

The Somalia – Somaliland Negotiations

The recent dialogue between the Somali Federal Government and Somaliland in Turkey is an encouraging step toward political reconciliation. However, so far the talks lack substance and a sense of urgency. Both sides must take concrete actions to inform and involve all concerned stakeholders, including elders, religious scholars, and business leaders in both Somaliland and Somalia.

President Ahmed Silanyo of Somaliland recently admitted that recognition, despite a tireless campaign for more than two decades, has thus far “remained out of reach.” President Hassan Sheikh has repeatedly listed “national unity” as one of the top priorities for his administration. The prospects of the Somali Federal government acquiescing to Somaliland separation in the near future are extremely slim.

With these considerations in mind, the two sides must be prepared for long and difficult negotiations. Somalia and Somaliland must foster the support of the Somali people by making the talks more inclusive. Somaliland should be commended for including opposition figures in its delegation. The federal government should also include those hailing from Somaliland but opposed to its independence in the negotiations. The roots of conflict between the two sides are buried deep in society, making genuine societal engagement essential if negotiations are to succeed.

Similarly, the two sides must embark upon a series of confidence-building measures for the dialogue to be successful. Interactions between Somali academic, business, sports, and cultural communities on both sides of the divide should be restored and encouraged. The two sides’ commitment to work together in the fight against piracy and terrorism should be fully implemented immediately.

Somaliland’s grievances based on historical injustices must be recognized and addressed adequately. Constitutional guarantees must be developed to ensure that past mistakes are not made again. But Somaliland must realize that its quest to leave the union is growing increasingly untenable.

Background

Somaliland was under a British rule before it gained independence on June 26, 1960. Five days later Italian Somalia gained independence and the two sides united to form the Somali Republic. The people of Somaliland and their political leaders had the initiative to unite with their fellow Somalis without any conditions. For most Somalis it was a joyous, if somewhat ubiquitous, union and an important step for Somali nationalism.

The new Somali Republic embarked upon an ambitious and bold quest for a Greater Somalia incorporating territories lying beyond the established national frontiers. The objective was to liberate the remaining three Somali-inhabited regions in the Horn of Africa and establish a pan-Somali state. The new Somali flag - sky blue with a five-pointed white star in the middle - represented the strong desire to liberate the other three ‘missing’ Somali regions: the Haud and Reserve Areas held by Ethiopia (now referred to as Region 5 or the Somali Region), the Northern Frontier District (NFD) of Kenya (now referred to as North Eastern Province), and French Somaliland (now known as the Republic of Djibouti).

The relentless pursuit of a “Greater Somalia” outraged Somalia’s neighbors, Ethiopia and Kenya, who were determined to maintain colonial territorial integrity in the face of what they saw as

Somalia’s expansionist aggression. Both countries adopted a strategic objective and signed a mutual defence pact to contain the threat from Somalia. Ratified in 1963, the pact remains in force and both countries can invoke it anytime there is imminent threat from Somalia.

Nine years after independence, a group of military officers toppled the democratically elected government of Somalia in 1969 ending rampant corruption, political gridlock, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Under the leadership of General Mohamed Siyad Barre, the military regime initially garnered popular support for its robust institutional building, literacy and poverty reduction, and restoration of the pride of the nation.

The government took what would prove to be an ominous gamble on its massive political capital in 1977 when the military mounted an attack against Ethiopia aimed at liberating the Somali region. After initial success, the military was soundly defeated crushing national morale. Fissures quickly emerged within the rank and file of the military.

In 1978, a group of senior military officers attempted a coup. Despite failing to takeover power, they succeeded in further demoralizing and dividing the Somali National Army. President Barre lost confidence in many of his key military aides and consequently grew increasingly

introspective. Seizing on this opportunity, Ethiopia institutionalized its objective of dismantling the Somali state. A number of disgruntled Somali military and political leaders sought refuge in Ethiopia and established rebel groups there.

A decade later, one of these armed factions—the Somali National Movement (SNM) - was fighting Somali government troops in cities throughout northern Somalia. In its attempt to crush the SNM, President Barre's regime waged a brutal shelling and bombing campaign of Hargeisa.

