



The politics of secession and unification in Somalia: disjuncture, dialogue, intricacies, and exclusion

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“Every prayer has its time”: a Somali proverb.

Abstract

This paper explores the intricate dynamics of secession and unification in Somalia. In 1991, Somaliland seceded from the rest of Somalia and established its own governance structures. In doing so, it achieved relative peace and stability, but its goal of attaining international recognition remains unfulfilled. This is partly because successive Somali governments have often used their internationally sanctioned juridical power to uphold territorial integrity. Over the years, negotiations between the two sides have been marked by a cycle of stalled and restarted talks, with both parties entering discussions from deeply entrenched positions defined by mutual antagonism and reluctance to engage meaningfully. Through interviews with key informants and focus group discussions, this paper argues that the political elites’ unwillingness to pursue constructive dialogue is rooted in exclusionary state-making processes and practices within their respective territories. These processes and practices have created radicalized political environments, shaped by and shaping the opportunistic behavior of elites, making the prospect of a long-term resolution increasingly complex.

Keywords: Somali, secession, unity, de facto, de jure, self-determination, democracy.

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1 Introduction

Somaliland declared its secession from the rest of Somalia following the collapse of central authority in 1991^[1]. Until recently, when a major conflict erupted in territories inhabited by the Dhulbahante clans in Sool^[2], Somaliland had enjoyed relative peace and stability^[3], in stark contrast to the protracted conflict and insecurity in South-Central Somalia, especially the capital, Mogadishu^[4]. Despite its stability, Somaliland has struggled to gain international recognition^[5] largely due to the central government's objection to its independence despite lacking control over it. Efforts to facilitate dialogue – led by actors such as the United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom, Turkey, and Djibouti – have so far been unsuccessful^[6]. This paper explores the underlying complexities that have hindered progress in these negotiations and will continue to do so at least in the near future.

Recognition is a politico-legal decision^[7,8] where new states are formally pronounced sovereign by one or more members of a club of sovereigns whose relations are regulated by legally binding agreements and laws as well as non-binding norms and practices. According to Vidmar^[9], state recognition takes different forms, but three are most common. The first is consensual recognition, where states that emerge from disintegrated unions are consensually admitted to the United Nations. The second is a mutual divorce, where the parent and the seceding state agree to part ways. The third is an enforced separation, where the parent state does not consent to the secession, but several sovereign nations offer recognition and enforce associated rights. This is uncommon but where it occurs, it does so on remedial grounds, which stipulates that the principle of territorial integrity does not apply if the parent state fails to fulfil its obligation of protection and equity^[9,10].

As of 2024, at least six unrecognized de facto states pursued international recognition^[11]. Almost invariably, these entities invest significant efforts in creating internal legitimacy^[12]. However, the means and methods by which such legitimacy is pursued vary from one context to another. In some situations, coercive methods are applied, whereas in others, democratic norms and practices are followed^[13,14]. Furthermore, de facto states engage in diplomatic relations within their neighbourhood and beyond^[15,16] amidst a dire need for survivability in hostile post-secession environment^[17] characterised by acute underdevelopment and scarcity of resources^[18]. It is in this light that the US and EU engagement with Somaliland on matters related to security, democratization, and the rule of law can be understood.

The current literature on the political landscape in Somaliland – covering the historical dynamics^[19–21], socio-economic viability^[22,23], politico-legal basis of independence^[24–28], internal contestation against the cessation^[29], and intensification of clan-based fragmentations^[30] – largely overlooks how the politics, benefits, and norms shaping or emerging from the new formation undermine prospects for a meaningful dialogue with the parent state. Equally, the significant and often elite-centric scholarship on Somalia's peace and state-building processes^[31–33], does not fully account for how the evolving political settlement in the south produces a distinct

environment that negatively influences the nature and trajectory of engagement between the two sides.

This paper attends to this gap by arguing that the reluctance of ruling elites to engage in a meaningful dialogue, alongside the lack of progress in stalled negotiations, is deeply rooted in exclusionary state-making politics and practices. These politics and practices contribute to the radicalization of political spaces as far as secession and unification are concerned. Stated differently, the respective ruling elites are motivated to maintain the status quo given that the current political structure and climate provides them with a degree of power and security that might not exist if the issues were resolved through more amicable means.

Data for this paper was collected through interviews with key informants, focus group discussion, and a review of policy documents. The key informant interviews were conducted in Hargeisa and Mogadishu between 2015 to 2023 with people having deep knowledge of the matter. They include former and serving senior government officials who participated in the talks; observers who followed and monitored the issue closely, such as journalists who covered the talks; the diplomatic community, which has shuttled between the two sides at the point of discussion or prior to the discussion; and academics who teach in Somali universities. The focus group discussion was conducted with business communities and professionals whose interests are directly and immediately affected because of their greater level of mobility and cross-border engagement.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. The first explores the broader dynamics of secession in Africa to contextualize the Somali case. The second section examines the origins and internal divisions that have shaped Somalia's political landscape, Somaliland's quest for independence, and its internal contestation. The third section analyzes the political dialogues and engagements between Somaliland and the Somalia's central government, highlighting key moments of negotiation and deadlock. The final section offers an examination of local political complexities and exclusionary state-making practices, shedding light on the internal challenges in both Somaliland and southern Somalia that complicate efforts toward meaningful dialogue.

