

WHY IS SOMALILAND NOT RECOGNIZED?

By Hassan Haji Mohamed , February 23, 2006

This has reference to Mr. Mohamed A. Omar's latest article, entitled " Somaliland's Disheartening Foreign Policy Needs an Overhaul", which is presently posted on some Somali websites. Prior to that, I also read some other articles by this author on the same subject. So, let me make the following brief comments on them. In his writings, Mr. Omar gives the false impression that Somaliland is doing great: It is very democratic, its government is functioning very well and it is attracting a lot of world attention, but there are, in his opinion, some problems with its foreign policy. However, the fact remains that – despite his unwarranted excessive enthusiasm - not a single country has yet recognized the self-declared Republic of Somaliland, after almost 15 years of a unilateral secession - not even Ethiopia, the historical enemy of the Somali people which has always endeavored, and is still endeavoring, to dismember the Somali state or absorb it. So, contrary to Mr. Omar's seriously flawed arguments regarding "Somaliland's disheartening foreign policy", the reasons for this lack of recognition is, according to many experts on Somali affairs, deeper than that, and it is more than a minor foreign policy issue or a failing public relations (PR) exercise. The reasons why Somaliland has not, and would probably not be recognized in the foreseeable future, could be summarized as follows:

1. Somaliland occupies one of the smallest, poorest and least developed areas of the Somali Republic (practically, no industry; no agriculture worth mentioning; and the livestock on which it depended so heavily cannot be exported now due to a strict ban from the governments of its main market, i.e., the neighboring Arab countries. I've a first hand knowledge of this situation, because I witnessed it during a recent visit to Hargeisa). Thus, many experts believe Somaliland cannot be a viable state. One may argue that Djibouti is equally small and poor, but Djibouti had different circumstances and got its independence at a different historical context.
2. Four major Somali clan-families live in Somaliland and, in most reliable estimates, only the majority of the population of one of these clans, i.e., people from Burao and Hargeisa, favor secession; the rest would rather remain within a unified Somali Republic for fear of being dominated and oppressed by this latter major clan-family (to which, most probably, Mr. Omar belongs, since he is such a fierce advocate for Somaliland's so-called "regained independence"). That is why the majority of Las Anod people, for instance, have opted for joining the autonomous region of Puntland so as to remain within a united, federal Somali Republic.
3. Some people could argue, as Mr. Omar and his type at times do, that Somaliland's constitution was passed by the overwhelming majority of its population some years ago. However, this is also inaccurate, because not a real plebiscite, whereby a true census was conducted within the major clan-families of Somaliland and then taking, in a free and fair manner, their votes on the proposed secession, was ever carried out. Besides, even the democracy that they often boast about so loudly is seriously flawed, despite the nominal

existence of some political parties. As we all know, everything in Somaliland's public life, including the number of parliamentary seats and ministerial positions, is based on an arbitrary tribal balancing act; and not a properly conducted census for voters as well as education, work experience in government affairs, and other rational qualifications. As to the relative peace and stability that Somaliland has enjoyed in the past 14 years or so, the credit for its realization goes mainly to the traditional clan elders who convinced the public at large that maintaining peace is in their own interest, and do not go to a widespread democracy or a well-developed, modern system of governance.

4. Many countries in this world, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa – foremost among them our neighbor Ethiopia itself - face secessionist movements within their own boundaries. Hence, it would be very difficult for them to recognize Somaliland, because this would set a precedent and could reflect negatively on their own local situations. Besides, it would also be against the charter of the African Union which requires not to alter the borders of African states as they stood at independence time.

5. The Somali Republic was founded in 1960 by the formal agreement between the North (ex-British Somaliland) and the South (former Italian Somalia). It, therefore, stands to reason that its dissolution should also come, legally, through a mutual agreement between these two parties. As such, so long as the South remains in turmoil, most foreign countries would be discouraged from recognizing the North's separation. For our readers information, I was told that, when the negotiations were going on in 1960 for the unification of the two regions, the Southerners wanted it to be postponed for a few more years, until the two peoples get to know each other better. But it was the Somalilanders who insisted on an immediate unitary state, and the Southerners had to oblige somewhat reluctantly. Perhaps because their tiny elite of educated people spoke English, the Northerners thought they could monopolize power and privilege in the new Somali Republic, but to their everlasting disappointment and frustration this did not materialize! (Mr. Omar can check this factual episode of recent Somali history with his elders). Another piece of information for him: I learned from a highly reliable source that a high ranking delegation from Somaliland which visited Saudi Arabia a few years ago was told by top Saudi Government officials the following: "If the whole world recognizes you, we will never recognize you." When the Somalilanders asked with a great surprise and bewilderment: Why? The Saudi officials simply replied: "Separation is not in your interest, nor that of Southern Somalia".

6. Even when it was unified, the Somali Republic was one of the poorest, weakest and least developed countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. If it is split up into two, the situation would be even worse for both parts. This reminds me about a Scottish politician, who previously advocated seceding from the United Kingdom, but later changed his mind. When he was asked about the reason for his change of heart, he said without any further hesitation: "A broken up UK will only result in smaller, weaker, less prosperous and less influential two states called England and Scotland." I think this equally applies to Somaliland and Somalia.

7. In the opinion of some experts on Somali affairs, Somalilanders would have been smarter – and this directly applies to Mr. Omar's flawed foreign policy analysis – if they could work hard to help in the pacification of the South, and even host some of its peace and national reconciliation conferences, as some foreign countries, like Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, Djibouti and Yemen, did, and then negotiate for separation or a loose federation with the resulting functioning Somali government of the South. Instead, Somaliland, its leaders and its small elite of intellectuals, like the writer under review, have been adopting in the past 15 years a narrow-minded, paranoiac attitude, filled with incredible hatred, antagonism and a highly exaggerated sense of superiority towards anything pertaining to the South. But if they are still angry about the fact that the Siad Barre Administration oppressed them or killed their people, they should know that, as their leader and politically savvy, the late Mohamed Ibrahim Egal, ex-Prime Minister of Somali Republic, once reminded them when some brutal mass graves were discovered in Hargeisa some years ago, it was a particular regime that did so (and not all the people of the South) – a regime that had committed similar crimes against the rest of the country, but sometimes even more in some other regions with forces often led by officers and other soldiers from the North (or present day Somaliland).

In conclusion, the effect of the above-mentioned irrational attitude from the part of Somalilanders has been so dismal to Somaliland itself. It now lies in a perpetual limbo and its people mostly survive on the remittances from the Somali refugees in Western Europe and North America, while the Somaliland Government depends as the main source of its income on the port of Berbera – which was, incidentally, constructed, modernized and enhanced by the previous Somali administrations, but now serves as the main gateway of our archenemy, Ethiopia, to the rest of the world. (If Somaliland is so wonderful, democratic and prosperous, why do the above-mentioned writer and hundreds of thousands Somalilanders stay overseas, most of them living on the meager handouts from social security or food-stamps that are given to them in Western countries as political refugees from Somalia). The never ending crisis in the South, and Somaliland's self-inflicted isolation, has allowed the successive "transitional" governments in the Somalia to get, rather unfairly, the greater part of the economic assistance that the international community allocates in the name of the Somali Republic.

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