Why the United States Should Recognize Somaliland’s Independence

By Peter J. Schraeder

The United States government should officially recognize the independence of Somaliland, a moderate Muslim democracy in the Horn of Africa. Such an argument may seem counterintuitive at a time when tensions are rising in the region. But I submit that it is precisely because of those rising tensions that it is time for the Bush administration to act, especially if it is truly serious about democracy promotion, counter-terrorism, and curtailing the spread of Islamic fundamentalism.

Why does Somaliland deserve U.S. recognition?

First and foremost, it is important to recollect that, after achieving independence from British colonial rule on June 26, 1960, Somaliland was duly recognized as a sovereign entity by the United Nations and thirty-five countries, including the United States. Several days later, on July 1, the independent country of Somaliland voluntarily joined with its newly independent southern counterpart (the former UN Trust Territory of Somalia that was a former Italian colony) to create the present-day Republic of Somalia. Somalilanders rightfully note that they voluntarily joined a union after independence, and that, under international law, they should (and do) have the right to abrogate that union, as they did in 1991. Examples abound in the second half of the twentieth century of international recognition of countries that have emerged from failed federations or failed states, including East Timor, Eritrea, Gambia, and the successor states of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The same legal principle should be applied to Somaliland.

The political basis for Somaliland’s claim is that the voluntary union of 1960 was derailed in 1969 by a military coup d’etat in Mogadishu that ushered in more than two decades of brutal military rule under the dictatorship of General Mohamed Siyaad Barre. Himself a southerner, Barre destroyed the foundations of the north-south democratic compact, most notably by unleashing a murderous campaign (bordering on genocide) against northern civilians that resulted in more than 50,000 deaths and created over 500,000 refugees as part of a widening civil war during the 1980s. Even after Barre was overthrown in 1991 by a coalition of guerrilla armies, including the northern-based Somali National Movement (SNM), northern expectations of a government of national unity were dashed when southern guerrilla movements reneged on an earlier agreement and unilaterally named a southerner president, which in turn was followed by the intensification of inter and intra-clan conflict in the south. Nearly thirty years of unfulfilled promises and brutal policies ripped the fabric of the already fragile north-south political compact. A “point of no return” had been reached for Somalilanders intent on reasserting their country’s independence. In May 2001, a popular mandate was given to dissolving the union, when a resounding number of ballots cast (97 percent) in a national Somaliland referendum favored the adoption of a new constitution that explicitly underscored Somaliland’s independence.
Somaliland deserves recognition if the Bush administration is truly sincere about promoting
democracy in the wider Middle East. In sharp contrast to southern Somalia where instability and
crisis have reigned and in fact intensified in the last fifteen years, Somaliland has established a
democratic polity that, if recognized, would make it the envy of democracy activists in the
Muslim world. The essence of Somaliland’s successful democratization was captured by U.S.-
based International Republican Institute and the National Endowment for Democracy in
convening a September 2006 panel discussion on Somaliland. They wrote that “Somaliland’s
embrace of democracy, its persistence in holding round after round of elections, both winners
and losers abiding by the rules, the involvement of the grassroots, the positive role of traditional
authorities, the culture of negotiation and conflict resolution, the temperance of ethnicity or clan
affiliation and its deployment for constructive purposes, the adaptation of modern technology,
the conservative use of limited resources, and the support of the diaspora and the professional
and intellectual classes are some of the more outstanding features of Somaliland’s political
culture that are often sorely lacking elsewhere.”

Somaliland also deserves recognition from a purely U.S.-centric national security
perspective. The Somaliland government and population embody a moderate voice in the
Muslim world that rejects radical interpretations of Islam, including that espoused by various
portions of the Council of Somali Islamic Courts (CSIC) currently in control of Mogadishu and
its environs. It would serve as a bulwark against the further expansion of radical ideologies in the
Horn of Africa by offering a shining example (along with Mali and Senegal and other
predominantly Muslim Sub-Saharan African democracies) of how Islam and democracy are not
mutually exclusive, but rather mutually reinforcing. Somaliland leaders are also eager to
cooperate with the Bush administration in a variety of counter-terrorism measures, including
working with the Combined Joint Task Force—Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) based in
Djibouti. They are currently prohibited from doing so due to U.S. legislation that prevents
cooperation with unrecognized Somaliland authorities.

