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Political Settlements and State Formation: The Case of Somaliland

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Why did the civil wars in Somaliland end while Somalia's continued? This paper asks why large-scale violence was resolved in the internationally unrecognised 'Republic of Somaliland' but not in the rest of Somalia. The case of Somaliland offers insights into why some domestic power struggles – including violent ones – build the foundations for relative political order while others perpetuate cycles of economic malaise and political violence.

The unrecognised status of the Government of Somaliland has made it broadly ineligible for official international grants and loans, and so it has had to rely more heavily on its internal capacity to extract capital, whether from its domestic population or its diaspora. Despite these constraints, Somaliland's political and developmental achievements have been relatively impressive – with the most significant progress being the restoration and maintenance of peace. Its achievements are most striking when compared to the level of conflict and poverty presided over by successive governments in southern Somalia – governments that have been largely underwritten by external political support and financial assistance.

This paper finds that it was not simply the lack of direct external assistance that mattered, but the fact that Somalilanders were not pressured to accept 'template' political institutions from outside and could negotiate their own locally devised, and locally legitimate, institutional arrangements. There was sufficient time and political space for solutions to evolve, rather than an attempt to impose predetermined institutional end points. The emergence from civil conflict was out of kilter with conventional conflict prevention programs that emphasise grassroots consensus and inclusion; it was also coloured by struggles to control the means of legitimate coercion, and a high degree of collusion between the political and economic elites.

Finally, the lack of external assistance meant that the incentives for elites to cooperate with one another were primarily local. This was at odds with the way that peace was being pursued in the rest of Somalia at the same time, where vast sums of money were being spent by external actors to bring political competitors to the negotiating table in the hope of forging a durable peace.

The 'rules of the game'

For Somaliland, the maintenance of peace is the gravitational centre around which all other political and economic considerations orbit. On this basis, peace is exchanged for relatively exclusive access to the key drivers of economic growth. Somaliland's political settlements drew on existing institutions and established new ones in order to overcome civil conflict, and in so doing created a hybrid political order consisting of locally appropriate (though imperfect) norms and rules of political engagement. The 'rules of the game' that were consolidated during this process established that the building and maintenance of peace should:

- Be highly inclusive
- Use widely understood (though not strictly 'traditional') mediation techniques
- Maintain a relative balance of power between clans and sub-clans
- Not rely on outsiders to solve Somaliland's problems.

This political settlement has become increasingly exclusive since the last national conference ended in 1997, but it nevertheless underlines the 'rules of the game' that regulate competition over power and resources, and the handling of differences in non-violent ways. This was not an inevitable outcome. When resources are viewed as scarce, it is common for actors to assume a zero-sum game in which opponents' gains will be viewed as losses. Incentives to act are politically and socially constructed.

Structural facilitators of change

There were several key structural circumstances that influenced Somaliland's political settlement:

- The restricted access to external finance that was available to both the Somali National Movement (SNM) during the civil war and to the civilian governments that have followed it.
- The military victory of the SNM in 1991, which was accepted by the north-western clan militias that it defeated. There was no such victor in the rest of the country following the collapse of Siyad Barre's government, which facilitated the ongoing conflict between competitors.
- The absence of external actors weighing in to either end or prolong the intra-Isaaq wars in the mid-1990s. Somaliland's conflicts were very internally focused, while those in the south engaged many external actors and external sources of revenue. Access to this revenue in the south reduced the incentives of local power brokers to manage violence as a means of protecting revenue streams.
- International focus on events in the south during Somaliland's formative period in the 1990s allowed Somaliland's peace-building process to proceed with an unusual level of autonomy.
- Neither the government nor any other coalition has ever been able to claim a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.
- Somaliland remains an unrecognised state despite its ambitions to the contrary, which seriously limits the ability of the government to extract income from normal international channels.
- The ongoing conflict in Somalia graphically illustrated the potential for violence to spiral out of control in structural circumstances that closely resembled Somaliland's.

Of course, none of these factors can be seen as determining Somaliland's political trajectory. Things could have turned out very differently were these same circumstances animated by different agents with different beliefs, perceptions and abilities.

Agential facilitators of change

Developmental change requires time, and is brought about by human action. It relies on agents who are willing and able to respond to, and sometimes create, critical junctures. External actors seeking to engage in the politics of developing states need to understand the deeper mechanics of the political configurations in the areas that they work, and ask:

- Which agents are more likely to perceive the developmental interests of the community?
- What conditions are most likely to give them the incentives to work towards the developmental interests of the community?
- What gives agents the best tools to act effectively to this end?

This piece exposes the disproportionate influence that actors with access to quality secondary education had in forging the early years of Somaliland's political settlement. Quality secondary education was one of the most important tools that agents had to act effectively.

- A disproportionate number of Somaliland's most influential political actors attended either Sheekh or Amoud secondary schools – both of which taught a curriculum that prioritised leadership and critical thought.
- A key indication of the importance of these institutions is the fact that three out of the four presidents of Somaliland attended Sheekh School while the other, Dahir Rayale Kahin, attended Amoud School. All three vice presidents also went to Sheekh School, although one – Abdirahman Aw Ali – also attended Amoud School.
- Cutting across each of the most important groups of actors is the importance of pre-existing networks of trust. Most of the coalitions analysed in this paper (the self-help group Uffo, the SNM, clan elders, and female activists) comprised members who knew each other personally prior to their engagement in politics.
- The clan leaders who were members of the national Guurti represented their constituents through hybrid and novel means. The Borama Conference formalised the role of a certain type of clan leader in Somaliland's political system – one that was willing and able to be detached from a pastoral context.

