Deciphering Somaliland's Democratic Rarity in the Horn of Africa

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Abstract

In a region often characterized by undemocratic and authoritarian regimes, Somaliland, a self-proclaimed republic in northwest Somalia, stands out as a democratic anomaly. The recent presidential election in November 2024, noted for its free and fair process and the peaceful transfer of power from the incumbent to the opposition, has been hailed as remarkable. This study investigates the conditions that have fostered this nascent democratic experiment in Somaliland and considers potential lessons for other countries in the region. The research is based on a review of primary and secondary literature, along with an extensive study of the region's and Somaliland's political landscape.

Keywords

Somaliland, Electoral Democracy, Rarity, Horn of Africa, Democratic Elections

Introduction

In a region widely epitomized by conflict and a pervasive practice of authoritarianism, Somaliland represents a considerable departure. Although not officially recognized by the international community, Somaliland has remarkably emerged as a peaceful, stable and democratic polity. Seasoned observers who had been fascinated by its story of success described the small polity in various positive terms, including as a "rare success story" (Bryden, 2005), "a country that could" (Shinn, 2002), "untold African Marvel" (Aboa-Bradwell, 2011), "Africa's best kept secret" (Jhazbhay, 2003), a "masterpiece in African elections" (Medhane, 2010) etc. However, such characterizations should not lead to overly optimistic expectations regarding Somaliland. These perspectives not only obscure the significant challenges and limitations inherent in Somaliland's democratic processes but also contribute to an exaggerated perception of the country's political progress.

Somaliland is still a weak and poorly funded state with rudimentary infrastructure and limited resources. Although it enjoys widespread peace and stability, this remains fragile and underdeveloped. The country's democratic transition has been a source of excitement, but it is still messy and incomplete (Walls, 2014). The government is weak and limited in both its despotic and infrastructural powers. The economy is driven by the private sector, which significantly influences the government. Its quest for political recognition has remained elusive, hindering economic growth and prosperity by limiting access to international development aid and loans.

Despite challenges, Somaliland has achieved remarkable progress. Unlike its southern neighbor and many other countries in the region, Somaliland has made substantial strides in peacebuilding, statebuilding, and democratization. It has successfully recovered from the security setbacks of the early 1990s, establishing a functioning government and a peaceful environment conducive to economic revival. Over the past decade and a half, Somaliland has demonstrated its commitment to democratization by conducting a series of successful elections and forming a democratic government, a feat matched by few other countries in Africa and the Middle East (Hansen & Bradbury, 2007, p. 461).

While Somaliland's achievements in state-building and peacebuilding are noteworthy, this study focuses on its progress in democracy. It examines how Somaliland emerged as a democratic polity and explores potential lessons for other countries in the region.

The study is structured into five sections. The first section provides a conceptual and theoretical discussion of democratic regimes, laying the groundwork for treating Somaliland as an electoral democracy. The second section offers an overview of politics and the state of Somaliland. The third section discusses the context of democratization in the Horn of Africa and why Somaliland is unique in this regard. The fourth section analyzes the factors driving Somaliland's thriving democracy. The final section considers the lessons that can be drawn and whether Somaliland's experience can be replicated elsewhere in the region.

Theoretical Framework

The standards employed for distinguishing democracies from autocracies vacillate between minimalist, maximalist, and hybrid approaches. The minimalist approach, influenced by the democratic theory of the famous Austrian economist, Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) conceives democratic regimes as electoral democracies. Schumpeter defined democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." (Schumpeter, 2003, p. 269). Democracies, in this perspective, are those regimes where the key positions of the government are filled through multiparty, competitive, free, and fair elections. Under electoral democracies, elections are often competitive, and incumbents cede power peacefully when they are defeated (Bidner et al., 2015, p. 2). According to Diamond (2002, pp. 21-22; 1996, p. 21), contemporary electoral democracies also provide for minimal civil and political freedoms, including freedom of organization, expression and assembly, which is necessary for meaningful elections, political debate and electoral campaigning. Yet, these are only partial. Electoral democracies largely fail to devote much attention to the fundamental human rights of individuals and minorities (Diamond, 1996, p. 21; Morlino, 2008, p. 9; Mukand & Rodrik, 2015, p. 1).

The maximalist approach, on the other hand, is founded on a much broader and extended conception of democracy. It challenges the minimalist approach's focus on elections as narrow (See Wolfgang Merkel [2004]). Democracy, rather, is broadly understood to constitute competitive elections and other institutions essential for safeguarding the civil and political rights of citizens and minority groups. In accordance with this approach, democracies are distinguished in the competitive multiparty elections they undertake and the guarantee they provide to more substantial civil and political rights under a strong rule of law (Diamond, 2002, p. 25). These forms of democratic regimes are widely identified as liberal democracies (Mukand & Rodrick, 2015, p. 1) and include several countries in the West that are classified by Freedom House as free.

A third approach, widely known as the hybrid approach, has recently emerged as a very useful perspective to be able to understand politically grey regimes that are neither democracy—liberal or electoral—nor fully autocratic. The literature on hybrid regimes posits a range of conceptions of hybrid regimes, and the subtypes identified are many (See, Collier & Levitsky, 1997; Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 51). Yet, these regimes are widely identified in terms of their mixed characteristics combining certain democratic rules, procedures and institutions with varying degrees of authoritarian governance (Levitsky & Way, 2002, p. 51). Hybrid regimes have been considered forms of transitional democracies, yet they have also increasingly been regarded as variants of authoritarianism (Levitsky & Way, 2010, p. 4).

