Out of the rubble

Somaliland, an unrecognised state, is winning friends abroad

But storing up problems at home

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BERBERA AND HARGEISA

ON JULY 1ST 1960, five days after it cut its colonial ties, the former British Somaliland merged with the one-time Italian Somaliland to form a united Somalia. It was a bad move. The dictatorship of Siad Barre, who took office in 1969, marginalised and massacred Somalilanders. On May 18th 1991, five months after his fall, what was by then simply Somaliland declared independence. It was a statement of intent—and regret. Exiles returned home to rebuild their nation. "Hargeisa had been destroyed to rubble," recalls Suad Ibrahim Abdi, a campaigner for women's rights. "There were no buildings, no water."

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What happened next is Somaliland's founding story. At confabs—under trees or desert stars—clans agreed to share power. Presidential elections followed with regularity. The country is poor but, without much aid, it has developed somewhat. Hargeisa is not the prettiest capital, but it serves a fine camel-milkshake. All of this contrasts with the chaos in Somalia, where foreigners have lavished money and guns.

This month Somalilanders will mark 30 years of peace. The country of 4.5m people is winning friends abroad. But its sovereignty remains unrecognised. When discussing it, the West defers to African countries, which defer to Somalia, which is dead against ceding suzerainty. "The big question", says Ms Abdi, is "fine, we've made progress. But where are we going from here?"

One answer can be seen in Berbera, on the Gulf of Aden. “We call it our hope,” says Khalifa Ibrahim, an adviser to the mayor, pointing to the expanded port opened in 2018 by DP World. Somaliland hopes that the investment of $442m (the largest in its history) by the Dubai-based port operator will prove catalytic for its economy. Port fees and custom taxes already account for 70-80% of government revenues. Planned alongside the new facility are a free-trade zone, an airport, hotels, an oil terminal and a park for 1,000 lorries. Land values have soared ten-fold.

Somaliland sees the port as bringing political benefits, too. “It has upgraded our position in the region,” argues Abdishakur Mohamoud Hassan, the mayor. Ethiopia under Abiy Ahmed, its prime minister, has grown closer to Somalia. His landlocked country depends on the port of Djibouti for most of its imports. The new facility at Berbera, in which Ethiopia has a 19% stake, gives it another option.

Berbera also gives the United Arab Emirates (UAE) an alternative foothold in the region. After a long dispute, Djibouti seized the DP World facility there in 2018. Somalia’s government in Mogadishu is allied to Turkey and Qatar, which are rivals to the UAE, which in March became the first Arab country to send a permanent diplomat to Hargeisa.

It has joined others in establishing a presence. Kenya recently announced it will set up a consulate in the capital. In August Taiwan opened its East Africa office there and pledged aid for its fellow sovereignty-challenged country. China tried to block the move. But Somaliland said it would not support the principle that there is only one China, with Taiwan a part of it. “Somaliland showed backbone,” says Allen Chenhwa Lou, the Taiwanese representative.

Such diplomatic advances show how far Somaliland has come in 30 years. Yet some locals worry about whether its clan-based political system that established stability is still the right one. "Somalilanders always say that we're a good model for the continent," says Guleid Jama of the Human Rights Centre, a local NGO. "But I don't think we are any more."

The constitution passed in 2001 was meant to loosen the grip of clans on politics. It limits the number of political parties to three, encouraging coalitions. But most voters still invariably vote by clan.

It is a system that "makes us less prosperous", argues Mohamed Fadal of the Social Research & Development Institute, a local think-tank. Jobs and contracts are spread around on the basis of clan, not merit. "You cannot leave a clan behind" is the founding principle of Somaliland's politics, explains Mohamed Farah of the Academy for Peace and Development, another think-tank. It may be a better model than the winner-takes-all ethnic politics in some countries, but many citizens feel it stunts the development of true democracy.

Institutions meant to hold government to account are weak. Judges bow to the executive and rarely prosecute corruption. Parliament is a rubber stamp. On May 31st Somaliland will hold parliamentary elections for the first time for 16 years. Media could be much freer. Foreign journalists are treated with grace and kindness, but local ones can be arrested for upsetting the wrong person. Last year a court ordered a local social-media star to be deported for a post in which he drank tea from a mug with a picture of Somalia's flag.

In the courtyard of the Hargeisa Cultural Centre, young Somalilanders are dancing and making music videos. Jama Musse Jama, the centre's director, points at them through his office window, noting that 70% of the country is under the age of 30. "Peace is not enough for these young people," he says. "They need jobs and opportunities." An estimated 75% do not have a job.

Women are neglected, too. Sucaad Odowa spent 24 years in London before returning to Hargeisa. "But I didn't count on the status of women in my country," she says, citing how women lack rights to divorce and need the consent of a male relative for caesarean sections. Women's inequality has led

her to run for parliament against the wishes of her clan elders. The 82-member lower house has but a single female MP.

Islam is another conservative force. A women's football tournament was called off last year for apparently transgressing sharia. In the city of Burao a "vice-prevention committee" has closed several female-owned businesses.

Some Somalilanders privately admit that the lack of international recognition is a handy excuse for domestic shortcomings. Yet so long as it is unrecognised, it is hard for the government to get aid and loans, and for businesses to sell things abroad. Travelling on a Somaliland passport, which many countries do not recognise, can be a nightmare.

Soon Somaliland will have spent longer as a de facto independent country than it did as part of a united Somalia. Most Somalilanders know no other status. And they want their country to write its own story, even if it is not always a fairy tale. ■

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