Ideational facilitators of change

In Somaliland there are several powerful ideas that help to reinforce a common reference point for political actors to draw from when framing processes of political change. These include:

- Beliefs about Somaliland being exceptional from the rest of Somalia (and of Somalilanders from other Somalis)
- Beliefs about Somaliland's rightful sovereign independence
- Beliefs about Somalilanders' inherent self-reliance
- The pervasive belief that peace is tenuous and its maintenance is a priority that outweighs all other political and economic matters.

These ideas do not just reflect common beliefs about, or imaginings of, a shared past; they also influence people's behaviour and shape their perceptions of what is politically desirable and possible. In the context of Somaliland, where the 'state' is technically absent, the narratives constructed around the idea of Somaliland as an exceptional and inherently legitimate sovereign entity feed directly into the ongoing negotiations and power struggles that give shape to its political settlement. The shared beliefs and narratives (accurate or idealised, valid or distorted) over Somaliland's exceptionalism and inherent peacefulness help to reinforce a status-quo whereby the absence of civil war is offered in exchange for acquiescence to elite capture of the economy.

How the 'failed states' literature fails to conceptualise change

Much of the 'failed states' literature suggests that when the state does not hold the monopoly on violence, violence will embroil its competitors as they struggle to claim the monopoly for themselves. This is a very structural explanation that takes no account of the agency of those supposed competitors who can both perceive, and act to alter, their circumstances. In Somaliland, those potential competitors were scarred by years of violence and deeply cognisant of the consequences of defecting from a settlement that promised peace, even if it did not promise a great deal else.

For Somalilanders, the threat of violence was less from an external invasion than an internal combustion. This perception had profound impacts on the institutions – and the ideas about violence that undergird them – that were fostered during this period. Protection from violence was viewed as an internal matter, and if violence had been a political tool and a political choice for local actors in the recent past it was believed that it could become so again with little warning. Peace was precarious, and it rested on a tenuous balance between coalitions with roughly equivalent power. Somaliland's civil wars in the mid-1990s provided the opportunity for local coalitions to determine that no one clan could dominate the others. They constituted neither 'development in reverse' nor a conflict trap because of the way that the actors perceived their incentives to cooperate, largely as a result of those unusually insular wars.

Messages for policy makers

- Less was more. Somaliland was of peripheral importance to external donors and, more importantly, to the external militaries that were active in Somalia in the 1990s. With the exception of a sum of around US $100,000, which was provided by several donors for the Borama Conference in 1993, there was virtually no foreign funding used to finance the peace conferences in Somaliland between 1991 and 1997. There was a strong sense of local ownership precisely because the process was almost entirely locally owned.
- No pre-determined institutional endpoints. The peace conferences were lengthy, deliberative processes that occurred according to local norms and rhythms. They were allowed to take as long as was necessary to reach an outcome satisfactory to those involved. The inherent fluidity gave participants the time and political space to establish the institutions they believed were appropriate to the local context rather than being rushed to adopt template institutions or hold elections. Somaliland's story points to the importance of allowing time and political space for locally legitimate solutions to evolve rather than attempting to impose pre-determined institutional end points. Somalilanders' success at ending the widespread violence did not come as the result of trying to implement international best practices or norms of good governance. Had Somalilanders conducted the peace conferences with the aim of reaching liberal democratic outcomes or streamlined bureaucratic structures, it is likely that the outcome would have been less connected to the immediate requirements of stemming violence and, presumably, less effective in doing so.
- Collusion over inclusion. Peace in Somaliland was consolidated with help of the large amounts of money given to President Egal by a small circle of wealthy local merchants in exchange for extraordinary profits. Egal combined collusive business deals with security dividends for the wider population and tethered the commanding heights of the economy to his own state-building project. If the focus at the time had been on providing inclusive economic growth, it is also likely that President Egal's collusion with the business elite would have been seen as unacceptable. Exclusive though it was, Egal's ability to extract – and lavishly reimburse with 'public' money – was, and remains, widely accepted within Somaliland as having been legitimate.
- Investment in quality secondary education and tertiary scholarships. The biographical backgrounds of the influential political actors, activists, and technocrats from that period show that they were disproportionately well educated and, moreover, disproportionately educated at one secondary institution in particular – Sheekh School.

Providing funding for secondary schools beyond their physical infrastructure is no longer a priority among Western donors in Somaliland/Somalia. Instead, education funding is channelled almost exclusively towards primary schools, in line with the Millennium Development Goals. Despite this, the importance of Sheekh School in Somaliland's political and peace-building history is demonstrated by both the testimony of its former students and by the positions obtained by its graduates in the decades that followed.

Foreign development assistance should be about more than fixing institutional gaps using the technical lens of imported and transferable best practice. The case of Somaliland underlines that legitimate institutions are those born through local political and social processes, and that these are largely shaped through the leadership process.

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