In most hybrid regimes, multiparty elections are not uncommon. Yet, elections are undertaken for the core purpose of legitimizing the incumbent and to mask realities of authoritarian domination (Ekman, 2009, p. 9; Diamond, 2002, p. 24). Opposition parties and their supporters face severe pressure and when elections are found to threaten the incumbents' own power, they are manipulated.

While this body of literature has been instrumental in delineating democracies from non-democracies, it has been widely critiqued for its predominantly Western-centric orientation. In response, a growing corpus of scholarship across the African continent advocates for the integration of indigenous and traditional African norms and practices as foundational elements of governance. One such perspective emphasizes the value of traditional African decision-making systems, particularly those rooted in consensus, as a viable alternative to Western liberal democratic models.

Notably, philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1995) challenges the legitimacy of formal political parties and the multiparty system, arguing that these are Western impositions unsuited to the African sociopolitical context. He proposes a "consensual non-party system" as a more culturally congruent model of governance. In contrast to the majoritarian principles of liberal democracy, Wiredu asserts that consensus is the hallmark of traditional African political life. He states, "decision-making in traditional African life and governance, as a rule, is consensus." Drawing on the practices of various African communities—most notably the Ashanti of Ghana—Wiredu acknowledges the limitations of traditional systems in addressing the complexities of modern governance. Nevertheless, he contends that a consensual non-party system deserves to "be taken" "seriously" in Africa (Wiredu, 1995).

Wiredu's proposition has sparked significant debate regarding the role of traditional African systems and actors in contemporary democratic processes. Many scholars have praised his efforts to ground governance in indigenous structures, viewing his work as a meaningful contribution to the search for locally embedded, culturally rooted, and sustainable democratic models (Fayemi, 2010, p. 218; Olanipekun, 2020, pp. 6-8). However, critics have raised concerns about the adequacy of traditional structures in addressing contemporary governance challenges. Some have questioned the foundational assumptions of consensus democracy, particularly the presumed existence of a common interest and the normative frameworks that facilitate consensus (Fayemi, 2010, pp. 218-2019; Eze, 1997).

While Wiredu's analysis centers on the Ashanti, similar attributes can be observed in the governance system of Somaliland. The democratic system in Somaliland is deeply informed by traditional structures, particularly the Xeer system which plays a central role in conflict resolution. The upper house of Somaliland's parliament, the Guurti, is composed of clan elders, reflecting the integration of customary authority into formal governance. Although Somaliland operates as an electoral democracy with political parties, it has limited party competition between three political entities in order to foster consensus across clan lines. This mix of traditional institutions with forms and practices of governance has been instrumental in maintaining stability and embedding democratic practices in the unrecognized republic.

Somaliland, in this study, is treated as a case of an emerging electoral democracy. The small unrecognized polity is, indeed, the only country in the region classified as partly free by the 2016 Freedom House report. In the past decade and half, Somaliland has undertaken a series of successive and successful elections that are widely deemed competitive, free and fair (Abokor et al., 2006, p. 8; Hansen & Bradbury, 2007, p. 465). Moreover, unlike elections in many other states in the region, the electoral process in Somaliland has also been marked by alteration of power and a smooth transition

of power. Nevertheless, Somaliland›s democratic system exhibits several significant deficiencies, notably its inability to ensure the equitable participation of women and other marginalized groups. Furthermore, the persistence of authoritarian practices, patrimonial governance, and frequent breaches of constitutional provisions continue to undermine the integrity of its democratic institutions.

These shortcomings mean Somaliland is ruled out as a liberal democracy. Somaliland, however, is also far from a hybrid regime, primarily, because in contrast to many hybrid regimes, the political elite in Somaliland have demonstrated a remarkable commitment for democratic governance. Besides, Somaliland's elections have also been markedly distinguished by extensive and meaningful competition, alternation of power and a smooth post-electoral transition.

Somaliland: State and Politics

The narrative surrounding the emergence of the modern state has been articulated through various theoretical and historical lenses which range from hypothetical social contract theories to more historically grounded and cogent accounts, such as the conception of war-making as state-making. Charles Tilly, in his renowned dictum "state-making as war-making," offers a historically nuanced explanation of state formation, emphasizing the central role of warfare in the development of modern states.

According to Tilly, the experience of warfare has been instrumental in consolidating state power. European societies, confronted with relentless struggles for survival in a Darwinian context—where the weakest were inevitably marginalized—were compelled to develop effective state structures to defend themselves against external threats. These threats necessitated the creation of similarly robust states by rival societies (Clapham, 2001, p. 1). In this process, the conduct of war facilitated the centralization of authority, diminishing the autonomy of quasi-independent vassals and imposing the imperative for an effective system of encadrement through which societal resources could be mobilized and organized (Clapham, 2001, p. 2).

This imperative for resource mobilization, primarily for military purposes, catalyzed the emergence of national bureaucracies capable of extracting resources—particularly manpower through conscription and financial assets through taxation. These bureaucracies enabled the deployment of citizen armies which were pivotal in shaping the modern European nation-state between 1792 and 1945. Crucially, this process contributed to the formation of the so-called "imagined community," which endowed the coercive apparatus of the state with a moral foundation, thereby fostering voluntary participation and, in many cases, self-sacrifice among citizens (Clapham, 2001, p. 1). This imagined community subsequently underpinned the development of public participation, governmental accountability, and the provision of social welfare by the state (Clapham, 2001).