2 Politics of secession and unification

2.1 Secessions in Africa

Secession is the withdrawal or separation of a particular entity from an established political federation or state ^[34]. Various factors can give rise to the pursuit of secession. This includes failed aspirations ^[35], ethno-nationalism ^[36], and postcolonial grievances ^[37] some of which find lexicon in the ways colonial authorities have arbitrarily drawn borders. There are three forms of secessions in Africa ^[38]. The first is based on a rejection of the colonial borders. This form often emerges from marginalization ^[39]. The second is based on a purportedly distinct colonial history

and subnational identity^[40]. And the third is performance-based secession whose ultimate goal is to achieve greater political representation or improvement in access to resources^[41]. Aside from Somaliland, among the most memorable secession attempts in Africa are Biafra, Katanga, Eritrea, and South Sudan^[10]. Thus far, only two countries, Eritrea, 1993, and South Sudan, 2011, have succeeded in their endeavours for secession^[42,43].

The decisive factor of Eritrea's success was the strategic alliance and agreement between the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front who overthrew the Mengistu regime in 1991^[44,45]. South Sudan's secession was realised not only through armed struggle but also powerful international pressure. For example, between 2005 and 2009, the U.S. exerted considerable pressure on Sudan^[46]. The death of John Garang, the leader of the Sudan People's Liberation Army, further increased the momentum for secession^[47]. Moreover, the potential of tapping into vast oil reserves added an economic dimension to the secession^[48] amid western sanctions against Sudan^[49]. While Eritrea's independence aligned with the African Union (AU) charter's principle of colonial border sanctity^[50] which was also reiterated in a resolution issued in Cairo in 1964^[51], South Sudan's secession deviated from the AU charter.

The other secession attempts in Africa have been quelled by a combination of force and diplomatic pressure^[52]. For instance, the Nigerian government regained full control of Biafra in 1970 following a civil war that lasted for thirteen years^[53]. Equally, Katanga's secession was ended in 1963 only three years after it declared independence from Congo^[54].

2.2 Secession in Somalia

In the Somalia context, a major part of the scholarship on the post-conflict peacebuilding explores the historical context within which Somaliland's claim to statehood is located. It highlights the cracks of the 1960 union which could be no more evident than in the constitutional plebiscite of 1961, where the majority of northerners voted in the negative^[1]. It also points to the history of the struggle against the military rule most notably by the Isaaq political elites who formed an armed organisation, Somali National Movement, to remove Mohamed Siad Barre from power^[55,56]. To quell this, Barre signed an agreement in Djibouti with Ethiopia's Mengistu Haile Mariam. However, the opposite of what he hoped for happened. SNM took the fight to the major cities of Burao and Hargeisa. Barre's response was heavy-handed^[19]. He reduced these cities to rubbles through indiscriminate bombardment.

Equally significant is the scholarship on how Somaliland has heavily invested in democratization to improve its legitimacy and outlook^[24]. In 2001, it held a constitutional referendum where the vast majority of registered voters^[57], almost exclusively from the Isaaq regions, returned yes. The results were however suspect. Discrepancies emerged when voting history is compared. For instance, the number of votes recorded in the referendum was markedly lower than in subsequent elections^[29]. In 2003, Somaliland embarked on a crucial

phase of its political evolution with local government elections ^[58] followed by parliamentary and presidential elections in 2005 ^[59]. A significant advancement in this direction was also the introduction of a biometric system in 2015 ^[26,27] which was used for the 2017 presidential elections ^[25].

Unlike the scholarship on peacebuilding and democratisation, the internal contestation of the secession has received less attention. The few that exist highlight that how the secession emerged more as a reaction rather than strategically planned project ^[29] and it also sheds light on how the internal fabric of the region remains fraught with divisions. During Somaliland's 1996 national conference in Hargeisa, a concurrent counter-conference, largely supported by diaspora-backed anti-Somaliland factions, was held in Boocame, leading to 'Boocame II' whose notable outcome was the Dhulbahante clan's affiliation with Puntland ^[60]. The political landscape underwent another shift with the foundation of the Khatumo state in 2012, representing Dhulbahante interests, but soon confronted by Somaliland's resolute military presence, especially in Las Anod ^[61]. It is this kind of resistance that presented challenges to Somaliland's attempts to exert its authority over these regions.

