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# Somaliland Surviving the Agonizing Process of International Recognition

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On 18 May 2009, the self-declared 'Republic of Somaliland' marked eighteen years since it proclaimed independence seceding from the rest of Somalia. Even after nearly two decades of self-rule, however, the international community remains hesitant to recognize the breakaway territory as a functioning sovereign state. Yet Somaliland leaders remain undiscouraged by the apparent lack of enthusiasm and inaction by the international community, including, most importantly, the African Union (AU). As a result, the messages coming out of Somaliland often refer to 'the irreversible independence' or almost of 'no return to the union with Somalia'.

Somaliland's claim to statehood is being made on the basis that the territory has had historically separate status for a brief period following independence from Britain in June 1960. The next month, in July 1960, the former colonies of Italy and Britain voluntarily established a unitary nation-state known as Somalia. Almost immediately the leadership in Somaliland regretted this decision and begun to wage a secessionist struggle against Siad Barre's misrule for two decades. Barre's forces pursued Somaliland armed movements killing tens of thousands of people and destroying infrastructure in the region. This experience of brutal political repression and military atrocities fostered the emergence of the Somali National Movement (SNM) in 1981, which waged a secessionist struggle, leading to the collapse in 1991 of the Somalia state and the eventual declaration of independence by Somaliland.

Since then, the Somaliland government has been persistent in its pursuit of official recognition. It declared the territory a 'Republic' in 2002 and wrote to the AU asking it to send a fact-finding mission to see the viability of the de facto state. In response, the AU dispatched, between April 30 to May 4 2005, a mission led by its former Deputy Chairperson of the AU Commission Mr Patrick Mazimhaka. Later the same year, in December, Somaliland's President Dahir Rayale Kahin submitted a formal application for admission to the AU, pleading for recognition as a fully active member of the continental body.

Despite the lack of international recognition, Somaliland has the primary constitutive components evident in most nation-states including: an internally accepted political system; institutions of governance; a police force; and its own currency. But the lack of recognition has significantly impeded the territory's overall progress. In this regards, the AU observer mission report had noted that 'the lack of recognition ties the hands of the authorities and people of Somaliland, as they cannot effectively and sustainably transact with the outside to pursue the reconstruction and development goals'. The AU fact-finding mission has also concluded that the situation was sufficiently 'unique and self-justified in African political history' and recommended that the AU 'should find a special method of dealing with this outstanding case'.

Following the above rather sympathetic gesture, president Rayale, on 16 May 2006, met with the then AU Commission Chairperson, Alpha Oumar Konaré to discuss Somaliland's application for membership. Somaliland authorities argue that their claim is consistent with article III of the OAU charter and article IV of the Constitutive Act of the AU, which states that the Union shall function in accordance with the principles of respect for the borders existing on achievement of independence. They also infer the experience of other states, including in Africa, acceptance of self-determination, such as recognition given to Bangladesh, Eritrea, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia.

Given the AU's sensitivity about the maintenance of colonially inherited borders, the 2005 mission report could be seen as exceptionally sympathetic. But so far the organization has taken no further concrete action. Instead the AU's current efforts are focused overwhelmingly on south/central Somalia. The organization in 2006 deployed a peacekeeping mission in Somalia (AMISOM) in support of the fragile Transitional Federal Government (TFG), that is presently battling with Islamist insurgents. In effect, since president Kahin had submitted an application for membership four years back, there is no breakthrough at the continental organization or at member states level.

Regardless of the lack of progress on formal recognition, Somaliland still attracts significant attention, as the region occupies a strategic position near the world's major oil transport routes and major power wants to see it guarded carefully. Consequently the self-declared republic has established political contacts with a number of countries. Ethiopia and the UK insist that Somaliland deserves encouragement and support as the self-proclaimed state has provided an area of relative stability in the volatile Horn sub-region.

In a similar context, Somaliland has also established significant contacts with Belgium, Ghana, South Africa, Sweden, and Djibouti. Moreover, in early 2007, the European Union sent a delegation to discuss future cooperation; while President Kahin led his own delegation and attended the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Kampala, Uganda. In December 2007 the Bush administration also considered whether to back the shaky transitional government in Somalia or to acknowledge the less volatile Somaliland secessionists. Recently the UN special envoy to Somalia,

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Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, was quoted as saying: 'We will open a new UN political affairs office in Hargeisa &hellip;[and] this office will further advance UN funding support to Somaliland in the fields of maritime security and counterterrorism.'

However, before Somaliland gets recognition by the rest of the international community, it needs full and formal legal recognition from the AU. Since President Kahin has submitted a formal application pleading for recognition four years back, there is no breakthrough at the AU or member state level. While it is normal to feel sympathetic to Somaliland's agony in this process, it is equally understandable to see the rationale behind why the AU remains indecisive on the matter. There are indeed risks for the AU to say 'yes' to Somaliland's request for recognition and set the 'wrong precedent'. At least from the Union's perspective, the principal objection against recognition is the strong reservation African governments have about revising borders inherited from colonial times. This is a legitimate concern that cannot be ignored, given the heterogeneity of the majority of African states and the possibility that many may face with the proliferation of similar ethnic and secessionist movements. Other potential risks relate also to the nature of the relationship that is going to be forged between Somaliland and Somalia. Central in this case is whether the two will create friendly relations, through which mutual recognition will be exchanged. Currently, there is a serious threat of Islamists controlling most of the territories of the South and central Somalia. Such elements could aim to infiltrate Somaliland, de-stabilise it and take it over with the support of local Islamists. Moreover, Somaliland is in dispute with the neighbouring autonomous Somali region of Puntland over the Sanaag and Sool areas, some of whose inhabitants owe their allegiance to Puntland and could lead to further destabilisation of the sub-region.

To conclude, Somaliland has persevered for 18 years as an independent state, hoping that it will one day get the attention of the international community, especially that of the AU. The debate whether the breakaway territory deserves recognition as well as the implications of it continues. Coupled with its electoral crisis, presently it has become clearer that without recognition, it remains hard to tell how long Somaliland's relative peace and stability can last. It is critical, therefore, that the international community shows foresight. In particular, the AU has yet to act decisively on the matter. Meanwhile, the people of Somaliland still continue to live with the agony of waiting to hear from the decisionmakers whether they will be a recognised 'Republic' or not.

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