While this trajectory characterizes the emergence of the modern state in Europe, the genesis of most African states—excluding Ethiopia and Liberia—can be attributed to colonial imposition. These states did not undergo a process of state formation through warfare; rather, they were products of external conquest by imperial powers whose military capabilities vastly outmatched those of indigenous African societies (Clapham, 2001). The Horn of Africa, however, presents a notable exception. Clapham asserts that this region exhibits a more intensive and prolonged relationship between warfare and state formation than any other part of the continent, thereby offering a unique context in which this relationship can be more effectively examined (Clapham, 2001, p. 2).

Nevertheless, the impact of warfare in the Horn of Africa is complex and multifaceted, and the correlation between conflict and state formation is far from deterministic (Clapham, 2001, p. 9). States such as Djibouti, Somalia, Somaliland, and Sudan like their counterparts elsewhere in Africa, were initially shaped by colonial legacies (Bereketeab, 2007, pp. 39–40). However, the experience of warfare in the region provides a rudimentary explanation for the emergence of states such as Ethiopia and the post–Cold War secessionist entities of Eritrea, Somaliland, and South Sudan (Dias, 2013; Clapham, 2001).

Furthermore, the divergent trajectories of states in the Horn of Africa illustrate that warfare has produced varied outcomes: successful state formation (e.g., Eritrea, South Sudan, Somaliland), state disintegration (e.g., Somalia), and state weakening (e.g., Ethiopia and Eritrea following the 1998–2000 conflict) (Dias, 2013, p. 5).

The emergence of new states in the Horn of Africa during the post–Cold War period is closely linked to the recurrence of violent conflict in the region (Clapham, 2003; Jacquin-Berdal, 2002, as cited in Dias, 2013, p. 5). Protracted wars, some spanning several decades, were instrumental in the creation of new states. Eritrea and South Sudan, for instance, emerged following two of the longest and most devastating conflicts in Africa (Dias, 2013, p. 5). Similarly, the formation of Somaliland was precipitated by a war that led to the disintegration and collapse of Somalia, resulting in the emergence of self-declared autonomous entities.

Although it had a brief history of existence as a sovereign state in 1960, the republic of Somaliland was created in May 1991. Independence was declared at a Grand National conference of Northern peoples attended by representatives of Somaliland clans and the Somali National Movement (SNM)—the northern movement that took control of most of the northwest following the downfall of Siad Barre's regime. The conference revoked the act of Union that united Somaliland with the Italian trust territory in the south and declared the (re) birth of the republic of Somaliland. Since then, Somaliland has developed into one of the most peaceful and stable polities in the region. The political recognition of the republic, however, has remained elusive for more than a quarter of a century since the country declared its independence in 1991.

Roughly the size of England and Wales, the republic of Somaliland borders Djibouti to the west, the Gulf Aden to the north, Ethiopia to the west and Puntland to the East. Its territory is divided into six regions: Woqooy Galbeed, Awdal, Togdheer, Sahil, Sannag and Sool. Though Somaliland's government claims sovereignty all over these regions, authority over parts of Sannag and Sool remains highly contested with the autonomous Puntland state of Somalia, and this contest over jurisdiction means that some of the progresses Somaliland has made in peace and democracy could not be extended into parts of these regions.
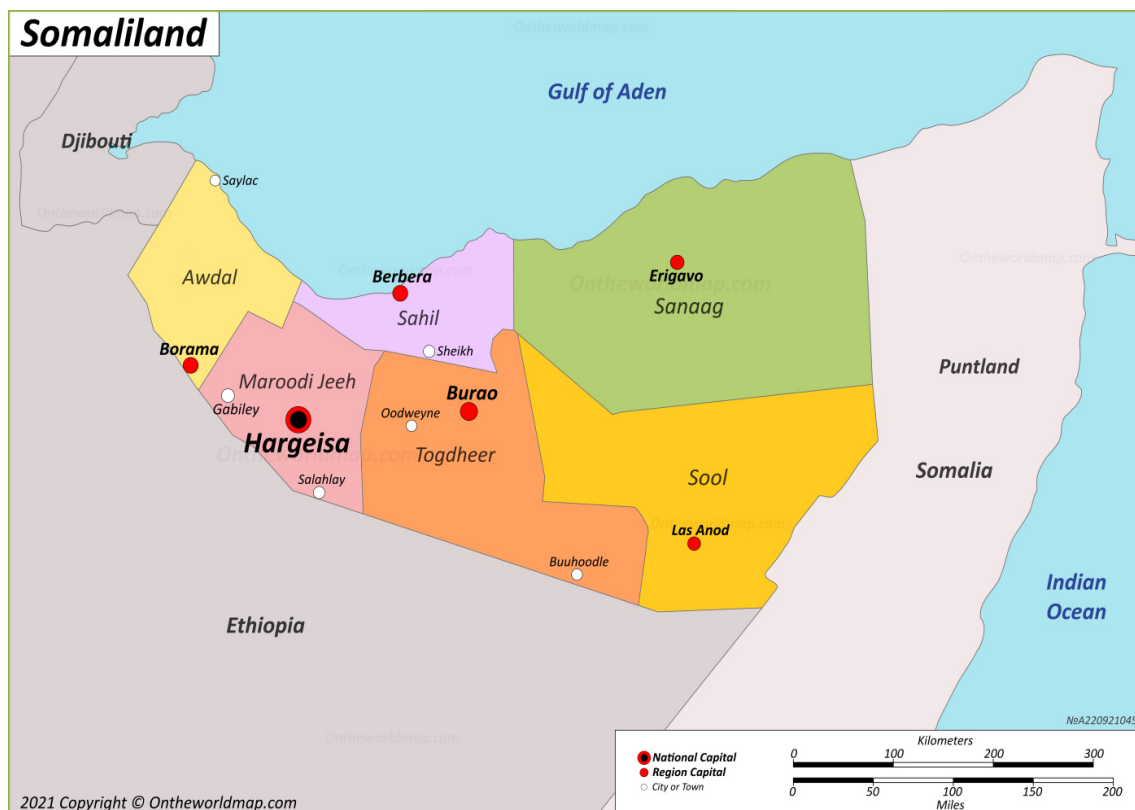