3 Political (dis) engagements : 1991–present

3.1 Strategic disjuncture: 1991-2009

After the 1991 ouster of Barre, Somalia fragmented into territories controlled by various factions, with the Isaq-inhabited areas of Somaliland coming under the control of the SNM.¹ However, SNM's territorial growth faced resistance. For instance, clashes in Awdal and skirmishes in Sanaag led the SNM to initiate peace talks with Dhulbahante elders. Amidst this fragility, the debate on whether to create a new state or participate in reconstructing the existing one emerged. The top leadership was convinced that they would be better off staying in the union.² Their view stemmed from two concerns. The first was that it would be difficult to achieve recognition. The second was fear of Somaliland degenerating into clan-based violence over the control and deployment of power and its benefits.³

The latter became a reality soon after the declaration of independence. However, these confrontations played a pivotal role in the political stabilization of Somaliland which reached its peak in 1997. At about the same time, proposals were underway for a peace conference in Djibouti which was eventually convened in 2000. Egal was not happy about how the meeting was organized and the level of influence his opponents wielded. The conference elected

¹ under the leadership of Abdirahman Ahmed Ali.

² Interviewee #16: February 15, 2022. SNM military officer.

³ Interviewee #02: July 22, 2022. University lecturer.

Abdikasim Salad Hassan as president, who appointed Dr Ali Khalif Galeydh as Prime Minister and Osman Jama Ali as his deputy. The assumption was that their appointment would not only appeal to their Darod and Dir clans but also bridge the north-south divide. But given the fact that both men had no control over the territories they hailed from, this objective was not met. Realizing the ineffectiveness of his strategy, the president of the Transitional National Government shifted direction and picked a new prime minister from southern Darod clans.⁴

The aim was to prioritize power consolidation in the south over the possible reunification. Subsequent administrations in Mogadishu maintained this strategy.⁵ Correspondingly, the political elites in Somaliland were predominantly in agreement to boycott Somalia's peace processes. In 2003, parliament enacted a law prohibiting engagement with southern administrations on political matters, justified by their 'lack of moral authority' to represent the south, their lack of popular mandate, and the absence of international guarantees for any dialogue implementation.⁶ This law laid the foundation for a radical political trajectory defined by disjuncture. It set the stage for a period of heightened skepticism, effectively halting any efforts at dialogue or reconciliation. For the next decade, political discourse was neither sought nor considered a viable option.

3.2 Intermittent dialogue: 2010-present

In 2012, Somaliland's statute against political engagement with the south was repealed by President Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud Siilaanyo, enabling the first formal meeting between Somaliland and Somalia. The repeal included two provisions: Somaliland could engage in meetings beneficial to its interests without conflicting with its sovereignty and constitution, and its participation in the London conference was endorsed by legislative bodies. After various low-profile interactions, both parties signed a memorandum of understanding to minimize hostile rhetoric. According to one observer:

“Somaliland’s delegation was well versed with the southern social and political dynamics, whereas the southern delegation was not acquainted with the northern context. Somaliland also had a clear objective about the meeting, i.e., ensuring that it gained partial control over aviation whereas the delegation from the federal government had no tangible goal.”⁷

The second formal meeting took place in Istanbul in June 2012, initiated by Somaliland amidst fading hopes for international recognition. By then, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed was succeeded

⁴ Interviewee #20: January 17, 2022. Researcher.

⁵ Interviewee #19: January 13, 2022. Former minister.

⁶ Interviewee #20: June 17, 2022. Chair of a political party.

⁷ Interviewee #01: January 07, 2022. Senior ministerial adviser.

by Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.⁸ At this point, neither the new Somali government nor Somaliland's administration were inclined to pursue further talks, given the lack of progress in previous discussions. However, both sides aimed to preserve the appearance of being responsible actors. It is in this light that the United Kingdom has convened a key conference for the new administration. The conference was attended by all the key actors in Somalia's politics. In the final communique, two points touching on Somaliland were made. The first was the need for the international community to assist in future dialogue. The second was to allow western naval operations to send suspected pirates arrested and tried overseas to serve prison terms in Puntland and Somaliland.

