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A VOID OF GOVERNANCE

The African Union Remains Slow to Act in Failed States

by **Aly Verjee**

Were the foreign ministers and heads of state and government assembled at the January Summit of the African Union (AU) in Khartoum, Sudan distracted by events further up the Nile? Soccer's African Cup of Nations, hosted by Sudan's northern neighbour Egypt, has gripped the continent and was reportedly just as massively popular with the delegates inside Khartoum's newly renovated Friendship Hall conference centre.

Host nation Egypt's tournament success is rare welcome good news for recently re-elected Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. His election victory in September 2005 was marred by irregularity and accusations of fraud, with most serious rivals barred from contesting the polls. In December, 27 Sudanese refugees died, and hundreds were injured, after Egyptian police stormed their protest camp in a central Cairo park. The refugees had occupied the park to protest their abysmal living conditions. Mubarak skipped the Khartoum summit, possibly because of his onerous soccer hosting responsibilities.

With the exception of Egypt's footballers, the northeast and Horn of Africa has not had many recent success stories. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 11 million people in the region face famine this year, due to the worst drought in a decade. The Khartoum summit, set to make desperately needed progress on Africa's education agenda, instead stalled on the question of Sudan's impending chairmanship of the AU. The involvement of the Sudanese government and army in the ongoing Darfur crisis, which continues to rank as one of the world's worst, with more than 3 million in need of humanitarian assistance, led many, in Africa and outside, to feel Sudan should not be rewarded with a prestigious summit, let alone gain the rotating chairmanship of the Union for its president, Field Marshal Omar el-Bashir. Further escalation of the Darfur conflict by greater

entanglement of Sudan's smaller western neighbour, Chad, still remains a real threat. On December 23rd Chad declared that a state of war existed between itself and Sudan.

Classic Failed States

Darfur is hardly Sudan's only blemish. Leaving aside the largely overlooked discontent in Sudan's eastern provinces, which the International Crisis Group recently described as a 'another powder keg ... with a worse humanitarian situation than parts of Darfur,' the great jubilation that greeted the adoption of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) one year ago, formally ending the decades-long civil war between north and south Sudan, has been tempered by the realization of how difficult full implementation of the CPA will be. Notwithstanding constitutional guarantees of fundamental civil liberties such as the freedom of expression and assembly, the heavy hand of the state remains apparent in all areas of life. I witnessed a recent peaceful protest march by students from the University of Khartoum, demanding relief from high tuition fees and concerned about deficiencies in student housing. The march invoked a rapid response from armed police in full riot gear, who fired tear gas on the demonstrators. Residents of the capital braced themselves for the possibility of similar trouble during the AU summit. While no large protests occurred, restrictions on some of Sudan's independent media were imposed, and some organizers of the parallel summit of civil society organizations were arrested and detained without charge for the duration of the conference.

Further east, Sudan's immediate neighbours, Ethiopia and Eritrea, are on the verge of reigniting the hostilities of their 2000-2003 civil war. With the December expulsion of Western peacekeepers, Eritrea's increasingly authoritarian regime has now severely limited the operational capacity of the UN Mission to Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE). Ethiopia has been wracked by internal tensions since parliamentary elections in May 2005. International donors, including Canada, have recently suspended direct aid to the Ethiopian government in protest at the government crackdown on the opposition.

North East Africa is also home to the textbook example of the 'failed state': Somalia. Since widespread national conflict began in the 1980s, culminating in the eventual collapse of the state in 1991, neither military intervention, as the UNOSOM mission and the death of American troops in

Mogadishu in 1993 so brutally testified, nor the first 13 rounds of mediated peace talks or the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on rehabilitation have brought anything resembling peace and stability.

After the 14th round of peace efforts the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) of Somalia was finally established and seated in Nairobi, Kenya. The TFG has yet to assume its seat in the official capital of Mogadishu, and with the December establishment of the Regional Council of Banadir, a self-appointed body claiming to govern the capital region, any future move to Mogadishu seems distant. Most recently, the TFG interim prime minister announced his opposition to the parliamentary speaker's call for a session of parliament to be held in the city of Baidoa later this month. This pits the interim prime minister at serious odds with the interim president of the TFG, Abdullahi Yusuf. Regardless of the latest dispute, the TFG controls but a fraction of Somalia's territory, claiming support from Jowhar and the northern autonomous area of Puntland, whose administration is noted for its authoritarian tendencies.

So Far From 'Black Hawk Down'

In a clean, concrete walled square plot by the banks of the Hargeisa River lies the neat installation of the Hargeisa Commonwealth War Graves cemetery. The site is in pristine condition, with newly restored headstones and manicured grounds commemorating the war dead of long ago. Just a few hundred metres away, down the side of the river bank, lie local victims of the civil war, covered only by ragged and torn blue tarpaulin. Welcome to Somaliland, home of the mostly unnoticed recent good news in this part of Africa.