Figure 1: Map of Somaliland
Source : Ontheworldmap.com (2021)

The population of Somaliland is estimated to be 3.4 million (Government of Somaliland, 2010, p. 63). The vast majority of the people come from five main clans: Issaq, Issa, Gadabursi (Sommoron), Dhulbahante and Warsenegli (Bradbury, 2008, p. 52). The Issaq are the most populous and politically and economically dominant clan in Somaliland. Yet, Issaqs are not unified entities themselves. They are divided into six main sub-clan entities: Habar Yunis and Idagalle (together known as Garhajis), Habar Ja'lo, Habar Awal (Issa Mussa and Sa'ad Mussa), Arab, and Ayuub.

For over a decade, Somaliland had been administered by a hybrid political arrangement, locally known as the *beel* system, combining parts of the traditional, discursive, consensual and clan-based governance system with modern institutional forms of rule such as executive president, cabinet and a bicameral parliament. This hybrid system of governance has widely been credited to the peace and stability the country enjoys today. Besides, the progress made in governance and peacebuilding had served as a foundation for the democratic transition process the country launched at the beginning of the new millennium.

The transition into democratic rule started with the development of the necessary legal and institutional frameworks. The constitution, overwhelmingly endorsed by 97% of the voters in 2001, provides for a multi-party democracy based on three official political parties which would be determined in accordance with the results of district-level elections. Clan-based political parties are banned. Political parties are required to have a national basis.

Table 1: National Political Parties in Somaliland

2003- 2011	2012 - 2022
United Democratic People's Party (UDUB)	Kulimye (Unity) Party
Kulimye (Unity) Party	Justice and Development Party
Justice and Welfare Party (UCID)	Wadani (National) Party

Aside from the constitution, a series of other legal instruments have laid out the legal provisions needed for the successful undertaking of elections. These included the political associations and parties' law, the presidential and local council elections law (2001), the parliamentary elections law (2005) and the voter registration law (2007) (Interpeace and APD, 2015, p. 40). While these electoral laws were certainly useful in terms of spelling out Somaliland's democratic trajectory, they were, nonetheless, criticized for being "weak, incomplete and incoherent" (Interpeace and APD, 2015, p. 12).

Institutionally, Somaliland's Electoral Commission (NEC) is the chief institution entrusted with organizing and conducting elections. The NEC was established in 2001. Yet, the NEC has been largely poorly funded and lacked well qualified and trained permanent staff (Interpeace and APD, 2015, p. 36). This lack of well qualified and permanent staff has been a serious institutional challenge for the conduct of elections in Somaliland (Abokor et al., 2006, p. 14; Walls & Kibble, 2011, p. 36).

Somalilanders, in general, have demonstrated a strong interest in the polity's political affairs and widely taken part in the country's elections. Women and the youth, for instance, voted in numbers during the country's successive elections. Nevertheless, due to the country's absence of a census and a reliable voter registry, it has been difficult to effectively understand the level of voter turnout.

Table 2: Voter turnout in Somaliland

Election	Votes Casted
The constitutional referendum (2001)	1.19 million
The first district elections (2002)	440,067
The first presidential election (2003)	488,039
The first Parliamentary election (2005)	670, 328
The Second Presidential election (2010)	538,246
The Second District elections (2012)	810, 858
The 2017, Presidential Election	555,142

Source: Abokor et al. (2005), Interpeace and Academy of Peace and Development (2015), and Michael Wall and Steve Kibble (2011), Scott Pegg and Michael Walls (2018)

The Horn of Africa's Context and Somaliland's Rarity

The horn of Africa has been dubbed as home to some of the worst and undemocratic regimes in the world (IRIN, 2003). Among the world's worst, three—Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan—are said to be in the horn. Though these three are considered worse, the democratic and human rights records of other states in the region have not been different.

Eritrea is officially a one-party state. National elections have not been held since independence. The ruling party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ)—the reincarnation of the former guerrilla Movement, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), has now been in power for more than a quarter of a century. The PFDJ-led regime has been accused of massive human rights violations, and in the latest twist of events; the UN has accused Eritrean officials of crimes against humanity and suggested for the international community to use the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other available mechanisms to ensure accountability in Eritrea.

Somalia continues to examplify the characteristics of a failed state, plagued by persistent political instability, civil conflict, and widespread insecurity. In their analysis of Somalia's democratic transition, Biyo et al. (2023) acknowledge some progress but highlight significant shortcomings. These include vote-buying, the susceptibility of the electorate to manipulation by demagogues or populists, and the risk of a "tyranny of the majority," where minority interests are systematically marginalized or ignored.