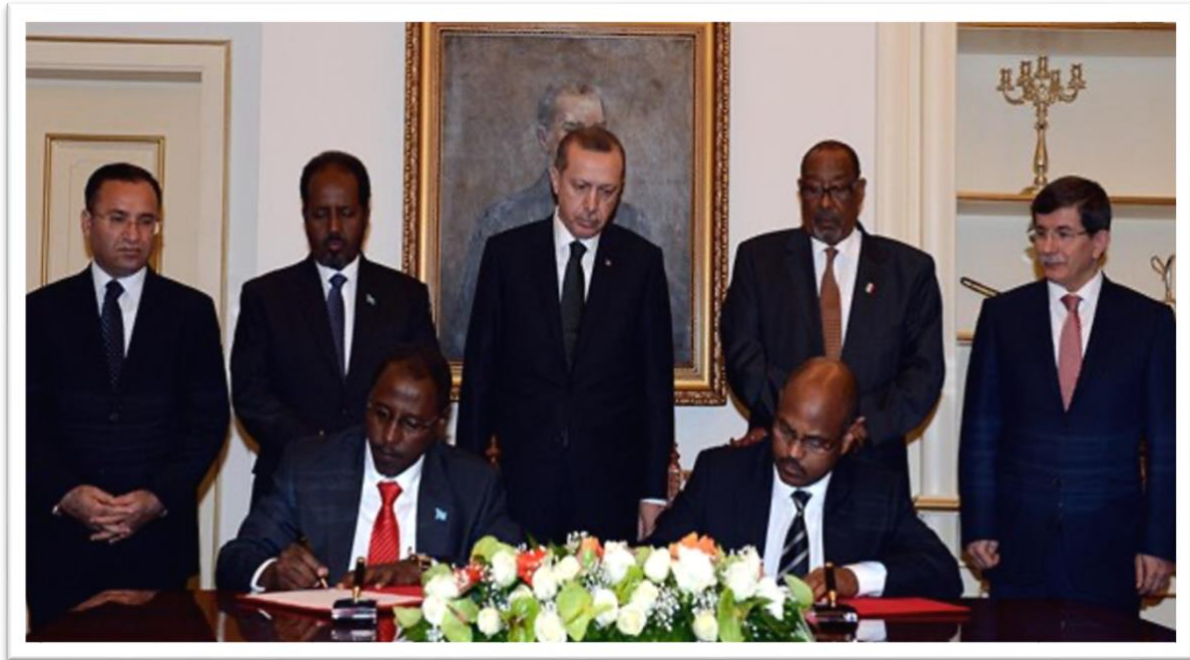


Figure 1: Photo of representatives signing the Istanbul agreement. Source: Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013.

Following this, a rather symbolic follow-up meeting between the two sides occurred in Dubai on June 28, 2012, primarily resulting in an agreement for continued committee deliberations^[62]. In April 2013, the Turkish government hosted a conference at the request of the two sides. Mohamud and Silanyo met to re-establish formal contacts following a pause^[63]. Subsequently, delegates met in Istanbul between July 7 and 9, 2013. However, the discussions became mired in technicalities. The federal government's inclusion of Somaliland-originated ministers in the negotiation team was opposed by Somaliland, which suggested choosing

⁸ There were huge hopes when he led the first non-transitional administration for over two decades.

representatives from southern Somalia's political elites. However, the federal government insisted on its right to select its own representatives.⁹

The Somaliland delegation brought two items to the table: aviation and foreign assistance.¹⁰ But the delegation from the federal government vehemently opposed this.¹¹ In the absence of tangible progress, maintaining the channels of communication has become more essential than attaining a meaningful outcome.¹² For this reason, small technical agreements were seen as a face-saving exercise for both parties.¹³ They also decided to form a joint control centre in Hargeisa to oversee air traffic control over the airspace.¹⁴ On the one hand, Mohamud was under pressure at the time from Puntland and Khatumo.¹⁵ On the other hand, he had no intention of upsetting Somaliland.¹⁶ Mindful of these conflicting interests and viewpoints, Mohamud adopted a "no harm" policy.

When Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo was elected in 2017, the federal government informalized its approach to the talks. It used low level shuttle diplomacy to improve cooperation. This however had a little effect, and it later shifted to formal engagements. At the end of 2017, the Chief of Staff was designated as a special envoy to Somaliland. The President justified his choice on three points. Firstly, the appointee had no political view on the matter; second, he came from a clan which presumably has some form of sympathy in the north; and third, he had good access to the president.¹⁷ Part of the efforts of Farmajo was also to predict in advance who will likely come to power in Somaliland. Key figures from the region in his government assured him that Bihi stands a better chance. His advisors also assured him he is a safe bet:

“The fact that a military man may assume control of Somaliland posed opportunities and dangers for dialogue. On the one hand, he could commit the nation to something as tricky as reunification, but he might also lead the country into violence in the meantime.”¹⁸

⁹ Interviewee #07: December 11, 2021. A former journalist who covered the talks.

¹⁰ Interviewee #12: June 13, 2022. Aviator; Interviewee #14: August 01, 2022. Development practitioner.

¹¹ Interviewee #07: December 11, 2021. A former journalist who covered the talks.

¹² Federal Government of Somalia and Government of Somaliland 2013b.

¹³ Interviewee #05: February 28, 2022. Member of parliament in Somaliland.

¹⁴ Federal Government of Somalia and Government of Somaliland 2013b.

¹⁵ Formed in 2010 by Dhulbahante leaders, this political movement has become a de facto administration in the Dhulbahante-inhabited areas of Sool, Sanaag, and Togdheer regions.

¹⁶ Interviewee #04: March 4, 2022. Member of parliament in Somalia.

¹⁷ Interviewee #09: May 10, 2022. Senior presidential staffer; Interviewee #18: March 12, 2022. Journalist.

¹⁸ Interviewee #08: December 05, 2021. Political analyst.

