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Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 780765662]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



South African Journal of International Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792221889>

Somaliland: An African Struggle for Nationhood and International Recognition

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Online publication date: 11 November 2009

To cite this Article Adam, Hussein M.(2009) 'Somaliland: An African Struggle for Nationhood and International Recognition', South African Journal of International Affairs, 16: 2, 271 – 274

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10220460903269024

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10220460903269024>

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Book Review

Somaliland: An African Struggle for Nationhood and International Recognition, by Iqbal D Jhazbhay, Institute for Global Dialogue & South African Institute of International Affairs, Johannesburg, 2009, 243 pp., \$25.00 ISBN 978-1-920216-20-7

This book review takes the form of an extended commentary highlighting some of the important issues, by the way of discussing the author's theory, narrative and analysis.

According to the author, 'the central hypothesis underlying this study is the importance of Somaliland's example as a case study in the efficacy of the internally-driven, "bottom-up" approach to post-conflict nation-building and regional stability and the implications this approach holds for prioritizing domestic reconciliation between indigenous culture and traditions, and modernity in achieving relative stability and international recognition in the nation-building project' (p. 19). Given my familiarity with Somali studies literature, as well as my participant observation of Somali affairs, I find this study to be highly original, relevant, valid and timely. The originality is partly because both the Somaliland domestic and international experiences are unique. As the author states, this is a mid-level theory intended to qualitatively illuminate a case study that could be used in future as a building bloc towards a grand theory.

The author provides as an analytical tool what he terms a 'quadrilateral framework': reconciliation–reconstruction–religion–recognition. This allows him to compile a huge pile of data, dates and events and to present them in a structured and organised manner. All this leads to an original sub-theory of the dialectic between international relations and internal factors.

There are several articles on narrow aspects of the Somaliland experience and a few general reports by the War-torn Society's Project and the International Crisis Group whose works are cited here. From my perspective, this is the first scholarly and substantial manuscript on Somaliland covering *both* domestic and international topics. Its survey of existing literature — books, articles, reports, newspapers, websites — is simply breath-taking. His nine field trips over a period of several years, have allowed him to check and recheck most of the data collected from various sources. He conducted interviews with an impressive list of personalities, including heads of state, ministers, diplomats, Somali studies experts, and other academics such as heads of research institutes. I happen to know many of them and they are relevant and knowledgeable.

Professor Jhazbhay is correct in pointing out that the elders are the engine that drives all reconciliation efforts in Somaliland; their absence in Somalia is partly responsible for the chaos in the south. This marriage of 'tradition' and 'modernity' is what allowed the north to survive two civil wars and now enjoy 18 ten years of peace. At the centre of the elders movement is the Council of Elders (the Guurti). Somali

culture is rich in traditional institutions evidenced in its systems of land management, agricultural and grazing systems, conflict mediation, legal adjudication, and many related functions. What facilitated the modern role of traditional elders? This study mentions the role of British colonialism. The British wanted colonialism 'on the cheap', therefore they practiced 'indirect rule', allowing traditional elders to manage grassroots politics. Jhazbhay sees this as a secondary rationale; after all, the British colonised India and Nigeria (where the term 'indirect rule' itself was coined); yet India emerged with a liberal democracy while Nigeria experienced decades of military rule. The thesis points to the existential compromise between the liberating Somali National Movement (SNM) and the elders as the primary rationale. The SNM is also unique in being the only liberation movement that has voluntarily dissolved itself and allowed the elders to give power to a veteran politician, Mohamed Egal. The five-month-long gathering in Borama in 1993 was a Guurti project that laid the basis for a constitution. This study notes: 'In the case of Somaliland, clan leadership ascendancy was facilitated by the modernizing nationalism of the SNM which, ideologically, sought to bridge the cultural gap between tradition and modernity and which, from the standpoint of self-reliant pragmatic survival, depended on the clan elders as pillars of support in mobilizing the social base of insurgency and post-conflict governance' (p. 55). Somaliland has gone on to adopt a constitution by referendum, and to hold local government elections followed by presidential and parliamentary elections.

With regards to reconstruction in Somaliland, the author suggests that the engine for it is a free (nearly) unregulated market economy. The expansion of the free market has been facilitated by the provision of security which is also a product of reconciliation. Women with piles of various currencies transact business in open markets. There is a need for limited and appropriate regulation and light but suitable taxation. The author is right to observe that, in both Somaliland and Somalia, there is a climate of opinion in favour of decentralisation and power sharing institutions. The focus on the diaspora is critical. 'Roughly half of Somaliland's 3.5 million nationals have been estimated to live outside its borders' (p. 96). This diaspora provides remittances that sustain the country. For example, the export of livestock to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States is critical to the Somaliland economy. However, it is also its Achilles heel: from time to time Saudi Arabia bans such exports. On one such occasion, the ban lasted 14 months and the number of animals exported from Somaliland fell sharply from 2.9 million in 1997 to just over 1 million in 1998.