Since the 1990s, both Sudan and Ethiopia have been dominated by authoritarian regimes that maintained power for extended periods. Although periodic elections were held, incumbents consistently secured overwhelming victories. Opposition parties and independent media faced systematic suppression. Ethiopia, in particular, has been characterized as an electoral authoritarian regime (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2008). Elections have largely been orchestrated to ensure the ruling party's dominance (Aalen & Tronvoll, 2008). The only genuinely contested election in post-1991 Ethiopia occurred in 2005, which culminated in post-election violence that claimed the lives of over 200 individuals. Sudan, similarly, has been notorious for state-sponsored terrorism, protracted conflict, and egregious human rights violations. While elections have occurred, they have been largely symbolic and devoid of genuine democratic substance.

In 2018 and 2019, a wave of anti-government protests and civil society-led movements in Ethiopia and Sudan led to the downfall of entrenched regimes and ushered in a period of political reform and liberalization. However, the initial optimism quickly faded away. The anticipated democratic transitions in both countries reversed course, giving way to political crises and renewed civil conflict. Observers have described this reversal as tragic. In a comparative study, Michael Woldemariam remarked, "The collapse of the 2018–19 political transitions in Ethiopia and Sudan was one of the great African tragedies of the past decade." What had been widely hoped to be successful transitions ultimately devolved into violence and instability.

Djibouti, a small coastal state on the Red Sea, has remained relatively stable in comparison to its neighbors (Bereketeab, 2013, p. 14). Nonetheless, its political landscape is heavily dominated by the Issa clan, leaving the Afar ethnic group in a position of persistent marginalization (Bereketeab, 2013, p. 14). The ruling party, the People's Rally for Progress (RPP), and its leader, Ismail Omar Guelleh—who succeeded his cousin Hassan Gouled in 1999—have maintained power for decades. In the national elections held in April 2016, Guelleh and the RPP secured 87% of the vote.

South Sudan which gained independence in 2011 following one of Africa's longest civil wars, was initially met with widespread optimism. However, the country soon descended into renewed civil conflict. The roots of the crisis are multifaceted, but a key trigger was the political rivalry between President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar in the lead-up to the 2015 presidential election. Both leaders, representing the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), nominated themselves as candidates, leading to a bitter power struggle that reignited civil war. Although the war formally ended with the IGAD-mediated power-sharing agreement in 2013, many continue to fear that longstanding rivalries are reemerging, raising concerns that South Sudan may once again descend into renewed civil conflict.

In summary, while elections are not uncommon in the Horn of Africa, they often lack credibility, transparency, and inclusivity. Dominant political parties such as the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) in Eritrea, and the RPP in Djibouti have remained in power for decades, effectively stifling political competition and preventing genuine multiparty democracy. The violent aftermath of the 2005 Ethiopian elections and the 2007 Kenyan elections further underscores the challenges of peaceful power transitions in the region, particularly when opposition parties are poised to win.

In contrast, Somaliland presents a notable exception to the region's democratic deficit. The self-declared republic has conducted a series of elections that have been widely regarded as competitive and credible. Moreover, Somaliland has demonstrated a rare commitment to peaceful and orderly transfers of power, distinguishing it from many of its regional counterparts. The most recent example occurred in 2024, when incumbent President Muse Bihi Abdi of the Kulmiye Party was defeated by opposition candidate Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi of the Waddani Party, followed by a peaceful and orderly transfer of power.

Successive and Successful Elections

The formal democratic transition process in Somaliland started in 2001 with a popular vote on the country's first independent constitution. This was followed by five successive and successful elections. The first to be held, in what was a paucity of democracy in the region for well over three decades, was district and municipal elections. They were held in 2002.

Unlike similar elections in other countries, district elections in Somaliland have dual objectives: constituting local and municipal administrative structures and determining the three national political parties of the country. Somaliland's electoral law qualifies the first three political parties winning many of the votes in the district elections to become national political parties eligible to run for presidential and parliamentary elections. Although there were enormous financial, technical and logistical challenges, the 2002 district elections were held successfully. According to Renders (2012), the district elections were held with relatively good spirits and organization. Observers were uniformly positive in their assessment of how these elections were held.

In four months, elections for the office of the president and the vice president followed (Abokor et al., 2006, p. 7). The presidential election turned out to be a closely contested race which the opposition was highly tipped to win. Yet, the incumbent President, Dahir Riyale Kahin of the UDUB party, retained his position. The result he won, however, was a very narrow one. Riyale defeated his rival, Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud "Silanyo", chairman and candidate of the main opposition party, Kulmiye, in just a margin of 0.01 per cent of the votes casted. Not surprisingly, the result was briefly challenged by the Kulmiye. Yet it was accepted later, and the transition process proceeded peacefully.

In September 2005, the first parliamentary elections were held. These elections were for the lower house, namely the House of Representatives—the upper house, widely known as the *Guurti*, remains an unelected body. Voting took place in 982 polling stations for 82 seats (Abokor et al., 2006, p. 5). The incumbent UDUB party emerged as the winner taking 33 seats (Abokor et al., 2006, p. 19). Nevertheless, the opposition winning 49 seats altogether, the UDUB could not command a majority. Consequently, the two opposition parties took control of the parliament, and Somaliland became the "only country" in Africa where the opposition had controlled the parliament (2005–2010) (Abokor et al., 2006, p. 19).

The second presidential election was held in 2010, more than two years behind schedule. Three candidates from the three national political parties contested the election. In the outcome, the main opposition candidate, Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud "Silanyo", who narrowly lost the presidential bid in 2003, comfortably emerged as a winner, and his victory was followed by a remarkable process of power transition that surprised many observers in the region. The incumbent president, Dahir Riyale Kahin, calmly accepted his loss and handed over office peacefully.

