

Book Review

***Somaliland: An African Struggle for Nationhood and International Recognition.* By Iqbal D. Jhazbhay. Johannesburg: Institute for Global Dialogue and South African Institute of International Affairs, 2009. 243 pp. \$25.00 paper.**

Somalia is often described in Hobbesian terms as “the only country in the world where there is no government,”¹ but instead “a long-running, multi-sided battle for control”² by heavily armed fighters representing “a tangled web of clans and militias.”³ However appropriate the designation “failed state” may be for the onetime Somali Democratic Republic, it does not do justice to the complex realities on the ground. In fact, what many writers refer to as “Somalia” in their lurid accounts of the struggle for resources and power is really only the central and southern parts of the former national territory. In assessing the reality of conditions in Somalia, it is more accurate to consider that at least three distinct political spaces have emerged in the territory of the collapsed Somali state. In central and southern Somalia, an ineffective Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the fifteenth such entity since the fall of the dictatorship of Muhammad Siyad Barre in 1991, struggles against an Islamist insurgency spearheaded by the *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen* (Movement of Warrior Youth, al-Shabaab), a terrorist group with al-Qaeda links. In the northeast, the autonomous Puntland State of Somalia has managed to avoid the violent conflict and extremism that has devastated the areas to its south, but nonetheless has acquired an unsavory reputation as the center of the activities of Somalia’s infamous pirates whose syndicates increasingly dominate the region’s politics. Finally, in the northwest, there is the Republic of Somaliland, which is the subject of the present volume.

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¹BBC News, “Living in Somalia’s Anarchy,” November 18, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/africa/4017147.stm>.

²Eugene Robinson, “Down the Wrong Path in Afghanistan,” *Washington Post*, December 4, 2009, A 27.

³Abdinasir Mohamed and Sarah Childress, “Suicide Bombing Kills Somali Ministers, Students,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2009, A11.

The modern political history of Somaliland begins with the establishment, in 1884, of the British Somaliland Protectorate that, except for a brief Italian occupation during the Second World War, lasted until June 26, 1960, when the territory received its independence as the State of Somaliland.⁴ Notification of the independence was duly communicated to the United Nations (UN) and some thirty-five member states duly accorded the new state diplomatic recognition. Several days later, the Italian-administered UN trust territory of Somalia received its independence. The two states then hastily entered into a union that a number of legal scholars have argued fell somewhat short of the minimal standards for legal validity,⁵ and that the Somalilanders quickly regretted due in no small measure to the discrimination that the northerners, predominantly members of the Isaaq clan, suffered at the hands of the numerically superior members of clans from other regions. The condition of the northern clans only worsened with the military coup d'état that, in 1969, brought the military regime of Siyad Barre to power. Initially an officially Marxist state guided by "scientific socialism," the dictatorship switched Cold War allegiances and allied itself with the United States a decade later. Unfortunately for the northerners, the about-face did little to alleviate their situation. In fact, in 1988, Siyad Barre's air force actually perpetrated one of the most bizarre war crimes in the annals of armed conflict: Taking off from the airport in Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, the aircraft bombed the very same city, destroying some 80 percent of it.

After the collapse of the Siyad Barre regime, elders representing the various clans in Somaliland met in the war-ravaged city of Burao and adopted a resolution annulling the northern territory's merger with the former Italian colony and declared that it would revert to the sovereign status it had enjoyed upon the achievement of independence from Great Britain. Despite the fact that Somaliland has not received formal recognition from any state, the remarkable progress that the authorities and people of the region have made stands in stark contrast with seemingly endless chaos in central and southern Somalia where the internationally recognized TFG is hardly a government in any common-sense definition of the term since it effectively administers hardly any territory and provides no services to such citizens as find themselves in the limited zones where it is even present. This is where Iqbal Jhazbhay, a professor of religious studies and international relations at the University of South Africa (UNISA), finds the principal themes of *Somaliland: An African Struggle for Nationhood and International Recognition*:

This disjuncture between successful local nation-building and unsuccessful international efforts at nation-building without local legitimacy has

⁴See I. M. Lewis, *The Modern History of Somaliland: From Nation to State* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965).

