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Freedom in the World - Somaliland [Somalia] (2008)

Capital:
N/A

Population:
3,500,000

Political Rights Score: 4
Civil Liberties Score: 4
Status: Partly Free

Overview

Somaliland's government continued to function at a much higher level in 2007 than those in Mogadishu and the autonomous region of Puntland. At year's end, Somaliland had failed in its ongoing bid to win international recognition as an independent state, but its leaders met with more foreign dignitaries and increased the likelihood of eventual recognition. Somaliland forces also captured territory that is claimed by Puntland.

The modern state of Somalia was formed in 1960 when the newly independent protectorates of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland agreed to unite. In 1969, General Siad Barre took power in Somalia, ushering in a violent era of clan rivalries and political repression. As flood, drought, and famine racked the nation, the struggle to topple Barre resulted in varying degrees of civil war and banditry that lasted until January 1991, when he was finally deposed. Heavily armed militias, divided along traditional clan lines, then fought for power. The current Somaliland, largely conforming with the borders of the former British Somaliland in the northwestern corner of the country, seized the opportunity of Somalia's political collapse to declare independence.

In a series of clan conferences following the 1991 independence declaration, Somaliland's leaders agreed to form a government system that combined elements of an electoral democracy (a directly elected lower house) with traditional political structures (an upper House of Elders). Political parties did not operate freely until 2003. Since then, the three main political parties have roughly represented Somaliland's three most powerful clans. While the presidential election of 2003 and parliamentary elections of 2005 did not meet international standards, they were conducted without reports of widespread intimidation or misappropriation. Nevertheless, the government is relatively weak, clan-based conflicts still threaten stability, and women have very little influence on the decision-making process. There are also fears that the conflict in southern and central Somalia could spill over into Somaliland.

Somaliland has its own border disputes with its neighbors. It engaged in a military confrontation with Puntland forces in October 2007 when its troops seized the city of Las Anod in Sool region. The area was controlled by Puntland. The attack was popular among Somalilanders, many of whom disliked Somalia's current president, the former ruler of Puntland. Also during the year, Somaliland officials increased their contacts with foreign governments and international bodies, but they failed to win recognition of the region's independence.

About half of Somaliland's people are livestock herders. Since the region is not

recognized as an independent state, it does not receive direct development aid. However, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide some social services, and many locals attribute the region's success to the lack of international involvement in its affairs.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

According to Somaliland's constitution, the president is directly elected for five-year terms and appoints the cabinet. The lower house of the bicameral Parliament, the 82-seat House of Representatives, is directly elected for five-year terms, while the 82-seat House of Elders is indirectly elected by local communities for six-year terms. In April 2003, nearly half a million voters took part in the presidential election, which Dahir Riyale Kahin won by a margin of less than 100 votes. His most prominent opponent, Ahmed Mahamoud Silanyo, chose to respect the result, thus averting bloodshed. The last elections for the lower house took place in September 2005, but the upper house has repeatedly postponed elections since its formal six-year term expired in 2003. In May 2006, the House of Elders voted to extend its term another four years rather than hold elections in September.

Three main parties dominate Somaliland politics: the For Justice and Development Party; the United Peoples' Democratic Party, which is the president's party and is loosely affiliated with Somaliland's second-largest clan, the Dir clan; and the Peace, Unity, and Development Party, linked to [Silanyo](#) and loosely affiliated with the country's largest clan, the Isaaq clan.

Transparency International did not rank Somaliland separately in its 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Somaliland journalists enjoy much more freedom than their counterparts in the rest of Somalia, but because of elevated political tension ahead of the 2008 presidential election, the government limited press freedom more aggressively in 2007. It drafted a new press law that would reportedly grant the Ministry of Information more leeway to intervene in the managerial, financial, and editorial decisions of media outlets. Journalists have also protested against a government proposal that would require them to register with the ministry and obtain a press card to practice their profession. There were more high-profile cases of media harassment during the year. In January, Yusuf Gabobe and Ali Abdi Dini, journalists with the newspaper *Haatuf*, were detained for making allegations of corruption against the first lady. Another *Haatuf* journalist based in the northwestern Awdal region was also arrested in connection with the articles, and the three were tried for defamation in March. They were eventually pardoned, but the case had a negative effect on local media. Other journalists were also detained and harassed throughout the year, and at year's end at least two, Abdiqani Hassan Farah and Mohammed Shakale, remained in prison. The two were arrested in Las Anod for their coverage of the border conflict.

Two independent television stations began broadcasting in recent years, but the government is reluctant to liberalize the airwaves. It argues, with a degree of validity, that open access could lead to the instigation of clan violence. Newspapers in Somaliland are not economically sustainable and are heavily subsidized by journalists' relatives and Somalilanders living abroad. The internet is widely available at competitive prices and serves as an active forum through which the diaspora contributes to the local media environment.

Nearly all Somaliland residents are Sunni Muslims, and Islam is the state religion. Proselytizing by those of other faiths is prohibited.

International and local NGOs operate in Somaliland without serious government interference. The government is wary of large protests but there have not been reports of systematic government crackdowns on public gatherings.

According to the Somaliland constitution, the country has an independent judiciary. The constitution also states that the laws cannot violate the principles of Sharia (Islamic law). The judiciary functions relatively well, but there have been questions about the independence of the courts, and local Islamist groups have pushed for more explicit application of Sharia.

Somaliland police and security forces, while well organized, have been accused of being heavy handed. However, the scale of abuse does not approach human rights conditions in the rest of Somalia or other countries in the region.

Somaliland is ethnically and religiously homogeneous. Societal fault lines are largely based on clan. The larger, wealthier clans have more political clout than the less prominent clans, but clan elders often intervene to settle conflicts.

Society in Somaliland is patriarchal. While women are present in the workplace and hold some public positions, men have near-total domination of the political decision-making process. As in the rest of Somalia and other places in East Africa, female genital mutilation is practiced on the vast majority of women.