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Freedom in the World 2010 - Somalia

Capital: Mogadishu

Population: 9,133,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 7 *

Status: Not Free

Explanatory Note

The numerical ratings and status listed above do not reflect conditions in Somaliland, which is examined in a separate report.

Overview

As Ethiopian forces completed their withdrawal from the country in January 2009, Somalia's transitional parliament was expanded to include opposition factions, and the new body elected moderate Islamist leader Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed as president. He formed a broader government that enjoyed international support and a moderate amount of domestic goodwill, but it struggled to impose its authority over more than a small portion of the country during the year. Meanwhile, its radical Islamist opponents, the Shabaab and Hizbul Islam, fought among themselves and alienated most Somalis with their brutal interpretation of Islamic law. A suicide bombing at a university graduation ceremony in December killed four cabinet ministers and several other officials, raising new doubts about the government's ability to defend itself.

Somalia gained independence in 1960 as an amalgam of former British and Italian colonies populated largely by ethnic Somalis. A 1969 coup by army general Siad Barre led to two decades of instability, civil strife, and the manipulation of clan loyalties for political purposes. After Barre's regime was finally toppled in 1991, the country descended into warfare between clan-based militias, and an effective national government was never restored.

Extensive television coverage of famine and civil conflict that killed approximately 300,000 people in 1991 and 1992 prompted a UN humanitarian mission led by U.S. forces. The intervention soon deteriorated into urban guerrilla warfare with Somali militias, and over 100 UN peacekeepers, including 18 U.S. soldiers, were killed. The operation was eventually terminated, and international forces had left by March 1995. Civil strife continued over the subsequent decade with varying degrees of intensity.

At a 2000 peace conference in Djibouti, many of Somalia's factional leaders agreed to participate in a three-year transitional government with a 245-seat Transitional National Assembly. The government and more than 20 rival factions signed a ceasefire in 2002, but serious fissures developed as some groups launched separate power-sharing negotiations in Mogadishu.

The political process was revitalized in 2004 and resulted in the establishment of a 275-seat Transitional Federal Assembly (TFA) and a new Transitional Federal Government (TFG), in which the leading clans took an equal number of seats. In October 2004, TFA members elected the controversial Ethiopian-backed warlord Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed to serve a five-year term as president. Yusuf had previously been the leader of the breakaway region of Puntland.

By early 2005, strong divisions had emerged within the TFG between Yusuf's supporters and an alliance of clan leaders and Islamists; the president was perceived as hostile to the influence of Islamists in politics and social services in Mogadishu. The Islamist Courts Union (ICU), a broad coalition of Islamists, eventually emerged as the dominant force within the capital, and over the course of 2006, the group gained control of most of southern Somalia. Unable to assert power in Mogadishu, the TFG established itself in the town of Baidoa. Meanwhile, hard-liners within the ICU, backed by Eritrea, grew increasingly hostile toward Ethiopia. With tacit U.S. support, Ethiopia invaded Somalia to oust the ICU in December 2006, forcing the Islamists to retreat to the extreme south of the country.

The departure of the ICU triggered renewed instability and an insurgency against the Ethiopian-backed TFG by groups including the Shabaab (Arabic for "youth"), a radical ICU faction. All sides in the conflict committed severe human rights abuses, and as many as 400,000 people were displaced from Mogadishu during 2007. By the end of the year, a group of moderate exiled ICU leaders had joined forces with non-Islamist opposition members to form the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (ARS), though hard-line Shabaab supporters did not participate.

Insurgent groups continued to battle Ethiopian and TFG forces in 2008, and increased attacks on aid workers led to a reduction in humanitarian assistance. UN-sponsored negotiations between the TFG and a more moderate faction of the ARS began in Djibouti in June, and by November the two sides had agreed to a power-sharing arrangement that would double the size of the 275-member parliament. The Shabaab did not join the talks and vowed to fight on.

