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Negotiations between Somaliland and the Federal Government: Prospects of Success or Failure

Unit for Political Studies

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From 14 - 18 June a new round of discussions was held in Djibouti between the unilaterally declared “Republic of Somaliland” and the federal Republic of Somalia. The presidents of both countries attended as well as the president and prime minister of Djibouti and Ethiopia respectively, the US ambassador to Somalia, the president of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and representatives of the EU.

As far as the declared positions of the participants are concerned, there is nothing new to justify restarting talks now. In fact, disagreement has been sharper than ever since the two new presidents – Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo (Mogadishu) and Muse Bihi Abdi (Hargeisa) – took power in 2017. Both sides have accused the other of failing to meet their obligations under previous agreements and causing their collapse.

Although Farmajo issued an official apology for crimes committed by the Somali government in Somaliland under President Muhammad Siad Barre (1969-1991) earlier this year – the first such apology ever – it is unlikely that there will be any serious breakthroughs on the secession issue. Both sides are thus focusing on scoring points on secondary issues, such as the division of international aid. Farmajo is also seeking political victories that might bolster his chances in the presidential elections set to take place in 2021.

The Background

Somaliland unilaterally announced its secession from Somalia on 18 May 1991. Its claim to sovereignty is based on a narrative of difference from the rest of Somalia: it gained its independence from the UK prior to the rest of Somalia, which was under Italian rule. The two countries united in 1960 as the “Democratic Republic of Somalia”.

Despite the passing of three whole decades since Somaliland’s secession, it remains largely unrecognised both within Africa and globally. The African Union sent a fact-finding mission to the region in 2006, which recommended granting it recognition as an independent country,⁽¹⁾ and found that the union established in 1960 had led to much suffering for Somalilanders.⁽²⁾ But the report was not brought up in the African Union’s ministerial talks, a clear indication that the AU intends to continue with its established policy of rejecting any attempts at secession on the continent, on the grounds that this would be opening a Pandora’s box of border disputes across Africa. Many member countries have made any future recognition of Somaliland contingent on the federal government of Somalia issuing its own recognition first. But eight years of negotiations have not produced any results.

1 “Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership”, Crisis Group, 23/05/2006, accessed on 18/6/2020, at <https://bit.ly/30YCqUL>.

2 Ibid.



Initial negotiations (2012-2015)

For many years after declaring independence Somaliland consistently ignored the various Somalian reconciliation conferences (the first of which was held in Djibouti in 1991) on the grounds that it is no longer part of Somalia. On 23 February 2012, however, it participated in the London Conference,⁽³⁾ marking a sea change in its position.⁽⁴⁾ The points of agreement established by the Conference included an affirmation that “the International Community should support any dialogue between Somaliland and the Transitional Federal Government or whoever takes its place in order to clarify future relations between the two.”⁽⁵⁾ The president of the federal government, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed also met for the first time with Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo, his Somaliland counterpart, in June 2012. This was an unprecedented step, and served as the springboard for negotiations after more than two decades of diplomatic silence.⁽⁶⁾

As part of its recent growing interest in Somalia, Turkey has hosted three of the six rounds of negotiations that have been held between the two sides since 2012. The first round, which involved the presidents themselves, was held in Ankara on 13 April 2013 after Somalia had elected a new president and its government had received full international recognition. These talks produced the Ankara Document, which included thirteen points stipulating, among other things, intelligence-sharing, cooperation in fighting terrorism, extremism and piracy, and in combatting the illegal dumping of poisonous materials in Somali waters.⁽⁷⁾

This was followed from the 7th to the 9th of July 2013 by the Istanbul Conference. The Istanbul Conference did not discuss contested issues of sovereignty, but did result in an agreement allowing Somaliland to receive international aid directly from donors and to enjoy full control of its airspace. On 16 - 19 January 2014, another conference was held in Istanbul. This time it was agreed that a joint body would be established to monitor air traffic, headquartered in Hargeisa and made up of four members (two from each country). The document also contained a paragraph condemning the mass killings perpetrated by the Somali military regime against Somaliland’s inhabitants in 1988.⁽⁸⁾

On 21 December 2014, a new round of negotiations was held in Djibouti. The conclusions of earlier negotiations were reaffirmed and the need to avoid politicising development aid or making accusations

3 "Somalia conference is a turning point, says Cameron", *The Guardian*, 23/02/2012 accessed on 18/6/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3dgo0Ze>. UK interest in Somalia has grown steadily since 2012, and the UK has held several international conferences on oil wealth in the country. The British company Spectrum has conducted preliminary surveys looking for crude oil around Somalia’s Indian ocean coastline.