In 2017, Somaliland has elected Muse Bihi Abdi. In the beginning, the relationship between Bihi and Farmajo blossomed. There was constant communication between the two. This was made possible in part by Farmajo's good relations with Abiy. In early 2020, Ethiopia's prime minister exerted pressure on Somaliland to resume the halted negotiations. Somaliland leaders were hesitant because they were worried about Farmajo's use of the negotiations to increase his chances of re-election. They were not, however, successful in convincing Abiy that engagement with Farmajo was not in their best interest.

In February 2020, Abiy held a meeting for Farmajo and Bihi in Addis. While the proceeding of this meeting was not disclosed, it was later revealed that the sides have agreed a follow-up meeting in Hargeisa. In the end, Somaliland declined this meeting following consultation with key political actors. The two sides met in Djibouti again after being pressed by not only Ethiopia but also the U.S. and EU. The final ministerial communiqué from this meeting stipulated that the two sides form three subcommittees to address humanitarian aid, security, and co-management of airspace ^[64]. On May 15, 2022, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was elected as President. Even though the new president met with Bihi in Djibouti later in the year, the talks were not taken forward.

On April 1, 2023, Abdikarim Guled, a former interior minister, was appointed by President Mohamud as the special envoy for the negotiations ^[65]. The new envoy, like his predecessor, is from the Sa'ad clan of Habar Gidir. Like Farmajo, Mohamud also chose a close confidante. Also, like Bihi's view of Farmajo during the elections, Mohamud is no longer interested in interacting with Bihi considering that he may lose the upcoming election of 2024. The only obvious distinction between the current and previous administrations' approach is the new appointee's history in the discussion which contrasts with that of his predecessor who was not involved in the previous talks. The recurring tactics have made observers question the current president's sincerity. In response, Somaliland has appointed Dr Edna Aden, a staunch and uncompromising advocate of the secession and former foreign minister, as envoy ^[66].

Given that past negotiations between the two sides were marred by mutual suspicion and reluctance to engage constructively, these appointments, whether for tactical reasons or genuine positions, indicate a projection of intransigence aimed at appealing to their respective constituencies.

4 Obstacle to progress: local intricacies

4.1 Northern intricacies

Intricacy is used here to reference the complexity of a set of political obstacles ^[67]. In Somaliland, five internal intricacies require attention. The first is the question of the peripheral clans: Dhulbahante and Warsangeli in the east and Gedabursi and Isse in the west. These clans face institutional marginalization, with slim chances of leading a political party due to a law requiring

parties to have a broad regional following. The Isaq clan, geographically widespread, meets this criterion, unlike the non-Isaq clans. Additionally, the statehood claim is based on the SNM's fight against Barre's regime, a history not shared by the non-Isaq communities.¹⁹ This complicates their identification with the SNM-inspired state formation.

In the past, the state was cognizant of this and was hence heavily reliant on some of the local elite's cooperation. However, under the current administration, there has been a noticeable shift towards a more centralized and repressive rule. For instance, the conduct of the Somaliland security personnel has instilled a sense of occupation among the local populace.²⁰ This aggressive this modus operandi was until recently effective in the central regions, largely because the Isaq clans are more tolerant for ruling elites' abuse of power since they regard themselves as the proprietors of the state, but this was neither effective nor accepted elsewhere. This is reflected in the ouster of Somaliland forces in August 2023 from Sool region following a conflict with the locals.