Grievances

Somaliland declared unilateral independence from Somalia shortly after the collapse of the central state in 1991. Traditional elders and political leaders representing some communities in the territory met in Burao that same year. The delegates agreed on two important issues – to seek reconciliation amongst the clans of Somaliland and to withdraw from the union with Somalia. The atrocities committed by the Somali state against the people of the Somaliland, it was felt, warranted secession.

The victims of the military regime's brutal repression have legitimate grievances. Human rights organizations documented sustained efforts by the Somali government to kill and maim innocent civilians. President Barre's anti-rebel campaign defied global norms of war.

In the late 1980s, President Barre's government grew progressively clannish, marginalizing entire communities from power. As various rebel groups tightened the noose around him, he used increasingly sectarian tactics to provoke conflict among different communities. Many northern Somalis felt increasingly unwelcome in a nation they voluntarily joined and sacrificed a lot for.

Recognition of these grievances is a key to reconciliation and, eventually, reunion. The leaders of the Somali Federal Government (SFG) and Somali citizens must be prepared to address these issues for the sake of national unity.

Achievements

In 22 years of unilateral succession, Somaliland made excellent progress as much of the rest of the country remained marred in conflict and instability. It established functioning state institutions that have maintained a degree of stability in the region. It has held a series of successful presidential, parliamentary and local elections. Following the last presidential elections a peaceful transfer of power took place in a way that would shame other nations throughout the continent. A cross-clan multiparty system has been enshrined in a constitution adopted through popular vote. Opposition parties are encouraged and tolerated. The role of traditional elders has been institutionalized in the upper house of the parliament, known as the "Guurti".

Somaliland's political maturity vis-à-vis the SFG was demonstrated in the team that it sent to engage in dialogue at the invitation of Turkey. Like previous talks, the Somaliland government included opposition politicians

in the dialogue while the SFG's team was insufficiently inclusive.

Economically, Somaliland has built a vibrant business sector that contributes to stability through employment schemes and tax revenues for the government. The biggest Somali money transfer company, Dahabshiil, has its headquarters in Hargeisa. The education sector is also promising. Somaliland has some of the best universities in the Somali region. Despite the lack of international recognition, Somaliland has made admirable progress as an autonomous region.

Challenges

Notwithstanding its admirable achievements Somaliland continues to face major challenges. First, the pursuit of international recognition has left many Somalilanders increasingly dogmatic and ignorant of developments elsewhere in the region. Many Somaliland politicians are aware that the notion of 'independence' is, for the time being, practically not possible. Somaliland has failed to gather the political momentum to foster recognition even at the regional level.

The African Union remains reluctant to seriously consider the Somaliland case. The United States and Britain - ostensibly the closest western allies of Somaliland - have consistently repeated that they respect the territorial integrity of Somalia. The UN frequently reiterates its respect for the unity of Somalia.

Second, in the last few years, violent inter-clan conflicts have taken place among communities living in Awdal region in the west, and Sool and Sanaag regions in the east of Somaliland. These confrontations have left many casualties. The involvement of Somaliland security services in these conflicts threatens regional peace and stability.

Third, Somaliland authorities have recently been apprehending people who openly support a united Somalia and employing scare tactics to dissuade anyone with unionist inclinations from participating in the national political space. In 2000 the Somaliland Parliament passed a law forbidding government representatives, local non-governmental organizations, and citizens of Somaliland from taking part in any meeting or conference on Somalia. Consequently, many northern members of the SFG are unable to visit their families and friends in Somaliland for fear of imprisonment. This policy is inherently brutal and counterproductive.

Fourth, press freedoms are growing increasingly curtailed in Somaliland. Although there is a strong culture of free media in Somaliland, the government refuses to issue permits for private radio stations. The government insists that burgeoning radio outlets in Somaliland will foment instability. By denying the citizens' their inherent right to establish a free press, the Somaliland government is demonstrating intolerance. Still, there are 16 daily newspapers published in Hargeisa and four privately owned TV stations in addition to the Somaliland National TV. All privately owned Somali TV stations such as Universal, Somali Channel, Royal TV, and S24 have

studios in Hargeisa and correspondents reporting from all regions of Somaliland.

Tensions over talks

As demonstrated in the Ankara Communiqué issued after the recent talks in Turkey, the two sides appear to have taken the least resistant path in the initial dialogue. Dialogue has resulted in a commitment to further dialogue. While the significance of the first face-to-face meeting between the two presidents on relatively neutral ground should not be understated it is disappointing that more substantive issues are yet to enter discussions. That the next round of talks are scheduled 'within 90 days' suggests the lack of a sense of urgency on both sides.