4 At the time those sympathetic with the separatist cause expressed concerns that participating in the conference tacitly equated Somaliland to other federal regions of Somalia and would encourage the world to think of it in this way. Such anxieties are clear, for example, in an article written by the former president of Somaliland in the British *Guardian* newspaper: Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud Silanyo, "London's Somalia conference does not recognise Somaliland – we cannot go", *The Guardian*, 07/05/2013 accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3dcNKpu>.

5 Muhammad Al Amin Muhammad Al Hadi, "Mu'tamar Landan Hawl al-Sumal... Tawaqu'at wa-Takhawwufat", Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 16/02/2012 (accessed on 19/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/37Y3P1v>).

6 "Somali and Somaliland presidents meet in Dubai", *BBC*, 28/06/2012, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bbc.in/30VkrM3>.

7 "Somalia and Somaliland sign Ankara Communique", *Anadolu Agency*, 15/04/2013, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3hIWd7t>.

8 Crimes committed by the Barre regime against Somalilanders remain central to the separatist narrative. Barre’s government employed mass killings against northerners, and bombing raids were conducted against Hargeisa and Burao. See: *Somaliland: Kill All but the Crows, In People & Power (Part 1&2)*, *Al Jazeera*, 16/06/2016, accessed on 18/06/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2CofYRn> & <https://bit.ly/3fCp7UK>.

that might damage the negotiations process was emphasised. A fourth round of negotiations was also scheduled, to be held in Istanbul ninety days later. But it was not to be. In the intervening period negotiations broke down – despite both governments sending delegations in January 2015⁽⁹⁾ – because the Somali delegation included Somalilanders. The previous agreement on airspace was not implemented,⁽¹⁰⁾ and discussions ended entirely amid a flurry of accusations from both sides.

Relations only worsened with the election of Farmajo and Abdi as presidents of Somalia and Somaliland respectively in 2017. The Gulf crisis, which began in the same year, exacerbated disagreements between the two sides, who adopted different positions on it. A diplomatic crisis had broken out between the UAE and the Somali government after the Dubai Ports Company won the contract to manage Somaliland's Berbera port,⁽¹¹⁾ which Somalia considered a breach of its sovereignty.⁽¹²⁾ The Somali Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad, speaking in an interview, accused the Emirates of “insulting” Somalia by continuing to deal with a party that lacked any international legitimacy.⁽¹³⁾

In February of this year, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed attempted to jump-start negotiations between the two parties. He succeeded in getting Farmajo and Bii Abdi to agree to an unofficial meeting on the sidelines of the last African Summit held in Addis Ababa, where he suggested that he and Farmajo should visit Hargeisa⁽¹⁴⁾ just as he had visited Eritrea in 2018 (resulting in the restoration of relations). But the Somaliland government refused to host the Somali president unless he granted them official recognition, and called again for the international committee to do likewise.⁽¹⁵⁾

The Latest from the Djibouti Negotiations

The current round of negotiations began on the initiative of Djibouti president Ismail Guelleh.⁽¹⁶⁾ It appears that the US and other regional powers – in particular Djibouti and Ethiopia – are hoping to bring about a lasting solution to a problem that has dogged the region for three decades. In his opening remarks, Guelleh emphasised that “after the struggles of the last thirty years, the time for rebirth is now.”⁽¹⁷⁾ The Ethiopian prime minister expressed similar sentiments,⁽¹⁸⁾ while the US ambassador

9 "A Press Conference on the Collapse of the Somaliland-Somalia Talks", 03/05/2015, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/31dXQnV>.

10 In July 2019 Somalia signed an agreement with the International Civil Aviation Organisation which granted full administration of Somali airspace to Mogadishu after more than 28 years of ICAO management. Somaliland considered this a breach of existing agreements with Somalia and submitted a complaint to the UN accusing the Somali government of abandoning the agreements reached at the Second Istanbul Conference. See: "Somalia And Somaliland In Fresh Battle Over Control Of Airspace", *East African Business Week*, 03/06/2019, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3hFgSt7>.

11 Aaron Maasho, "DP World launches expansion of port in Somaliland", *Reuters*, 11/10/2018, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://reut.rs/3hEaO3P>.

12 "Somalia warns Dubai Ports World against violating its sovereignty", *Al Jazeera English*, 22/04/2018, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2YfxhMQ>.

13 "Ahmad Isa Awad – Wazir al-Khariijyya al-Sumali", interview with Al Araby Television, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2UWHWKA>.