⁵See Anthony J. Carroll and B. Rajagopal, "The Case for an Independent Somaliland," *American University Journal of Law and Politics* 8, no. 2-3 (1993): 653-662.

informed the central focus of this study, namely the extent to which Somaliland illustrates the efficacy of internally driven, culturally rooted, “bottom-up” approaches to post-war nation-building; the success of this approach in reconciling indigenous cultures and traditions and modernity; and its success in achieving relative stability in the course of the nation-building project (p. 19).

It is an admittedly ambitious undertaking, but the author’s diligent efforts—over the course of six years of research, he made nine extensive visits to the region as well as forays to other African countries, Europe, and North America, during which he interviewed almost every major actor and most of the relevant scholars—and his fluent command of the relevant academic and popular literature enable him to deliver as promised. Without falling into the trap of overgeneralization, the volume distills from Somaliland’s efforts a good many lessons for the rest of Africa and the international community in general about what Jhazbhay calls “the four Rs”: reconciliation, reconstruction, religion, and recognition.

Particularly valuable is the insight that critical to Somaliland’s largely felicitous outcome was the fact once the armed struggle against the dictatorship ended, “initiative within Somaliland shifted to the clan elders, as the [Somali National Movement, the principal resistance group in the region] handed over to them to navigate what would become a complicated and delicate process of post-conflict reconciliation” (p. 38). The clan leaders of the predominant Isaaq purposely reached out to representatives of other clans in Somaliland, including the Darod/Harti, Gadabuursi, and Ise. The clans sent representatives to a national *guurti*, or council of elders, which, in 1993, elected Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal, who had briefly been prime minister of independent Somaliland in 1960 as well as democratically elected prime minister of Somalia between 1967 and the military coup in 1969, as president of Somaliland. Interestingly, while the apportionment of seats at the conference was done along clan lines in a rough attempt to reflect the demographics of the territory, the actual decision making was by consensus.

Egal’s tenure saw, among other things, the drafting of a permanent constitution, approved by 97 percent of the voters in a May 2001 referendum, which provided for an executive branch of government, consisting of a directly elected president and vice president and appointed ministers; a bicameral legislature consisting of an elected House of Representatives and an upper chamber of elders, the *guurti*; and an independent judiciary. After Egal’s unexpected death in 2002, his vice president, Dahir Riyale Kahin, succeeded to the presidency. Kahin, in turn, was elected in his own right in a closely fought election in April 2003—the margin of victory for the incumbent was just eighty votes out of nearly half a million cast and, amazingly, the dispute was settled peaceably through the courts. Multiparty elections for

the House of Representatives were held in September 2005, which gave the president's party just thirty-three of the eighty-two seats, with the balance split between two other parties. While regrettably Somaliland's political progress has stalled in recent years due to the repeated postponement of presidential and legislative elections over disputes relating to the voter registry, the differences appear to have been ironed out through an internal compromise worked out by all three of the region's political parties, with encouragement from Ethiopia and other foreign partners as well as pressure from clan elders. Polls appear likely in 2010.

In the chapter on reconstruction, Jhazbhay argues that, left to their own devices, Somalilanders discovered that the demobilization of former fighters, the formation of national defense and security services, and the extraordinary resettlement of over one million refugees and internally displaced persons fostered the internal consolidation of their renascent polity, while the establishment of independent newspapers, radio stations, and a host of local nongovernmental organizations and other civic groups reinforced the nation-building exercise. The stable environment thus created facilitated substantial investments by both local and diaspora businessmen who have built, among other achievements, a telecommunications infrastructure that is more developed and varied than in any of Somaliland's neighbors.