In January 2009, Ethiopian forces completed their withdrawal from the country, and the newly expanded TFA was sworn in. It elected the chairman of the ARS, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, as Somalia's new president, and he appointed Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke as prime minister in February, along with a 36-member cabinet.

Radical Islamist forces responded by launching a major offensive. Their ranks were bolstered by significant numbers of foreign extremists, and they managed to seize control of much of southern and central Somalia. While the militants proved unable to oust the TFG from Mogadishu during the year, they landed a number of serious blows. The interior minister was wounded in a March attack, and the security minister was assassinated in a car bombing in June. A suicide bombing at a university graduation ceremony in December killed the ministers of health, education, higher education, and youth and sports, along with other officials and a number of students. Moreover, fierce fighting erupted in Mogadishu in May, killing hundreds of civilians and forcing more than 200,000 residents to flee their homes. Chaos in the country intensified when the Shabaab and a rival faction, Hizbul Islam, fought pitched battles for control of the southern port of Kismayo in October.

The United States tried to fortify the beleaguered government during the year, sending 40 tons of arms and ammunition to the TFG in the summer. It also targeted suspected terrorists on Somali soil, killing an alleged member of Al-Qaeda, Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan, in September. The Shabaab responded with a bomb attack on the Mogadishu base of an

undermanned African Union peacekeeping force, killing its deputy commander and some 20 others.

Meanwhile, the situation in the semiautonomous region of Puntland in northeastern Somalia also deteriorated. A resurgence of clan rivalries triggered renewed insecurity and a breakdown in governance, and pirates based along the Puntland coast continued to launch audacious raids on foreign ships, holding crew members and cargo for ransom. The problem spiked in early 2009, prompting the international community to mount joint naval patrols in the Gulf of Aden and parts of the Indian Ocean.

Somalia's ongoing conflict and a chronic drought combined during the year to create what Refugees International described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis. More than 3 million people were in need of assistance, yet the UN World Food Programme had to scale back its operations due to the murder of two staff members in January and the reluctance of foreign donors to contribute money for food supplies that could be seized and exploited by Islamist militant groups.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Somalia is not an electoral democracy. The state has in many respects ceased to exist, and there is no governing authority with the ability to protect political rights and civil liberties. The TFG is recognized internationally, but its actual territorial control is minimal. The TFA, or parliament, was expanded in early 2009 following a 2008 agreement between the TFG and a wing of the opposition ARS. It now has 550 members, with 200 of the new seats allocated to the ARS and the remaining 75 to civil society groups. The TFA elects the president, choosing the moderate Islamist Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed in January after his predecessor resigned in late 2008. Sharif named Omar Abdirashid Ali Sharmarke as prime minister in February. The TFG was given a five-year mandate when it was established in 2004, and a new constitution and national elections were supposed to follow. However, the TFA voted in January 2009 to extend the TFG's mandate until 2011. The country has no effective political parties, and the political process is driven largely by clan loyalty.

Since May 1991, the northwestern region of Somaliland, roughly comprising the territory of the former British colony, has functioned with relative stability as a self-declared independent state, though it has not received international recognition. The region of Puntland has not sought full independence, declaring only a temporary secession until Somalia is stabilized. However, sentiment there has recently been hardening in favor of independence. In December 2008, elections for Puntland's 66-member legislature were held. The new parliament elected former finance minister Abdirahman Muhammad Mahmud "Farole" for a four-year term as president in January 2009. The result was seen as a fair reflection of the will of the legislature, and power was transferred peacefully from the defeated incumbent.

Because of the breakdown of the state, corruption in Somalia is rampant and grew worse following the overthrow of the ICU in 2006. Somalia was ranked as the worst performer among 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index. Corruption is also pervasive in Puntland.

