his research interests lie at the intersection of international relations, international law, political theory, and ethics, with particular concentrations on the implications for United States foreign policy and African states as well as religion and global politics.

Dr. Pham has testified before the U.S. Congress on numerous occasions and conducted briefings or consulted for the U.S. and foreign governments as well as private firms. He has appeared in various media outlets, including CBS, PBS, CBC, SABC, VOA, CNN, the Fox News Channel, MSNBC, National Public Radio, the BBC, Radio France Internationale, the Associated Press, Reuters, The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Washington Times, USA Today, Le Monde, National Journal, Newsweek, The Weekly Standard, New Statesman, and Maclean's, among others.