With regard to religion, Jhazbhay, who formerly headed UNISA's Centre for Arabic and Islamic Studies, contributes a chapter that, for its detailed, but readily accessible, survey of Islam among the Somali, is alone worth the price of his book. Against the backdrop of the rising tide of Islamist militancy in central and southern Somalia, what is remarkable is that in Somaliland the traditional system of clan elders and the respect they command has served as something of a mediating force, resulting in a pragmatic interaction between Islam and the secular project of modern state-building, leading to a unique situation where, as the author puts it, "Islam may be pre-empting and/or containing Islamism" (p. 137). The consequence of having an organic relationship between Somali culture and tradition and Islam appears to assure a stabilizing, rather than disruptive, role for religion in society in general and religion and politics in particular. Thus, while Somaliland's population is almost exclusively Sunni Muslim and the *shabāda*, the Muslim profession of the oneness of God and the acceptance of Muhammad as God's final prophet, is emblazoned on the region's flag, *shari'a* is only one of the three sources of the jurisprudence in the region's courts alongside secular legislation and Somali traditional law (*xeer*). On the other hand, given the limited resources of the Somaliland government, Quranic schools play an important role in basic education. Yet alongside these popular institutions stand equally well-received secular charities like the Hargeisa's Edna Adan Maternity Hospital, founded in 2002 by Edna Adan Ismail, a former foreign minister of Somaliland, which provides a higher standard of care than available anywhere else in the Somali lands for maternity and infant conditions as

well as for diagnosis and treatment for HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases and general medical conditions. Thanks to this integrative approach, the northern clans have largely managed to “domesticate” the challenge of political Islam in a manner that their southern counterparts would do well to emulate.

Recognition is probably the toughest challenge faced by Somaliland. The report of a 2005 African Union (AU) fact-finding mission led by then AU Commission Deputy Chairperson Patrick Mazimhaka concluded that “the fact that the union between Somaliland and Somalia was never ratified and also malfunctioned when it went into action from 1960 to 1990, makes Somaliland’s search for recognition historically unique and self-justified in African political history” and recommended that “the AU should find a special method of dealing with this outstanding case.”⁶ Jhazbhay is clearly sympathetic to this argument and devotes several pages to analyzing a little-known legal brief prepared several years ago by the Office of the Chief State Law Adviser (International Law) in the South African Department of Foreign Affairs that noted that “Somaliland had not only been a separate colonial unit but actually a separate independent state for five days [. . .] which makes Somaliland’s case unique and special as a legal justification for secession when things have not worked out” (p. 156) and concluded that on this basis “Somaliland does indeed qualify for statehood, and it is incumbent upon the international community to recognize it” (p. 157). Unfortunately, as yet no country has invoked these legal authorities to establish diplomatic ties with Somaliland, although Ethiopia, with a trade office in Hargeisa headed by a resident consul-general, comes close.

Jhazbhay consoles himself with the thought that perhaps “in the middle of the continuing unsettled political environment in the southern Somali non-state, Hargeisa’s uphill quest for recognition has been an incentive for Somaliland’s leaders to demonstrate effective governance,” which he defines in that specific context as “the ongoing politics of reconciliation and reconstruction, and preventing the extremist politics of Islamism (as opposed to the religion of Islam) from interfering in the nation-building process” (p. 149). These qualities are precisely the ones that should interest the international community given, as Jhazbhay eloquently articulates, “Somalia is not just a ‘failed state.’ It is a disintegrated state; one that no longer exists, whatever the fiction dreamt up by African, Arab, and international diplomacy to serve their vested political interests” (p. 177). I, having previously argued that the progress demonstrated by Somaliland confirms that not only a “bottom-up” approach offers “the most realistic hope of salvaging a modicum of regional stability and international security out of a situation that otherwise grows increasingly intractable with each passing day, but it provides the right

⁶African Union Commission, Report of the AU Fact-Finding Mission to Somaliland (30 April to 4 May 2005).

opportunities and incentives for Somalis to go about rebuilding their shattered social, economic, and political institutions,”⁷ cannot but endorse with the author’s plea, commending the book, both comprehensive and timely, to all those concerned with peace, security, and stability in the Horn of Africa.

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⁷J. Peter Pham, “Peripheral Vision: A Model Solution for Somalia,” *RUSI Journal* 154, no. 5 (October 2009): 90.