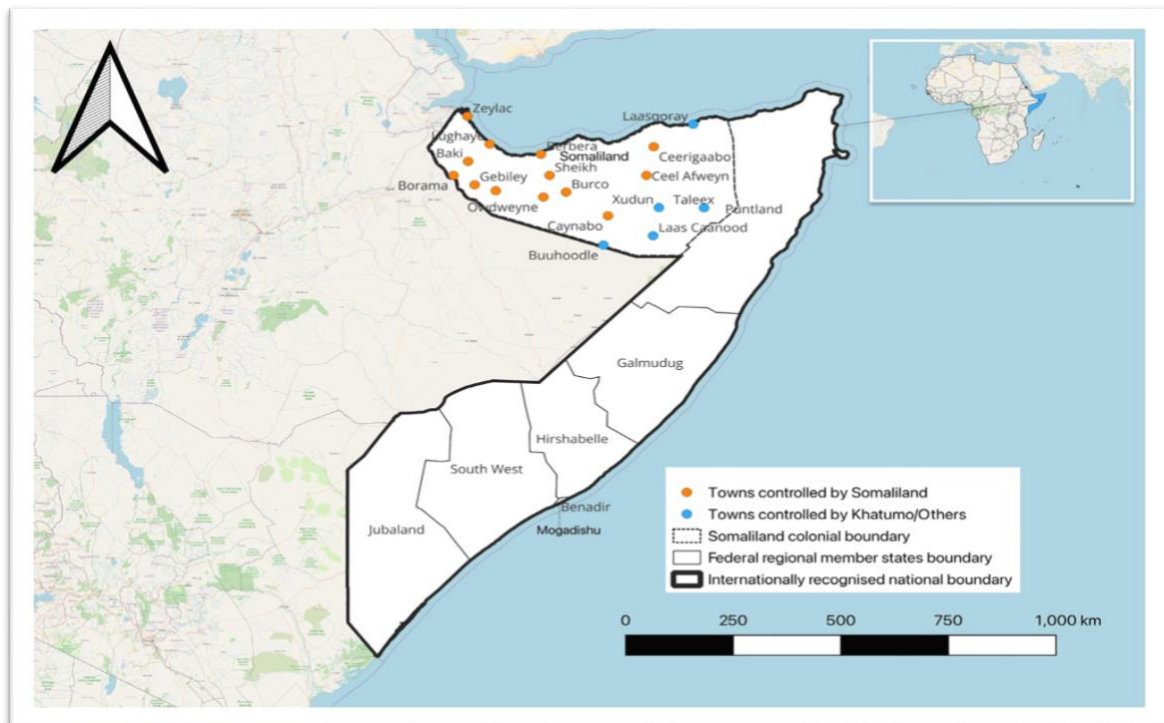


Figure 2: A map showing the boundaries of Somaliland and regional member states, as well as the towns controlled by Somaliland, Khatumo, and other administrations or actors. Source: author

¹⁹ In fact, many were in or supported the opposite side of the then conflict.

²⁰ The ongoing failure to implement the agreement with Galaydh has deepened despair, even among local elites who previously supported Somaliland.

The second is the question of the democratic deficit. Two decades after their advent, elections are marred by irregularity including delays and violence ^[68]. Their participation has also become, in many respects, more divisive than before. In the past, the political discourse and allegiances largely revolved around broader clan identities.²¹ However, at present, the fractures and coalitions are predominantly observed at the sub-clan level ^[69]. A case in point is the disgruntled Garhajis elites who are convinced that their contenders from equally powerful sub-clans are united in preventing them from ascending to power.²² Some leaders have publicly supported the idea of constitutional reforms to enhance the current processes of power production, organization, and distribution.²³

The third intricacy is the question of demographic change. Nearly 70 % of the population in Somaliland is classified as a youth ^[70]. The successive governments have tried to direct the youth's energy to the secession by reminding them historical events i.e., the indiscriminate bombing of Hargeisa and Buroa.²⁴ This narrative resonates to a significant proportion of a generation, now aged between 20 and 35, that has grown up amidst the de facto separation from Somalia.²⁵ However, another side of the coin is that, while they respect historical narratives, there are growing number of youths who are influenced by contemporary challenges like unemployment.

The fourth is a public mistrust regarding the long-term intentions of leaders. Abdullahi Jawan, a former electoral commissioner with nearly three decades of political involvement, has made an unsurprising yet striking observation about the Somaliland's political landscape. He pointed out that all the former presidents of Somaliland, with the sole exception of Rayale, had harboured ambitions and maintained associations that lean towards reunification with Somalia. His statement invites reflection on the implications of these intentions, affiliations, and ambitions for the region's quest for autonomy and identity.

Fifthly, businesses in Somalia are predominantly run by networks or groups, characterized mainly by their conservative religious orientation. These networks and groups have managed to garner substantial trust among the public and have also established a strong foothold in the country's political spheres. Unsurprisingly, these groups are pro-union. Their preference stems from a strategic consideration of the potential benefits and stability that a

²¹ such as Isaq and Harti.

²² i.e., Habar Je'lo and Habar Awal.

²³ i.e., Abdirahman Abdullahi (Irro).

²⁴ Interviewee #21: October 4, 2023. Resident in Hargeisa.

²⁵ Predominantly hailing from the Isaq inhabited areas, these young individuals typically view Somaliland as an independent entity.

united Somalia presents. While these groups may not exert direct pressure on Somaliland, they are strategic in their influence and engagement with federal authorities to maintain unity.²⁶

The final intricacy is the substantial influence wielded by the Somaliland diaspora. One of the most important ways they exert influence is the substantial role they play in raising funds for elections. This financial contribution carries considerable weight. It not only enhances their standing but amplifies their voice in shaping the direction of the political discourse. Such a "long-distance nationalism" ^[71] underscores the powerful and sometimes radical influence the diaspora exerts not just on the leaders, but also the public's attitude towards the dialogue.

4.2 Southern intricacies

In southern Somalia, five internal intricacies require attention. Firstly, the political and security dynamics in Mogadishu often expose the administrations to external pressures. Somalia's provisional federal constitution facilitated recognition of Puntland, established in 1998, formation of five more regional governments namely Jubaland, Southwest, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, and the Benadir Regional Administration. BRA's leadership is appointed directly by the federal President. Puntland and Somaliland contest over areas in Sanaag and Sool, with Somaliland's claim rooted in colonial borders and Puntland's in genealogical ties. Concurrently, a distinct electoral model where representatives from subclans select members of parliament's lower house ^[32]. This approach has brought stability but also continued exclusion, with clans such as the Hawiye and Darood holding more federal influence compared to others ^[72]. For instance, politicians from Somaliland have little influence in this system, primarily due to their limited socio-political base.