In 2012, the second-round district and municipal elections were held. The elections, however, were once again more than two years behind schedule—something which has become a recurrent phenomenon undermining the integrity of the electoral process in Somaliland. The two existing political parties, Kulmiye and UCID, and five newly established political associations—Wadani, UMMADA, Rays, Xaqsoor and DALSAN contested for seats. The ruling party, Kulmiye, emerged as a winner followed by Wadani and UCID, and the three formed as national political parties (Makokha & Ali, 2013, p. 6). As in other elections, the rating of the 2012 district elections was also positive among local and international observers.

The third presidential election which was held in 2017, was also hailed as "peaceful", "festive" and "Orderly" (Pegg & Walls, 2018). One Observer mission of European Team led by Dr. Walls Noted: "The mission was [...] pleased to be able to report a polling day process that was generally conducted peacefully and efficiently." They went on to declare that:

> Throughout the election period, Somalilanders demonstrated their support for the rule of law and constitutional process, voting peacefully and in significant numbers, and we applaud this commitment to peaceful participation in an impressively open electoral system. At the conclusion of the mission, we noted that irregularities observed, and complained about by opposition supporters, were not of sufficient scale to have impacted the result.

Hence, as in the previous processes, the process of the third presidential election was hailed by international observers. Some of the violence seen in the post-election period was addressed with the use of customary traditions of conflict resolution and eventually, the election was accepted by all the parties and Somaliland was back on track of its democratic course.

The fourth presidential and party election was held on 13 November 2024. This marked the fourth presidential election in two decades since 2003. According to the Brenthurst Foundation, the 2024 presidential election was "arguably the most contested and contentious election in Somaliland's history", partly because it was held after two years of delay and political debate (Brenthurst Foundation, 2024). Three candidates from the three political parties contested the election: the incumbent President Muse Bihi Abdi of the ruling Kulmiye party, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi "Irro" of the Waddani party, and Faysal Ali Warabe of the UCID party (Brenthurst Foundation, 2024). The election concluded with the victory of the opposition candidate, Abdirahman Mohamed

Abdullahi "Irro" of the Waddani party. The incumbent, Muse Bihi Abdi of the ruling Kulmiye party, conceded, ensuring a peaceful transfer of power. The election was hailed as free and fair. The Brenthurst observation team reported that "despite the constraints of Somaliland's financial and institutional means," the "election was free, fair, and credible." In its preliminary report, the University College London's International Election Observation Mission (IEOM) to Somaliland's presidential elections stated that the elections "largely took place in an environment where citizens were allowed to exercise their right to vote and demonstrated their enthusiasm for democracy." The report also noted that "the campaigning period was generally peaceful, with no observations of candidates being prevented from freely presenting their views, nor voters being hindered from engaging in campaign activities or learning about candidates' views."

In sum, without international recognition and any significant international support, Somaliland has held successive presidential, parliamentary, and district elections. Yet, it is not the successive undertaking of elections that identifies Somaliland as a beacon of hope in the horn of Africa. In fact, many countries in the region regularly carry out periodic elections. What distinguishes Somaliland as a remarkable story of success is the way these elections are held. In contrast to many other countries in the region, Somaliland elections have been highly competitive. In addition, although there were reports of multiple voting, ballot staffing, vote buying, and other forms of irregularities, Somaliland's successive elections have widely been regarded as free and credible. Observers were uniform in their assessment that no major incidents have happened to undermine the overall credibility of the country's elections. Above all, Somaliland's electoral process enjoys widespread support from much of the population. Except in parts of the Sool and Saanag regions in the east where Somaliland's authority is contested and the full undertaking of elections have been a very difficult task; Somaliland's successive elections had enjoyed widespread credibility and legitimacy by the general populace.

Alternation of Power and Smooth Political Transitioning

Post-electoral violence is a major challenge to elections in Africa. Many elections in Africa have also been criticized for failing to provide an opportunity for alternation of power. In contrast to this, Somaliland has displayed a significant deviation. Regardless of the enormous tensions that often surrounded its elections (prompting repeated postponements), post-electoral political transitions in Somaliland have generally been smooth. This was most conspicuously demonstrated in the two presidential elections in 2003 and 2010.

The 2003 presidential election in Somaliland was probably one of the most closely contested and narrowly won elections in Africa. According to NEC results, the incumbent president, Dahir Riyale Kahin, defeated his closest rival, Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud "Silanyo", in just a margin of 80 votes (REF). By any standard, this was an unusually narrow result that could open up plenty of room for contestation (REF).

The announcement instantly triggered small scale protests from Kulmiye supporters in Burco and Gabiley cities (Bradbury, 2008, p. 194; Renders, 2012, p. 245). The government, in its part, quickly invoked a state of emergency proscribing any further opposition rallies and protests (Bradbury, 2008, p. 194). Kulmiye took the result to the Supreme Court alleging a summation error. The Supreme Court, however, upheld the original result. Some Kulmiye members pressured "Silanyo" to form an alternative government (Bradbury, 2008, p. 194). Others who invested their personal wealth for the party's electoral bid could not overcome the defeat of the party (Bradbury, 2008, p. 194). With the simmering polarization of the two camps, many feared a return to violence (Barnet & Woldemariam, 2011). This, however, did not happen. The parties were reconciled with the help of clan elders, and the electoral process was concluded peacefully (Barnet & Woldemariam, 2011).

A similar remarkable political transition occurred in the 2010 presidential election following the victory of the opposition candidate, Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud "Silanyo. As opposed to the presidential contest in 2003, "Silanyo" this time was a clear winner, and shortly after the outcome was

announced by NEC, the incumbent president Dahir Riyale Kahin, to the surprise of many, conceded defeat and handed over power. The political transition process, once again, ensued without any disturbance.

