

WAITING TO BE SOMEBODY IN SOMALILAND

By Jason Warner

“If you are not a state, you are nobody in world politics.” – Martha Finnemore¹

Nobody knows the feeling of being an international nobody better than Somaliland, the 68,000-square mile enclave that has been seeking independence from Somalia for the past twenty years with no success. Despite its argument for statehood – that it was a sovereign state for four days in 1960 – a re-granting of sovereign rights for Somaliland has not been forthcoming. Yet with the July 2011 secession of South Sudan, and contemporary discussions of Palestinian statehood, observers rightly ask: is Somaliland next? Although it deserves independence as much as any of today’s attempted breakaway regions, a confluence of ill-conceived orientations from the United Nations (UN), the United States, and especially the African Union (AU) means that Somaliland’s wait to become an international “somebody” will not come to an end in the near future.

Objectively, Somaliland might be said to exhibit more attributes of a functioning sovereignty than even certain existing African (and non-African) states. Although legally circumscribed within the bounds of Somalia, Somaliland has been functionally independent from Mogadishu since the latter collapsed into chaos in 1991, after the overthrow of the Siad Barre regime. Somalia – without a functioning government since that date – has continuously garnered the dubious distinction as the world’s most failed state, serving as a safe haven for pirates in the Gulf of Aden and the increasingly nefarious terrorist group, al-Shebab. In contrast stands Somaliland. Having held multiparty elections since 2002, operating an independent press, and subsisting on its own through a combination of remittances and agricultural exports, Somaliland and its capital of Hargeisa have shown a laudable degree of self-sufficiency. As an oasis of calm in the middle of a long-brewing hurricane, why has the international community refused to grant Somaliland the statehood that it so desires?

The UN and the United States have been of little help to Somaliland. Long reluctant to take sides on issues of African secession – not least of all due to its early, disastrous

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siding with the forces that killed Patrice Lumumba after the Katanga secession in Zaire in 1961 – the UN has instead consistently deferred questions of secession to the African Union, despite the fact that its subsidiaries such as the World Food Program and World Health Organization have sustained contact with the Somaliland government. Bluntly stated, the UN frequently views secession as a third-rail issue better left for regional bodies to resolve. Somaliland gets no love from the United States either, which has also skirted the issue by passing the sovereignty-granting buck to the African Union. This US outlook on Somaliland is not surprising, since, as Jonathan Paquin has argued, the general US stance on secession has always been to seek stability: because Somaliland is already a bastion of calm in an otherwise tenuous region, the US prefers not to rock to the geopolitical boat.²

Consequently, Somaliland's hopes for independence are pinned on the AU, which has developed a similar proclivity for promoting the status quo. Since its inception, the AU – and its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) – has, on paper, been unequivocally opposed to supporting African breakaway states. Yet since 1993, when it supported Eritrea's independence, and more recently South Sudan's, the OAU/AU's rhetoric and action have been incommensurate. What gives?

As the lynchpin in the African sovereignty-granting process, the AU's support for secession apparently comes only once there is seemingly intractable violence between the breakaway exclave and the parent state. Put otherwise, the AU supports secession only once reconciliation appears impossible. Ironically, the unfortunate reality is that Somaliland is unlikely to gain independence not because it lacks the empirical attributes of a sovereign entity – it does possess them, certainly more than Somalia itself – but rather because it does not generate *enough* violence in relation to Somalia to necessitate such a radical solution as the conferral of statehood. Given that Somaliland is already peacefully coexisting with its parent state, the aforementioned triumvirate sees no need to alter the status quo. It is precisely because Somaliland has figured out how to peacefully break away from the world's most utterly failed and violent state that it is being prohibited from legally doing so.

In a global order in which issues of African sovereignty are uncritically forwarded to the African Union, the world will abide the AU as it generates desperately needed new thinking about the pragmatics of contemporary statehood. And lest there be any doubt, nobody is waiting more impatiently for the AU to do so than Somaliland. ■

– Adeel Ishtiaq served as Lead Editor for this op-ed.

NOTES

¹ Martha Finnemore, "Norms, Culture and World Politics: Insights from Sociology's Institutionalism," *International Organization*. 50, 2, Spring 1996. 332.

² Jonathan Paquin, *A Stability-Seeking Power: U.S. Foreign Policy and Secessionist Conflicts*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010.