Linked to this is also the second intricacy that concerns the southern Darod elites. Their concern mainly stems from the fact that a significant number of their clan members are under Somaliland's colonial geographic boundaries, therefore secession would upset their strength. Equally, they are concerned about any concessions that grant Somaliland one of the two top posts as part of a political settlement, as that would negatively affect their status in the above-mentioned federal arrangement. The third is the pro-union northern politicians in Mogadishu. This group which makes up more than 20 % of the legislative chambers uses their membership as a de jure platform to contest the choices made in Hargeisa.²⁷ This makes any president in Villa Somalia careful when dealing with Somaliland issues. The controversy surrounding Khatumo State's emerging status within the Somali federalism offers a compelling illustration. Recognized by federal authorities in as per a recent statement from the interior minister ^[73], Khatumo has

²⁶ Interviewee #04: October 2, 2023. A key businessman in Mogadishu.

²⁷ It is important to note while the representative of the formerly British protectorate is 20 %, not all of them support the union. But almost all of them believe that their regions are underrepresented.

become a focal point of significant political activity, especially among influential figures from the Darod and Dir clans. These actors have launched campaigns and counter-campaigns, all geared for or against consolidating Khatumo's position as a de jure authority within Somalia.²⁸

Fourthly, the federal government is embroiled in an ongoing struggle against al-Shabaab. Understandably, maintaining security takes precedence over engaging in political dialogues. However, even from security perspective, a case is made for the fact that the international community, especially those nations aiding Somalia's counter-terrorism efforts, favour a unified front against Al-Shabaab. Such front would benefit from Somaliland and regional members states being on board. Finally, the federal government's approach to the dialogue is characterised by short time political gains. Rather than addressing it purely on its intrinsic merits, the issue is often wielded as a tool to counteract pressures from Puntland. In this dynamic, Somaliland becomes less an end in itself and more a means to negotiate the demands and challenges posed by Puntland's stance mainly regarding the power production and resources distribution. According to one source, when Puntland ratchets up its pressure on Mogadishu, there appears to be a corresponding uptick in the federal government's willingness to engage in dialogue with Somaliland.

5 Locating the conundrum in exclusionary state-making

To make sense of the complexities outlined above, one needs to examine the exclusionary nature of state-making in Somalia, including Somaliland. It is in this sense that the reluctance, stalemate, or outright failure of dialogue between the two sides can be understood. I contend that the lack of progress is underpinned not only by genuine differences in visions for the future but also by entrenched, exclusionary state-making present in each region. By exclusionary state-making, I mean the political and governance processes and practices that favor select political and economic elites while systematically marginalizing others. In southern Somalia, exclusionary practices can be traced back to the fragmentation that occurred following Barre's ouster from power, resulting in the domination of warlords ^[74], and the failure of the Transitional National Government (TNG) first led by Abdikasim Salad and later by Abdullahi Yusuf, who, unlike his predecessor, was escorted to Villa Somalia on Ethiopian tanks.²⁹

In 2012, Somalia experienced a major political shift as it moved from a transitional government to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) ^[75]. Instead of fostering inclusion, and in direct contrast to optimism, these efforts have solidified a political system that predominantly

²⁸ Interviewee #22: October 28, 2023. Member of Parliament in Somalia.

²⁹ This prompted many Somalis to join anti-invasion resistance groups, including the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), whose leader, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, eventually became president.

favors the Hawiye and Darod elites³⁰, who, in turn, reinforce the exclusionary nature of the state by creating opportunities that favor their own networks. This dynamic has reinforced inequalities and perpetuated a condition where only certain elites can thrive. It is in this light that Somaliland's pursuit of independence with no prospect of recognition is seen as a strategic opportunity that allows certain elites to continue benefiting from the existing exclusionary power structure and wealth accumulation. This is to say that without the risk of a new political settlement – one that involves bringing Somaliland on board – there is little incentive, according to one source, for southern elites to support changes that might challenge their dominance.

In Somaliland, exclusionary state-making has followed a similar trajectory, shaped by the dominance of a single clan and its recent history of struggle against the military regime of Barre. It is in this light that the political narrative is shaped by a sense of victimhood rooted in the violence of the 1980s, with southern Somalia collectively framed as the source of suffering. This narrative has fostered a deeply insular political identity that perceives not only association with southern Somalia as a threat to its imagined sovereignty, but also excludes the perspectives of non-Isaaq clans from national discourse of state-making^[2]. Since its establishment in 1991, only one of the five presidents of Somaliland has belonged to a clan other than the Isaaq. Likewise, all the current political parties are headed by individuals from the Isaaq clan, and it is highly probable that forthcoming presidents will also originate from this group if the current political practices persist. Additionally, Somaliland has witnessed the rise of an oligarchic elite^[76], whose power is consolidated through control of key economic sectors. It is in this vein that public tenders are predominantly awarded to businessmen from a single clan.