Apart from the peaceful post-electoral transition process that marked its elections, Somaliland's elections are also markedly distinct for their role in providing an opportunity for alternation of power. Unlike many other elections in the region, and the wider Africa, Somaliland's elections have provided a platform for the people to see and enjoy the benefits that accrue with alternation of political parties in power. This happened in the 2010 and 2005 elections. In the 2010 presidential election, the opposition candidate won the presidency. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, the opposition swept the lower house of the parliament creating a situation where the parliament was controlled by the opposition—a situation which some authors described as unique in Africa.

Making Sense of Somaliland's Emerging Democracy

Somaliland has made remarkable progress in its successive elections. When asked about how their polity managed to achieve the democratic headway it has made, Somalilanders, from all walks of life, provide an account that begins and ends with their culture, indigenous institutions and the role of clan elders.

This study, however, suggests three major factors as explanations for Somaliland's remarkable democratic progress. The first relates with the ingenuity of the people and the leadership of Somaliland to functionally tame the Western multi-party form of democracy with elements of the traditional, discursive and clan-based consensual democracy, which the English anthropologist, Ioan Lewis, has passionately referred as "pastoral democracy"; while the latter two explanations relate to the political context within which Somaliland has been operating since 1991, particularly, to its relentless search for international recognition.

Local Adaptation and Contextualization

There still exists an ongoing debate whether democracy, understood in its Western style, is universal or if it takes different forms in reaction to the relatively distinct cultural values and norms of each society. In his widely read article, "Democracy as a Universal Value", the famous Egyptian economist, Amartya Sen, (1999) conceived democracy as universal value. According to Amartya Sen, democracy, as understood in the Western liberal conception, is a universal value that can take root in any culture.

Others, however, have contested Sen's assertion. Claude Ake, (1993), the renowned Nigerian political scientist, for example, talks about the need for a unique case of African democracy well versed with the socio-cultural realities of Africa. According to him, the Western-styled liberal democracy with its massive focus on individual interest and rights "makes little sense in Africa". A functioning democracy in Africa needs to be reconciled with the communal character of African society. Both sets of arguments have had difficult implications for the processes of democratic transition in Africa. The universality argument tends to impose a Western-styled liberal model of democracy as an all fit-in universal template, while the culture-specific argument dethrones some of our core assumptions of democracy in the name of a cultural adaptation. In Somaliland, nonetheless, evidence reveals that the practical application of the Western multiparty form of democracy in the broader context of Somali socio-cultural realities was a major factor of success (Kibble & Walls, 2009). Although, it remains uncertain if this system would be robust enough to respond to future problems and challenges, the accommodation of the modern multiparty democracy system within the general context of the traditional values of Somali society—despite an inherent tension between the two—has been a source of success and strength to Somaliland's emerging democracy.

Of course, the introduction of multi-party politics, following the spell of a decade-long rule under a clan power-sharing arrangement, was meant to move away from the existing clan politics. In practice, however, traditional clan politics continued to exert a significant influence over the country's newly introduced multi-party democracy (Kibble & Walls, 2009, p. 3). Political parties were/and still are

identified with clans and coalition of clans. Parties depended on their respective clans for moral and financial support. The parties' leadership exerted little control in the nomination of candidates; candidates were proposed by clans or needed to be endorsed by the clans.

Enmeshed in all this, the multiparty democracy functioned quite well. Whenever it runs against the traditional clan political practice and perceptions of power balance, it is readjusted. The disagreements over voter registration and popular opposition against the closed party list system, for instance, were partly caused because these two contradicted the deep-seated local practices of clan politics. Although most electoral experts agree on the need for an accurate, transparent and trusted voter registration for a representative, credible and peaceful elections (Interpeace & APD, 2015, p. 12), all but one of Somaliland's elections (the 2010 presidential election) was conducted with a voter register. Clear and accurate voter registration was viewed as a potential threat to traditional perceptions of power balance. The closed-party list system, used in 2002 district elections, on the other hand, had to be abandoned in favor of an open party list in 2012 due to a widespread public uproar against it. The closed list system was fiercely opposed because, by strengthening the power of political parties, it undermined the traditional power of clans.

In sum, the newly introduced multiparty system in Somaliland functioned well because it was pragmatically wedded with the underlining social structures, principles and norms of Somaliland's society. However, it wasn't only the contextual adaptation that provided for a functioning democracy. The very values and norms of Somaliland society have also been instrumental to the functioning of the country's multi-party democracy. This most particularly has been the case with Somaliland's culture of mediation, negotiation, and peaceful conflict resolution.

Somaliland always feels on the brink of violent conflict whenever elections are looming around the corner. Elections are frequently surrounded by heightened tensions, disagreements, and frequent delays. However, all these tensions and disagreements, on numerous occasions, were dealt with thanks to the intervention of the elders and through the country's tradition of negotiation and mediation. In the presence of the country's culture of negotiation and mediation, it has been possible to unlock political deadlocks, prevent electoral violence, and take the whole electoral process forward.

