

The jihadists next door

Having broken away from a failed state, Somaliland is now a success story.
But the west won't recognise it



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Tuesday 6 July 2010 19.00 BST

In Africa this past week a completely peaceful presidential election was held. International observers said it met all the western standards for a free election. What's more, the incumbent president fully accepted the result the minute it was announced and handed over power to his successor and bitter political rival – and on accepting his victory, the president-elect thanked and congratulated the outgoing president for his services to his country.

What makes this election remarkable, and an important example not just to Africa but to the whole of the developing world – especially Muslim countries – is that it took place in [Somaliland](#), a self-declared republic that broke away from the rest of [Somalia](#) 20 years ago, which doesn't get a penny of international assistance, and which hosts an estimated 600,000 refugees from the continuing civil war in the rest of Somalia.

The week before the election, [al-Shabaab](#), [al-Qaida](#)'s Somalia-based branch, warned the government and people of Somaliland not to go through with the election. Over 1 million voters ignored the threat, queuing for hours all over the country to cast their ballot.

Somaliland presents the other Somali vision that has become a reality. Next door to a country now synonymous with pirates, jihadists and suicide bombers, we have a nation of rules rather than individuals; where election results are accepted by those in power. Aside from today's South Africa, it is hard to think of any other country on the continent which is a consistent example of this.

And it could not have come at a more poignant moment. This week marks the 50th anniversary of Somalia's independence. It is a tragedy for all Somalis, whether living in the stability of Somaliland or not, that what is left of Somalia now ranks as the world's most failed state.

Somaliland, which lies on the Horn of Africa in the north-western corner of Somalia, is not formally recognised by any country – but it is accepted as a de facto country by many nations and organisations who maintain embassies and representative offices in the

capital, Hargeisa. It is peaceful, stable and has had several transfers of power and free elections in its 20-year history.

It has a particularly close connection with Britain, not just in the tens of thousands who live here who have family links to Somaliland (yes, people actually go on holiday to a part of Somalia), but also in the fact that for nearly 80 years, Somaliland was a British protectorate.

For Somalilanders, formal recognition by the rest of the world is the holy grail, a national obsession that defines part of what it means to be a Somalilander and that cuts across all party lines. Having rebuilt itself from the ashes of the civil war and survived with no outside help, Somaliland cannot understand why other countries, particularly in the west, don't open diplomatic relations with them. Now that the rest of Somalia has become one of al-Qaida's main bases and the site of one of the world's worst crises, the question of recognition is even more complex. Somaliland is a vital platform and the only visible option for trying to stabilise Somalia and reverse al-Qaida's growth.

Somalilanders have never wanted to see their country in these terms: they want to distance themselves from the mayhem in Mogadishu as much as possible. Yet it is only by accepting this role that the international support they crave will begin to materialise. The beleaguered UN-backed government in Mogadishu has no other partners with a strong security force, democratic institutions and an intimate knowledge of Somali culture, language, clan system and politics. Up till now, the west has looked to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and others to be their key allies, overlooking the one partner that has a direct interest in bringing peace and security to Mogadishu and halting the spread of radicalism.

For two decades Somaliland and the west have been stuck with the status quo of acceptance without recognition. But the challenge of al-Qaida in Somalia means we cannot remain in this limbo. A new approach needs to be found – and fast.

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Source: guardian.co.uk,
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