The talks between the two presidents threaten to raise tensions in the region. Many northern unionists are angered that they were not consulted with for this pivotal dialogue. They point to the SFG delegation that participated in the Turkey dialogue, which was led by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's key allies. Understandably, northern unionists are concerned about potentially sympathetic SFG leaders making concessions that could adversely impact them. The SFG must attempt to allay the fears of northern unionists about the dialogue by broadening consultations within the SFG before the next round of talks.

The talks may also raise tension in Somaliland. President Silanyo is widely perceived in Somaliland as being comparatively more pragmatic about national reunion. The Somaliland president is under the microscope of radical secessionists who are scrutinizing his every move and stand poised to frame him as a traitor if he appears to be more accommodating.

Conclusion

It is commendable that the Somaliland administration and the Somali Federal Government have restarted direct talks under the aegis of Turkey - a strong supporter of the Somali people and a country widely viewed as neutral. Presidents Mohamud and Silanyo are courageous to build on previous talks held in Britain and the UAE. Now is the right time to rekindle dialogue on the reconciliation process as the country recovers from more than two decades of unrest and fragmentation.

Still, after two previous rounds of talks, the two sides should have entered into discussions on more substantive issues at this third round. They should have injected a greater sense of urgency. Just over three years are remaining from the mandates of both presidents.

Somaliland deserves credit for including its own opposition politicians in the dialogue with the SFG. The SFG should learn from this pragmatic move that demonstrates political maturity. The SFG must establish a representative team of delegates before it engages Somaliland in the next round. Internal disunity will likely yield no results. In this regard, the SFG must also consult a wide spectrum of society before the next round of talks.

Equally, Somaliland has to overcome a number of internal challenges. First, it must discontinue the practice of

punishing northern unionists collectively and individually. The government's violent crackdown against the communities in Sool, Sanaag and Awdal should stop immediately. Somaliland must allow the free movement of northern unionists within Somalia.

President Silanyo is believed to be sympathetic to national reunion. Assuming that this is accurate, he must craft a strategy that addresses the legitimate grievances of his people but restores national unity. He must recognize that the path of international recognition is growing increasingly untenable. The people of Somaliland are deprived of their rights to international support as they continue to exist in the periphery. With the recent U.S. recognition of the SFG and repeated international statements on the sanctity of the territorial integrity of Somalia, President Silanyo should be bold in leading his people to the path of reunion. A free press could facilitate this. The continued absence of an open media landscape in Somaliland demerits its own claim to freedom.

Recommendations

To the Somali Federal Government:

- Continue engaging Somaliland with the objective of political accommodation and eventual national reconciliation.
- Seek the counsel of a broad spectrum of society for the dialogue.
- Make the negotiating delegation more inclusive and include northern unionists.
- Entrust negotiations with Somaliland with prominent personalities, politicians, businessmen, and religious figures.
- Devise a comprehensive settlement plan that addresses historical injustices.
- Recognize the legitimate grievances of Somaliland and apologize for the abuses carried out in the name of the Somali government.
- Be prepared to discuss power sharing offers that may enable and entice Somaliland politicians to pursue the path of unity. Encourage international partners to continue supporting Somaliland on economic development and improving security
- Take confidence-building measures such as the establishment of a common economic zone, common sports leagues, and the exchange of cultural and educational links.

To the Somaliland administration:

- Continue dialogue with the Somali Federal Government.
- Play moderator role and resolve peacefully and amicably all inter-clan conflicts between communities in Sool, Sanaag, Awdal and other places.
- Engage Puntland to peacefully resolve the outstanding border issues.
- Rescind laws barring northern politicians visiting family and friends in Somaliland.
- Collaborate with the SFG on fighting terrorism and piracy.
- Take confidence-building measures such as the establishment of a common economic zone, common sports leagues, and the exchange of cultural and educational links.

To the international community:

- End parallel Somalia-Somaliland mediation efforts and back the efforts of a single international broker agreed to by both parties.
- Incentivize reconciliation through development ventures and assistance building on mutual benefits of cooperation in economic and social fields.
- Discourage spoiling of the Somalia-Somaliland rapprochement by national, regional and international actors.

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