The non-electoral context—the politics of recognition/un-recognition

In his article on the impact of the non-electoral context on democratic transition, Kjetil Tronvoll, one of the doyens of electoral studies in Ethiopia, argues that though often are "overlooked in the democratization studies", the non-electoral context and key events unfolding between elections significantly impinge on the nature of democratic transitions. Tronvoll discusses the enigmatic Ethiopian and Eritrean conflict (1998–2000), and how it paved way to one of the most highly contested elections in the post-1991 political history of Ethiopia. According to him, the intra-party rift and fracture that unraveled within the ruling party following the end of the war in 2001 led to the weakening of the party within and loss of its legitimacy outside. In contrast, the resuscitation of pan-Ethiopianism in connection with the outbreak of the war had enhanced the popularity of opposition political parties championing Ethiopianism compared to the ruling party that has been practicing an ethnic-based democracy.

Tronvoll's analysis, interestingly, sheds light on the effect of non-electoral politics and events on the quality and integrity of elections. According to him, a full understanding of the role of elections in democratic transition requires "thick descriptions" referring to not only the formalities of elections but also the non-electoral contexts and events. This, however, poses a daunting task for the analyst, and balancing studies on electoral formalities with the analysis of contextual factors remains a key challenge to democratization research (Tronvoll, 2009, p. 450).

Kjetil Tronvoll's analysis significantly holds true for Somaliland. The political context within which Somaliland has been operating since 1991, and more specifically, its relentless search for international recognition, has had a strong influence on the country's motivation for democratization. Transition from the traditional *beel system* into a multiparty democracy was seen as a strategy to achieve

international recognition. Many in Somaliland believe that the polity's democratic transition will finally convince the international community to recognize Somaliland as an independent state (Walls & Healy, 2010, p. 2). Yet, it was not only the search for recognition that opened for democratization, but also the lack of recognition. Though it deprived critically needed financial and technical resources (which other post-conflict societies often receive), the absence of international recognition has provided Somaliland an opportunity for an autonomous process of peacebuilding, state-building and democratization. It gave Somalilanders the latitude to experiment with a hybrid state of their own in their own way and with their own local resources. Plus, as a national agenda that pre-occupied Somalilanders for more than a quarter of a century now, the quest for international recognition has kept Somalilanders of all walks of life united, contributing to the unity and peace of the country.

However, the dependence of Somaliland's process of democratization on the country's search for recognition and/or lack of recognition raises some concerns over its durability. First, the view of democratization as vehicle for international recognition implies that Somaliland's democratic process is meant for foreign consumption and is not well intended for serving the democratic needs of Somalilanders. Secondly, there is an emerging concern that if recognition is eventually realized, Somaliland's democratization process may be followed by de-democratization and the unity, peace and stability the country has enjoyed over the years may break down.

Strong Commitment to Democracy

At the heart of electoral integrity lies genuine elections which offer voters the opportunity for meaningful political participation (ACE, 1998). Genuine elections require commitment from the political elite and the public for free and fair elections. This commitment, unfortunately, does not exist in many countries in Africa. Gyimah-Boadi (2015, p. 101), in his discussion on the core challenges of democratization in Africa, notes that a waning democratic commitment among elites is a major factor responsible for the faltering of democratic progress in the continent. Despite the deepening and widespread desire for democratic governance by the wider public, commitment on the part of the elites in Africa has been ambiguous (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015, p. 110).

The elites in Somaliland generally seem to depart from this tradition. Indeed, one of the major factors that provided for a democratic government in Somaliland is the commitment of the people and the political elites of Somaliland for a democratic Somaliland. Both the people of Somaliland and the political elites have "demonstrated" a strong commitment to constitutional democracy (Abokor et al., 2005, p. 8). This has been illustrated in the devotion of the Somaliland government to fund the elections, particularly, the presidential elections which the international community was reluctant to support due to the country's woe with international recognition. In addition, the determination of the political elites across the political divide to peacefully resolve disputes arising from the tightly contested elections is also another case in point of the commitment of the elites for the democratic governance and peaceful transition of political power.

Not surprisingly, a major incentive for the democratic commitment of the elites and the public is the country's quest for recognition. Somaliland hopes to win the hearts and minds of the international community by demonstrating its qualities as a democratic country. Democratization and constitutional rule are presumed to facilitate the chances of the country for international recognition.

Lessons for other countries in the region?

Having undertaken five successive and competitive multiparty elections which widely have been described as free and fair, Somaliland has emerged as a noticeable electoral democracy in the horn of Africa in the past decade and half. This remarkable achievement of the country was made possible owing to the ingenuity of the people of Somaliland successfully accommodating the Western type of multiparty democracy within the socio-structural realities of the country, and contextual factors that necessitated the democratic transformation of the country. The democratic transformation of the country was seen as an instrument to enhance Somaliland's chances for international recognition.

Nevertheless, it was not only the absence of international recognition that helped Somaliland, but also the absence of international recognition. While lack of recognition has served as an inspiration for democratization, the absence of international recognition (and the subsequent international intervention that often associates it) had given Somalilanders the latitude to experiment their own peculiar model of democracy contributing to success.

To be contextually specific, the democratic achievements of Somaliland are, thus, rooted in the distinct structural and conjectural factors of the country leaving little chance for replication. Yet, short of replication, Somaliland's trajectory of democracy posits some important lessons for other countries in the region, and in Africa. Somaliland's democratic progress, first and foremost, attests to the fact that democratic elections are more likely to occur when political elites are committed to democracy. In the absence of such commitments, elections would remain mere exercises of public relations. Secondly, Somaliland's relatively successful experience is evidence that the Western-style multiparty democracy is perhaps unlikely to function properly unless adapted to socio-cultural realties of Africa. In consistent with the culture specific argument, Somaliland's democratic trajectory teaches us that multiparty democracy in Africa may have to be accommodated with underlining social— cultural realities to function effectively.

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