

## PLACES THAT DO NOT EXIST

### *Experiences from the parliamentary elections in Somaliland*

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In a recent BBC documentary series provocatively entitled ‘Places that don’t exist’ the presenter, Simon Reeves, toured a number of internationally non-recognised states, from Abkhazia to Taiwan. Topping this list of unusual territories was Somaliland, which, he explained, was the inspiration for the project. The documentary captured the tensions in mainstream understanding of the meaning of both ‘citizenship’ and the ‘nation-state’ in generally accepted discourses on development. By pitting the everyday experiences and achievements of stateless citizens against a state-centric theory worldview, the documentary underscored the disengagement between political theory and reality. This phenomenon has been emphasised recently during Somaliland’s parliamentary elections, held on 29 September. Indeed, since the region unilaterally seceded from its commitment to a greater Somalia in 1991, it has undergone a series of democratic reforms in an experience notably at odds with those of the rest of the territory internationally recognised as ‘Somalia’.

The challenge of creating a multi-party democracy is particularly acute in a traditionally nomadic society based on a highly decentralised kinship structure made up of various clans. Nevertheless Somalilanders believe the elections were an affirmation of

a democratisation process that was started with a constitutional referendum in 2001 and followed by local council and presidential elections in 2002 and 2003 respectively. The underpinnings of this dynamism are evident upon arrival at Egal ‘International Airport’ in Hargeisa, where foreign visitors are issued with a visa before entry into the non-state territory, marking the beginning of the visitor’s encounter with what has been described as ‘Africa’s best kept secret’.

The following short commentary highlights some of the issues raised during the parliamentary elections, which were a watershed in moving the society from clan to party-based politics.

### **Background to the international observer mission**

At the invitation of the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the organisation International Co-operation for Development was tasked with the overall organisation of international observers. The entire international observer team consisted of 74 observers from four continents, including a South African delegation of researchers and NGO staff. The observers were divided into teams of two each

and posted to all six regions of Somaliland, from the capital Hargeisa to interior rural towns. These teams were largely self-financed, but significant logistical support, including vehicles and communication equipment, was provided by local and international NGOs. Security for the observers was provided by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) funded Special Protection Unit.

## Context

These were the first parliamentary elections in the territory since 1969, when it was still a part of greater Somalia. A total of 246 candidates contested 82 seats of the lower chamber of parliament. Of this number only seven were women, a subject of some controversy in international circles. Since its inception in 1991, the chamber has been nominated by the upper house of elders *Guurti*, the traditional peace-makers within the larger political framework. Based on the constitution ratified in 2001, the electoral contest was limited to members of only three parties; this reflected a determined effort to move away from clan-based political affiliation towards a national identity. The parties consisted of the 'ruling party' UDUB (Democratic United National Party), KULMIYE (Unifier) and UCID (Justice and Welfare Party) that also closely contested the local council elections of 2002. There was little to distinguish the parties' platforms, however, as their main rallying point seemed to be the need for international recognition.

In accordance with the electoral law of 2005, each of the six regions was allocated a number of seats, with the capital given the highest number of 20 seats. This meant in practice that each region held a self-contained election. The distribution of seats was not without controversy, however, since there is currently no census upon which to base the allocation. The lack of a census also affected the difficulties in voter identification, because no voter registration was carried out. All in all the authorities had only US \$1.8 million at their disposal for the logistical operation of the elections, a considerable challenge if taken in context of the rudimentary infrastructure currently in place.

## Pre-election campaign

Despite the absence of international diplomatic recognition, Somaliland has managed to achieve significant private and public sector development, particularly in the media sector. This is perhaps because of the large number of Somalis in the diaspora who interact with the political situation through the Internet. In addition, the territory has a public and private TV station, one radio station and a range of print media. The fourth estate thus played a major role in the pre-election campaign, and codified their election coverage through a media code of conduct. The agreement outlined the rule of fair play with regard to balanced coverage and specified that it would "avoid excessive and privileged coverage of an incumbent politician from both the ruling and opposition parties". Indeed, this was a point of tension in the days preceding the election, as the opposition complained of disproportionate coverage of the ruling party. These complaints were forwarded to the election monitoring board within the NEC, which investigated these claims. On the whole, however, the pre-election period was characterised by peaceful campaigning that demonstrated a sense of political maturity among voters.

## Election day

In the spirit of maintaining peace and stability it was decided that polling would go ahead in all stations apart from those in some of the contested areas of Sool and Sanaag, where authority was still disputed by the administration of Puntland. The most striking feature of the day was voter enthusiasm for the process, with very long queues in which some people had spent the night to ensure their place in the line. It was also encouraging to witness the large numbers of women participants in both the rural and urban areas. In total it is estimated that some 800,000 people cast their votes. Problems that were encountered were neither widespread nor systematic, but were largely the result of inexperience with the electoral process. What was important is that the credibility of the process has been endorsed by

both the parties and the public. At the time of writing UDUB has been declared the winner, but without a strong margin, taking 32 seats, while KULMIYE and UCID took 28 and 21 seats respectively.



*Somaliland citizens queuing on election day:*

### **Some outstanding challenges**

One of the key challenges to opening the democratic space is the inclusion of women in politics. Certainly, civil society groups such as NAGAAD, which have been campaigning for such a transformation for over a decade, have made some impact on the current socio-

political landscape. But it must be remembered that in an overwhelmingly conservative society based on clan structures, change can only be envisioned in the longterm.

Apart from the obvious technical improvements to be made for future elections, the challenge now lies in creating substantive party platforms to consolidate Somaliland's achievements. It is hoped now that the parliamentary agenda will move beyond that of international recognition towards addressing pressing domestic issues such as high unemployment, the lack of access to health and education outside of urban areas, and overall service delivery.

In contrast to the expected divisionism of multi-party elections, the most recent experience reflects a society that has built upon its traditional consensual foundation, providing an instructive example of 'bottom-up' development. Future challenges for Somaliland may lie in deciding whether to democratise the nomination process to the Upper House of Elders, and to entrench a system of decentralised government. Seen in the context of politics in the region, Somaliland's domestic achievements remain 'Africa's best kept secret'.