In a nutshell, the emergence of distinct economic and political advantages resulting from exclusionary state-making in Somaliland and Somalia has created a situation where genuine dialogue was and remains largely absent and unfeasible in the near future. Instead, all parties seem to engage in discussions merely as a formality, offering little more than lip service. This occurs because the key stakeholders benefit from the current exclusionary statemaking, which reinforces their power and economic interests.

6 Way forward: some scenarios and a potential settlement

A crucial question that remains is what the future holds for the engagement between Somalia's federal government and Somaliland. Whether the two sides will find a sustainable path to cooperation or coexistence or whether they will embark on undesirable path of armed confrontation and conflict depends on a range of unpredictable factors. Nonetheless, I speculate three scenarios. First, if the federal government fails to make significant political or security advancements and Somaliland's ongoing instability increases, sub de facto states, such as SSC

³⁰ who in or in close proximity to power.

Khatumo,³¹ will be boldened to influence the terms of engagement. In this scenario, a possible policy response from the FGS would likely be a first-come, first-served approach, which involves engaging with any new entities that arise in Somaliland. In where such entities do not emerge, FGS may feel motivated to support the formation of administrations in exile, akin to the method through which Somaliland's parliamentary representatives in Mogadishu are chosen.

Second, if the federal government gains significantly greater territorial and political control in the south, but Somaliland remains weak and fragmented while continuing to push for independence, the FGS may see force as a feasible way to extend its control. Lastly, if both the federal government and Somaliland make progress in terms of peace and stability, there could be room for a new political framework that facilitates more constructive dialogue, potentially paving the way for a mutually agreeable solution to their longstanding stalemate. In such case, FGS may pursue a policy option that considers the internal complexities of southern Somalia and Somaliland as separate entities. The continued lack of international recognition for Somaliland's independence and southern Somalia's instability and yet insistence on unity perpetuate a standoff that leaves both parties in a state of limbo.

This makes compromise on both sides imperative. A pragmatic path forward could be to negotiate a confederation that balances the competing goals of sovereignty and unity. For Somaliland, this would allow it to retain control over its internal affairs while cooperating on shared interests such as defense and foreign affairs. For the federal government, this would allow it to preserve a durable union in line with the ethos of the republic's foundation in 1960. Furthermore, such an arrangement could garner substantial international support. For instance, the African Union, which has been hesitant to recognize Somaliland due to concerns that such recognition could inspire secessionist movements across the continent, might endorse this approach.

Nonetheless, many in Somalia are undoubtedly skeptical about confederation, arguing that it is not ideal for a country considered the most homogeneous on the continent. I share this fear, but when the ideal cannot be achieved, it is acceptable to settle for less and perhaps the inevitable. A similar outcry arose when the 4.5 power-sharing model was introduced in 2000 as a mechanism to move beyond the decade-long dominance of warlords. While not without flaws, it has served as a hemostasis for a nation bleeding to death. If nothing else, confederation will serve as a second dose before finally moving beyond the zero-sum politics. A well-known Somali proverb says, "*salaad kasta waqtigeedaa la tukadaa*," meaning, "every prayer has its time." In other words, time may come when a more coherent unity can be achieved. That time, however, is not now.

³¹ SSC Khatumo is an entity in northern Somalia, whose people have recently fought against Somaliland to determine their political future.

7 Conclusion

This paper examined the antagonism that characterizes the northern and southern political elites' dialogue over Somaliland's bid for independence and Somali government's counteroffer for reunification on yet to be seen better terms ^(6,77). It particularly zoomed on the intricacies that impede meaningful progress in the dialogue between the two sides. Rather than treating arbitrary, the fluid ways in which the engagement and disjuncture of this dialogue shifted can be understood as the outcome of exclusionary state-making processes that have taken hold in both regions. Neither Somaliland nor southern Somalia has achieved a comprehensive political settlement, leading to the radicalization of their political landscapes. As elites within both administrations became more entrenched in their respective power structures, their vested political and economic interests in maintaining their influence undermine any potential for a constructive or lasting political solution.

Thus, the lack of progress in negotiations is not merely a matter of diplomatic failure but reflects deeper structural flaws in the political systems of both entities. A significant body of literature exists on the elite politics in the Somali peninsula ^[31,76,78]. However, less attention has been given to how these elites engage in or subvert dialogue, despite the fact that they have, albeit reluctantly, met several times to resolve the ongoing dispute. It is in this regard, the paper enriches the scholarship on statemaking in the Somali peninsula by adding value to our understanding of the dichotomous efforts of secession and unification within the broader context of exclusionary statemaking and the nuanced political intricacies they create.

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