The chapter on religion (Islam) is crucial given recent events. Analysing the chapter, I come up with the following options before the Islamists: (a) The civil society strategy — for example: 'The Waxda movement has adapted a long-term strategy of developing a Muslim society by influencing by example via schools, charitable work, trade, etc., much in the same way of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt' (p. 116). (b) The Jihadist option — those who want to impose, top-down, an Islamic state by all means, including violence and militarism. In Somalia this movement, led by Hassan Dahir Aweys, captured Mogadishu and several parts of the south in June 2006 but were evicted by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopian troops in December 2006. This study covered these events in the form of 2006 reflections. I do not see a future for jihadists in Somaliland as explained and analysed in the thesis. (c) The Islamic courts movement — a large faction saw this as a civil society option and was willing to compromise with the TFG. However, a minority of jihadists hijacked the

whole Sharia courts movement which led to the confrontation with Ethiopia. (d) The constitutional, democratic option like Turkey — this alternative is compatible with Somaliland's democratic political culture. Women are playing an increasingly prominent role in Somaliland civil society (in Somalia too). These initiatives have won general respect. During the post-Siyad era, women have assumed key roles in the economy, including taking jobs in retailing, money-changing, and local distribution of imported goods. They have played critical roles in peacemaking. They continue to prosper in teaching and medical professions. This study shows, however, that women are highly under-represented in political life including among the three main political parties. As far as women's roles are concerned, there is the need to tilt the tradition–modernity dialectic a little more towards modernity. Their contribution in education has made this sector the most self-reliant.

The chapter on recognition provides a great deal of new information, with brilliant analysis. I come out with the conclusion that, while aiming for full recognition, Somaliland may have to opt for an interim special status. Nations sympathetic to Somaliland include Ethiopia, South Africa, Rwanda, Kenya (with some question mark) and the United Kingdom. Rwanda, in a recent AU session, tabled a resolution to discuss Somaliland. Arab States — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan — are generally against the recognition of Somaliland. This is mostly due to Egypt's anti-Ethiopian politics over the Nile. Ethiopia is in a delicate position: it has used its military power to impose the TFG in Mogadishu. Will it allow the TFG to impose itself over Hargeisa? If it does so, it will reopen the Pandora's box of Somali irredentism which will eventually consume Ethiopia's Somali Region 5 (the Ogaden). If it recognises Somaliland too soon, it will alienate the TFG 'puppet' regime. In any case, the fate of Somaliland and Somalia is in Ethiopian hands. This is contained in the analysis provided. What is preventing a dialogue between the north and south is a clash of political cultures. Deriving inspiration from its traditional reconciliation practices, Somaliland has evolved a secular democratic political culture. Somalia, for almost 15 years, was suffocated by brutal warlord culture. For a brief period it experienced a radical Islamist, jihadi political culture, and is now confronted by authoritarianism and neo-Siyadism.

This book facilitates the development of a new sub-field of International Relations dealing with the 'internationalization of domestic transformation' (p. 17). Somaliland's stability and democratisation needs recognition, and recognition will strengthen and sustain Somaliland's stability and democratisation.

I summarise with one of the most insightful observations: the struggle for recognition helps to discipline Somaliland's internal politics and society. He provides concrete examples of this domestic–international linkage and disciplining of Somaliland politics and society. For example, Somalilanders turned out in record numbers to vote in the constitution referendum because they are acutely aware of the international struggle for recognition. The domestic disciplining involves the elders, the business sector and leaders of civil society. The acceptance of the extremely narrow results (80 votes difference) in the presidential elections is due to these domestic actors plus awareness of the struggle for recognition. The same thing explains the very cordial and civil relations between the opposition parties (with a majority in parliament) and the ruling party. Since the hypothesis is confirmed, we may go on to predict that the disciplining of Somaliland is bound to increase as a result of the drastic events in Mogadishu and the coming to power of the hostile Abdulahi Yusuf.

The Somaliland experience is summed up by the observation: 'Whether one embraces, rejects, or is ambivalent about Somaliland's bid for recognition, Somaliland's progress in democratization, stability, and economic recovery constitutes one of the few pieces of genuinely good news in the troubled Horn of Africa' (p. 153).

As a contribution to a new sub-field in International Relations and a penetrating original analysis of a unique socio-political experiment, I hereby commend this book with great enthusiasm.

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