

A voice across the miles

Dr Laura Hammond, of the School of Oriental and African Studies, details how Somaliland's diaspora is engaging with politics at home...

The former British protectorate of Somaliland, which since 1991 has been functioning as a de facto (if unrecognised) state, is now at a political crossroads. A presidential election that was to have taken place in 2008 has been postponed repeatedly amid technical and political difficulties with voter registration. With each postponement, a political crisis has ensued. In September 2009 violence broke out in demonstrations in Hargeisa, the capital city, leaving three people dead. Yet rather than allow the violence to escalate and permanently derail the elections, Somaliland's political parties, legislature, civil society and members of the diaspora (with some support from the international donor community) have come together to find a path back to negotiation.

2010 will provide an important test of Somaliland's ability to move towards multi-party democracy and keep at bay the two-decade-long war in south Somalia. Negotiations between the political parties are being brokered by the National Electoral Commission (NEC), with support from Interpeace and its local counterpart, the Somaliland Academy for Peace and Development. In addition, members of the Somaliland diaspora are also working to advise, mediate, and hold accountable the political parties and their leaders.

The UK is a focal point for Somalilander diaspora political activity. The Somalilander community is one of the oldest African diaspora groups living in the UK, its roots going back to the 1890s when Somali seamen in the British Merchant Navy settled in coastal areas such as Cardiff and Liverpool. During World War II Somalis served with the British navy, and some took up residency in the UK to work, particularly in Sheffield and South Yorkshire. Following World War II, more Somalis came to take advantage of the post-war economic boom, and a large community was established in London's East End. Large numbers (though no official figures are available) of Somalilanders now also live in other parts of London, Manchester, Liverpool, Cardiff, and other urban areas.

Somalilanders did not begin coming to the UK as refugees until the civil war began in the late 1980s and the government collapsed in 1991. In 1988 at a conference in London, Somalilanders launched the Somali National Movement (SNM), which led the armed struggle against dictator Siad Barre's government forces in the northwest of the country. Once independence was declared in 1991, many people returned from their adopted homes; some



The United Democratic People's Party (UDUB) is one of three parties whose leaders recognise the value of diaspora support

returned permanently, but others continue to divide their time between Somaliland and the UK. The Somaliland community in Britain has an enormous influence on Somaliland economics (through remittances and investment) and politics.

I have recently been carrying out research on the influence of the Somaliland diaspora on electoral politics. In interviews both in Hargeisa, the capital city of Somaliland, and London, I have been attempting to learn more about the ways that the diaspora, despite being physically absent most of the time, continues to assert itself and to influence not only the outcome of elections, but also the issues being debated and the contents of negotiations between and within the parties.

Somaliland has three officially recognised parties. The United Democratic People's Party (known as UDUB) is the party of the President Dahir Rayaale Kahin. The Peace, Unity and Development party, known as Kulmiye, is led by UK citizen and former SNM chairman Ahmed Mohamed 'Silaanyo'. The Party for Justice and Welfare, known as UCID (pronounced Oo-id) is led by a member of the Finnish diaspora Faisal Ali Waraabe. Each party looks to the diaspora for funding, although by all accounts Kulmiye is the most successful at raising funds for campaigning and other activities. Kulmiye's supporters have funded a radio station, Radio Horyaal, run out of Belgium; it is the only opposition-run radio station that can be heard



The Peace, Unity and Development party, known as Kulmiye, is the most successful in Somaliland at raising funds for campaigning

throughout Somaliland. Each of the parties' leaders frequently travels abroad, usually stopping off in the UK to meet with members of the Somaliland community on the way. They clearly see the value of galvanising support amongst the diaspora, even though they are not eligible to vote.

Some members of the diaspora do return to Somaliland regularly. During the summer months, in particular, the party offices are assisted by returnees who have come to help the campaigns. Often they come with funds that they have collected from their contacts in the UK and elsewhere to pay for vehicle and office space rental, printing of campaign materials, and support for party officials.

Asked what they bring to Somaliland political life, members of the diaspora stress that their experience of living in liberal democracies gives them an advantage in discussing the direction that Somaliland should take. They say that, because they have lived with free speech and fair elections, they can provide valuable advice to Somalilanders who have never known such things. Those who have experience with economic management, planning and development are also regularly called on to provide advice to policy makers within the parties, which they do both in meetings in the UK as well as through visits to Somaliland.

Sometimes the work of Somalilanders in the diaspora is more formalised. Somaliland Forum, a non-partisan group of people engaged in advocacy for human rights inside Somaliland as well as for political recognition internationally, has been involved since 1997 in efforts to promote freedom of the press. They lobby the government on behalf of imprisoned journalists. Because many of the members are leaders in their own right, they are able to mobilise their supporters both in Somaliland and abroad to give support to particular issues. This multiplies their effectiveness.

Over the past two years the diaspora has been centrally involved in negotiations over setting the terms for the presidential election (and the local parliamentary elections that are expected to follow it). The Independent Scholars Group – set up in Hargeisa and comprising several prominent academics and civil society members, most of whom are what might be termed members of the 'part-time diaspora' – has been involved in mediating between the parties and advising on steps to resolve stalemates. UDDAA (the Promotion of the Constitution Group) is another body, based in the UK, that has been lobbying parties to use the Somaliland constitution to resolve its differences. The diaspora has been helped by concerned non-Somalilanders as well. A team of election observers, co-led by the NGO Progressio, University College London's Development Planning Unit, and Somaliland Focus, have also been lobbying the parties to continue to work towards a timely resolution of disputes so that the elections can go ahead.

Those involved in electioneering, both inside and outside Somaliland, say that they are aware that the world is watching their work, either to convince them that political recognition is deserved, or if the election is cancelled or corrupted, as proof that it is not ready for recognition. Failure to hold elections could seriously derail efforts to emerge from conflict. The stakes are thus very high.



Dr Laura Hammond
Senior Lecturer in Development Studies
School of Oriental and African Studies
lh4@soas.ac.uk
www.soas.ac.uk