This desperately poor former British protectorate, comprising the northwest quadrant of Somalia, has a functioning, largely democratic, bicameral government and state apparatus, an active and critical free press, working schools, roads, hospitals and universities. It has held 4 large scale polls in 5 years – a constitutional referendum in 2001, local council elections in 2002, presidential elections in 2003, and parliamentary elections in September 2005. None were significantly marred by violence or electoral irregularity. All were fiercely competitive. The current president, Dahir Kahin Riyale, assumed office after the death of his predecessor, the much beloved Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, in 2002. The transition occurred peacefully. At the 2003 elections Riyale retained his office against two challengers, with a

Florida-like margin of 80 votes. In 2004, Riyale survived an impeachment attempt, and the country went back to work without experiencing total paralysis.

Notable achievements even in mature democracies. In a region where tempers easily flare and small arms proliferate, and where the recovery from a brutal conflict is far from complete, these are exceptional events. By the standard of the anarchy of southern Somalia and in the face of the turmoil of neighbouring states, positively impressive. But what most distinguishes Somaliland's process of national rebuilding and reconciliation from other African success stories is the relative lack of interest, pressure, or involvement from the international community in shaping that rebuilding process.

A True Grassroots Approach?

British Somaliland joined Italian Somalia shortly after both territories gained independence in 1960. When the central government collapsed in 1991 Somaliland dissolved the 1960 Act of Union and unilaterally declared its independence. This move was not recognized by any other country. Since that act, the capital, Hargeisa, almost totally destroyed during the civil war, has been rebuilt, mainly without donor assistance. Several national reconciliation conferences, known as *shir*, took place as attempts at beginning the process of national forgiveness and for a more practical purpose: deciding on the form and function of a successor state and government. A constitution was eventually drafted and adopted and has set in train the democratic transition of the last five years. Why the success here, in contrast to the south? One explanation, advanced by Gerard Prunier, suggests that this rehabilitative process could only occur as a legacy of the different (more benevolent) form of colonization practiced by the British in contrast to the brutal suppression of the south by the Italians.

Regardless of the true so-called root causes, the comparison with recent external interventions elsewhere is striking. Somaliland has had almost no outside assistance, and is heavily dependent on family remittances sent home from abroad. South Somalia has had ample external interest and countless millions of dollars of investment on peace efforts mediated by the UN, the regional organisation Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and neighbours Djibouti, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Somaliland's parliamentary elections had a paltry budget of \$2 million (US). With 10 times the

population, Afghanistan spent 75 times as much on its most recent polls, held the same week as Somaliland's elections.

So Much for the AU and What About the Neighbours?

The African Union can almost be forgiven for not wanting to think about Somaliland in any way – on the questions of diplomatic recognition, cooperative assistance, or African solidarity. Like the EU, the AU can often move only as fast as its most reticent member. With 53, not 25, members, the possibility of reticence is not to be underestimated. As a country largely dependent on port revenue, Djibouti opposes Somaliland as a potential economic rival, with the great potential of its port at Berbera. The regional power, Ethiopia, without coastal access since its war with Eritrea, has been at the mercy of Djibouti's transport monopoly. But with the rehabilitation of the port at Berbera, the Addis Ababa-Hargeisa-Berbera corridor open up new possibilities for Ethiopia. In July 2005 a customs and export agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland came into force, and Addis has established air transport and informal diplomatic relations with Hargeisa.

Looming large in the calculus of other neighbours and of the AU is the fear of establishing another 'precedent'. Many AU members, not least AU host Sudan, have their own breakaway regions to be concerned about.

Indigenous, organic democracies and peace processes are messy and unpredictable – to be considered only as threats to established states and governments. While Senegal and South Africa have been quietly supportive of Somaliland's democratization, neither wants to be the first to jump in the deep end. Ethiopia, having obtained what it wants, is happy with the status quo.

As for Britain, the United States, and Canada, all countries with significant immigrant Somali communities, none wishes to shoulder the headache of being branded neoimperialists for stepping on the toes of sovereign African states. Africa must act first.

What next?

It seems ironic then that the latest impetus for Somaliland comes from the interim prime minister of the *federal* Somali government. In a recent interview, Mohamed Ali Gedi claimed that he was not opposed to the existence of Somaliland as a state. The self-declared Governor of Middle

Shabelle, southern Somalia, Mohamed Dheere, added his support, albeit in disparaging terms.

But the developments in Somaliland seem too promising to ignore. With the opposition gaining a parliamentary majority in the election, the government's executive and legislature are controlled by different parties. By the standards of contemporary Africa, this is again exceptional.

Ultimately, it may be geopolitics that most benefits Somaliland. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates has been active throughout the former Somalia. The week before the parliamentary elections the Somaliland police fought a gun battle with an al-Qaeda cell in the streets of Hargeisa. For maritime traffic, the waters off the eastern Somali coast are some of the most dangerous in the world. For the United States, the Horn of Africa is an important focus in the war on terror.

As an outpost of stability in Africa's northeast, Somaliland may yet serve a role. As a tiny player regionally it is at the mercy of much more powerful neighbours and political interests. But if the AU is serious about democratization, good governance and supporting organic, grassroots solutions to the failures of 'modern' states that litter the continent, it could do little worse than begin to seriously address the Somaliland question.

Aly Verjee, a QIAA alumnus, served as an international elections observer for the Somaliland polls in September 2005. He is currently a visiting lecturer at the Ahfad University for Women in Omdurman, Sudan.

Notes

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