14 "Somaliland rejects proposed visit by Ethiopia PM, Somali president", *Africa News*, 16/02/2020, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/37GAhVP>.

15 "Martida: Madaxweyne Muuse Biixi", *VOA*, 06/06/2020, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3dffVz>. Bihi belongs to the Somali National Movement (SNM) which led the secession. Perhaps as a result, he seems to be less willing to make concessions on the secession issue than his predecessors.

16 "Somalia, Somaliland talks touted as 'historic'", *Anadolu Agency*, 15/06/2020, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/37HPJRv>.

17 "KHUDBADII MADAXWEEYNAHA DALKA DJIBOUTI MUDANE ISMACIIL CUMAR GEELE 14/06/2020", *Youtube*, accessed on 18/06/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/3enAf7N>.

18 "Prime Minister of Ethiopia's speech", *YouTube*, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2YhiVf3>.



described the conference as a “historic meeting”, encouraging attendees to do everything possible to further the interests of Somalis.⁽¹⁹⁾

Nonetheless, the four days of negotiations failed to produce any serious results. Both sides stuck by their guns, with neither willing to compromise on the principles enshrined in their constitutions: secession or unity. Any progress on the core issue was impossible. But the parties did agree to continue negotiations in Djibouti fifteen days later in order to solve the controversial issues of foreign aid, security, and control of airspace.⁽²⁰⁾ Three technical subcommittees were formed to deal with these issues.

Prospects of Success

Despite growing international and regional influence in a solution to the Somali problem – and a corresponding growth in the opportunities to move the political process forward – the prospects of any real breakthrough in negotiations between Mogadishu and Hargeisa remain modest.⁽²¹⁾ US involvement is still limited to conventional ambassadorial activity, while possible regional partners (Ethiopia and Djibouti) have their own serious domestic problems to deal with. In Ethiopia Abiy Ahmed’s transitional government has extended its term on the pretext of the coronavirus pandemic.⁽²²⁾ Abiy Ahmed has long presented himself as the sponsor of peace in the region, particularly after winning the Nobel Peace Prize last year as a result of the peace agreement signed with Eritrea.⁽²³⁾ He has repeatedly made attempts to solve differences in opinion between African countries, including the maritime dispute between Somalia and Kenya,⁽²⁴⁾ as well as between different factions in South Sudan.⁽²⁵⁾ But his approach to the dispute with Egypt and Sudan over the Renaissance Dam has made many in the region wary of him.

Turkey has been conspicuous by its absence from the Djibouti negotiations, given its role as the traditional sponsor of peace negotiations between Somaliland and Somalia. In 2008 Turkey appointed Oğulcan Bekar, its former ambassador to Mogadishu, as special envoy to Somalia – the only country to have such a special envoy. The AU has also been absent, which has been taken as a measure of how limited the prospects are for progress.

19 In a tweet from its official account, the US embassy in Djibouti compared this meeting with the 2000 Arta Conference, which produced the first transitional government in Somalia after the collapse of the central state. This suggests that the US is likewise looking for a reconciliation between Somalia and Somaliland. <https://bit.ly/2YTezKf>

20 “Foreign minister of Djibouti’s final statement”, *YouTube*, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2CjTdOq>.

21 “Somalia in Talks Once Again with Breakaway Region Somaliland”, *Bloomberg*, 14/06/2020, accessed on 18/6/2020 at: <https://bloom.bg/3hGaSAb>.

22 Elias Meseret, “Ethiopian PM’s term extended as election delayed for virus”, *Washington Post*, 10/06/2020 (accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://wapo.st/3fMyvFB>).

23 “Ethiopian PM Abiy Ahmed receives Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo”, *Al Jazeera English*, 10/10/2019, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/2YMsNwt>.

24 “Ethiopia’s Abiy steps up mediation in Kenya, Somalia sea row”, *The East African*, 09/07/2019, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/3dh0Lyl>.

25 “Ethiopia, Eritrea leaders visit S Sudan to discuss peace deal”, *Al Jazeera English*, 04/03/2019, accessed on 18/06/2020 at: <https://bit.ly/37EwEjh>.



Conclusion

Somaliland has failed to secure international recognition even thirty years after its unilateral declaration of independence. Somalia's Farmajo, meanwhile, refuses to be responsible for granting legitimacy to its secession – particularly with elections just around the corner. As a result, it is unlikely that any future negotiations will lead to a real breakthrough between the two sides until domestic circumstances, or the regional and international environment, change significantly.