The critiques of the pro-independence position are numerous, but don’t stand up to close
examination. One strand of thought is that Somaliland is not economically viable. This position
is reminiscent of claims made by Europeans during the 1950s with respect to their African
colonies, with the aim of delaying independence throughout Africa. In any case, the argument is
belied by Somaliland’s creation of a highly self-sufficient, well-functioning economy even
though it has no access to the economic benefits that would come with statehood, such as access
to loans from international financial institutions.

A second critique, typically offered by African policymakers, is that recognition of Somaliland
will “open a pandora’s box” of secessionist claims throughout Africa. However, as in the case of
Eritrea, which gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, the Somaliland case does not call
into question the African mantra of the “inviolability of frontiers” inherited at independence. The
north-south union followed the independence and recognition of both the British and Italian
Somali territories, and its dissolution therefore would constitute a unique case of returning to the
boundaries inherited from the colonial era.

Others, especially those connected to UN efforts throughout the Horn of Africa, argue that
recognition will derail the UN-sponsored “building blocks” approach to national reconciliation
that includes the reconstitution of a central government in Mogadishu. This approach, however, has been an utter failure, as witnessed by the short-lived Transitional National Government (TNG) and its replacement by a Transitional Federal Government (TFG), the authority of which extends little beyond the town of Baidoa. What authority it has is largely due to the intervention of Ethiopian troops opposed to the further expansion of the Islamic Courts. It is time to recognize that the UN-sponsored “building blocks” cannot be stacked together to create a reunified central authority in Mogadishu.

A fourth critique claims that the “time is not right” for recognition because it will further intensify the widening crisis between the Islamic Courts and the TFG, and between their respective regional and international supporters. This argument has been heard repeatedly in the last fifteen years whenever efforts at reconstructing a unified central government were thought to be on the “verge of success.” Success has proved elusive over all this time, however, and it is now clear that southern Somalia will remain in crisis regardless of what is done with respect to Somaliland recognition. The most dire prediction of some Somali watchers is that the Islamic Courts movement will emerge victorious in the current conflict, assert its control over all Somali territories outside of Somaliland, and then threaten open warfare with Somaliland to bring it back into the Somali fold. If this should happen, it will likely be too late for the United States or others to intervene in a timely and effective manner to prevent Somaliland’s absorption into an Islamist Somalia. This reality makes recognition all the more urgent.

One of the more nuanced critiques of recognition is that loyalty to Somaliland in its eastern districts of Sanaag and Sool is contested, especially among the Warsengeli and Dhulbahante clans, and that any movement toward independence would potentially require the redrawing of Somaliland’s eastern boundary – which the leadership in Hargeisa (Somaliland’s capital) is unwilling to entertain. It is important to reiterate that Somaliland’s current boundaries are those of the original British Somaliland Protectorate created in 1884 and the independent country recognized by the international community beginning on June 26, 1960, and therefore have a solid legal basis under international law. The 2001 referendum provided an unequivocal popular basis for the independence claim. One way of resolving this issue, as was done with Eritrea in May 1993, would be to hold a territory-wide, UN-sponsored and internationally monitored popular referendum on independence that would be binding. If, as would be expected, pro-independence forces prevailed, those unwilling to live under Somaliland rule would have to make hard decisions about whether to continue living in Somaliland.

A final critique involves the concept of “African solutions for African problems.” Proponents contend that the United States should wait for African countries led by the AU to first recognize Somaliland. This approach is the topic of a thought-provoking International Crisis Group report, “Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership,” published in May 2006, and was publicly endorsed by Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendayi Frazer in a presentation on November 17, 2006 at the annual meeting of the African Studies Association. Although Frazer’s statement that the United States would recognize Somaliland if the AU acted first was welcomed by specialists on Somaliland, it is unclear when or if a AU recognition process will actually unfold. The encouragement of African action should not become the basis for inaction on the part of the United States.
The time for U.S. recognition of Somaliland is now, not only because it is right, but because it is in the interests of the United States. Recognition of Somaliland, followed by expanded engagement by Somaliland with the international community, would serve as a powerful lesson for other countries within the region (not least of all southern Somalia) of the benefits associated with the creation and consolidation of democratic systems of governance. Somaliland would become a model to emulate, and the United States would be congratulated for undertaking a proactive policy in support of a moderate, Muslim democracy.

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