Although Somalia's Transitional Federal Charter (TFC) calls for freedoms of speech and the press, these rights are minimal in practice. A TFG press law passed in 2008 allowed for significant government control over the media, and journalists have struggled to operate in areas controlled by the Shabaab. In 2009, the militants closed down a number of media organizations and stopped reporters from going about their duties. At least nine journalists were killed during the year, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, including four from Radio Shabelle who were slain in separate attacks. In the most deadly incident, two cameramen and a reporter were killed in the December bombing of a graduation ceremony in Mogadishu. Two foreign journalists kidnapped near Mogadishu in 2008 were released in November 2009, reportedly after ransom was paid.

Journalists also faced a difficult and dangerous media environment in Puntland, where

they were restricted from reporting on the January 2009 presidential election. Several reporters were arrested during the year, and three correspondents for Voice of America were temporarily barred from operating. Two foreign journalists who had been kidnapped in Bossaso in 2008 were freed in January.

Despite the fragmented state of the Somali media environment, photocopied dailies and low-grade radio stations have proliferated since 1991. Radio is the primary news medium, although there is no national broadcaster. Somalis living abroad maintain a rich internet presence, and internet and mobile-telephone services are widely available in large cities. Nevertheless, poverty, illiteracy, and the displacement of Somalis from urban areas limit access to these resources.

Nearly all Somalis are Sunni Muslims, but there is a very small Christian community. Both the TFC and Puntland's charter recognize Islam as the official religion. The TFC provides for religious freedom, though these rights are not respected in practice. The Shabaab and other radical Islamist groups imposed crude versions of Islamic law in areas under their control in 2009, banning music, films, certain clothing, and any other items they deemed immoral or un-Islamic. Anyone accused of apostasy risked execution. A clan leader was executed in Kismayo in January for alleged apostasy, and two sons of a Christian leader were beheaded near the city in February. A man was stoned to death for adultery in the town of Merka, near Mogadishu, in November; the death sentence on his pregnant partner was deferred until she had given birth. Members of other Muslim groups were also targeted by the Shabaab. Two clerics belonging to the government-allied Islamist group Ahlu Sunna wal Jammaa were beheaded in the Middle Shabelle region in March. The Shabaab caused deep offense among many Somalis by destroying the graves of Sufi Muslim saints.

The education system is severely degraded due to the breakdown of the state, and there is no system of higher education outside of Mogadishu. Academics reportedly practice self-censorship. The Shabaab has begun interfering in the education system in areas under its control, ordering the removal from schools of UN-distributed textbooks it considered to be "un-Islamic." The bombing of a graduation ceremony in December, which killed young medical students and two education ministers, among others, was widely seen as a direct attack on the education system itself.

Freedom of assembly is not respected amid the ongoing violence, and the largely informal economy is inhospitable to organized labor. The conflict has forced nongovernmental organizations and UN agencies operating in Somalia to either reduce or suspend their activities. Staff from one of the few that remains, the UN World Food Programme, have faced attack, and piracy off the Somali coast has increased the cost of shipping humanitarian supplies.

There is no judicial system functioning effectively at the national level. The TFA passed a law to implement Sharia (Islamic law) in May 2009, but the government was unable to carry out the legislation in practice. Local authorities administer a mix of Sharia and traditional Somali forms of justice and reconciliation. The harshest codes are enforced in areas under the control of the Shabaab. People convicted of theft or other minor crimes are flogged or have their limbs amputated, usually in public.

The human rights situation in Somalia remained grim in 2009, with civilians caught up in fighting between the Islamist militias, the TFG, and African Union peacekeepers. There was no effective process in place to investigate allegations of human rights abuses by any of the warring parties. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that there were 1.5 million internally displaced people by the year's end, most of them living in appalling conditions. An estimated 500,000 were taking refuge in neighboring countries.

Most Somalis share the same ethnicity and religion, but clan divisions have long fueled violence in the country. The larger, more powerful clans continue to dominate political life and are able to use their strength to harass the weaker clans.

Women in Somalia face a great deal of discrimination. Female genital mutilation is still practiced in some form on nearly all Somali girls. Sexual violence is rampant due to lawlessness and impunity for perpetrators, and rape victims are often stigmatized.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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