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Freedom in the World 2009 - Somalia

Capital: Mogadishu

Population: 9,000,000

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

The Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) continued to battle insurgent groups in 2008, and increased attacks on aid workers curtailed their activities in the country. In August, the TFG reached an agreement with a coalition of opposition groups, the Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia (ARS), that called for a ceasefire, the eventual withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, and power sharing. The TFG and ARS agreed in November to double the size of the transitional parliament, and the unpopular TFG president resigned in late December. Nevertheless, hard-line rebel factions boycotted the August agreement and continued fighting for the rest of the year.

Somalia gained independence in 1960 as an amalgam of former British and Italian colonies populated largely by ethnic Somalis. A coup in 1969 by army general Siad Barre led to two decades of instability, brutal civil strife, and the manipulation of clan loyalties for political purposes. Somalia was also plagued by natural disasters, including floods, drought, and famine. After Barre's regime was 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 strife 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 \$4 billion operation was eventually terminated, and international forces had departed by March 1995. Civil conflict continued over the subsequent decade with varying degrees of intensity.

In a peace conference in neighboring Djibouti in 2000, many of Somalia's faction leaders agreed to participate in a three-year transitional government with a 245-seat Transitional National Assembly. In August, the assembly elected Abdiqassim Salad Hassan as transitional president. The government and more than 20 rival factions signed a ceasefire in Kenya in 2002, but serious fissures developed over the next year, as some groups launched separate power-sharing negotiations in Mogadishu.

The political process was revitalized in 2004 at another conference in Kenya, which resulted in the establishment of a 275-seat Transitional Federal Assembly (TFA) and a new Transitional Federal Government (TFG). The country's four largest clans were each given 61 TFA seats, and an alliance of minor clans took the remaining 31. 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. A month later, he appointed Ali Muhammad Gedi as his prime minister.

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 Baidoa, about 155 miles to the north. Meanwhile, a hard-line faction within the ICU that was backed by Eritrea grew increasingly hostile toward Ethiopia. With U.S. support, Ethiopian forces invaded Somalia to oust the ICU in December 2006. By year's end, the Islamist forces had retreated to the extreme south of the country.

The ouster of the ICU led to renewed instability and an insurgency against the Ethiopian-backed TFG by groups including the Shabaab (Arabic for "youth"), a radical ICU faction. According to human rights groups, all sides in the conflict were guilty of severe human rights abuses, and as many as 400,000 people were displaced from Mogadishu during 2007. In November of that year, the TFA approved Nur Adde Hassan Hussein as the new prime minister; the increasingly unpopular Gedi had resigned weeks earlier. 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 ARS began in Djibouti in June, and in August, the two sides signed an agreement calling for an end to fighting, the eventual withdrawal of Ethiopian forces, and the establishment of a joint security committee. In November, the TFG and ARS agreed to a power-sharing arrangement that doubled the size of the 275-member parliament. The Ethiopian government announced that its 2,000-strong force would withdraw by the end of the year, but the pullout was not completed by year's end. The Shabaab and a hard-line faction of the ARS did not participate in the Djibouti talks, and fierce fighting continued. By November, forces allied with the Shabaab had gained control of most of southern Somalia, and another Islamist faction had seized several cities along the Ethiopian border. Clashes continued at year's end between Islamic militia groups and Ethiopian-backed government forces, particularly over control of Mogadishu.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Somalia is not an electoral democracy. The Somali state has in many respects ceased to exist. Technically, the country is governed by an internationally recognized Transitional Federal Government (TFG), but its actual control is minimal. The 275-member Transitional Federal Assembly, which convened in 2004, elected Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed to a five-year term as president, and he had the power to appoint a prime minister. In November 2008, the TFG and the ARS agreed to increase the number of parliamentary seats to 550, with 200 of the new seats allocated to the ARS and 75 to civil society

groups. Yusuf resigned as president in late December, and the legislature began deliberations on a replacement. 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 considerable stability as a de facto independent state, though it has not received international recognition. The region of Puntland, in the northeastern corner of the country, has been relatively autonomous since 1998. However, unlike Somaliland, it has not sought full independence, declaring only a temporary secession until Somalia is stabilized. Presidential elections in Puntland are scheduled for January 2009, and opposition candidates have accused incumbent Adde Muse, who is seeking reelection, of misusing public funds. In November 2008, opposition candidates also rejected the electoral commission, whose members were appointed by the president.

Because of mounting civil unrest and the breakdown of the state, corruption in Somalia is rampant and grew worse following the ouster of the ICU in 2006. Somalia was ranked as the worst performer among 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Although Somalia's Transitional Federal Charter (TFC) calls for the freedoms of speech and the press, these rights are quite limited in practice. The National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) declared that conditions worsened considerably in 2007, making Somalia the most dangerous country for journalists in Africa. During the year, eight media workers were killed, 53 were arrested, and more than 55 fled the country; five media outlets were also shut down. Journalists continued to face dangerous conditions in 2008, with three deaths in addition to several arrests and abductions. A journalist with the Somali National News Agency, Hassan Kafi Hared, died in a landmine explosion near Kismayo in January, and in June, NUSOJ vice president and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) correspondent Nasteh Dahir Farah was assassinated in Kismayo. Authorities arrested several journalists and harassed media outlets to limit their coverage of the insurgency. In one incident in April, TFG authorities raided and shut down a private Mogadishu-based radio station and arrested five of the station's employees, though they were released the same day and the station was permitted to resume broadcasting. In November, two foreign journalists and a local photographer were abducted in Mogadishu along with their driver. The parliament adopted a press law in March that allowed for significant government control over the media, prompting advocacy groups to call on the president to reject the bill; criticism of the law persisted through year's end.

Journalists also faced a difficult and dangerous media environment in Puntland, where in August the president banned journalists from reporting on the January 2009 presidential election until November 1. Two foreign journalists were abducted in Puntland in November and remained in captivity at year's end.

Despite the fragmented state of the Somali media environment, photocopied dailies and low-grade radio stations have proliferated since 1991. Owing to poverty and low literacy levels, radio remains the primary news medium, although there is no national broadcaster. A number of independent outlets ceased operations in 2007, and many of those that remain serve largely as mouthpieces for the factions they support in the fighting. 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 educational 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. Militants attacked primary and secondary schools on six separate occasions during 2008, prompting a three-day strike by educators in September to call for an end

to the violence.

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. Between July 2007 and June 2008, some 20 staff members of these groups were killed, making Somalia the world's most dangerous location for aid workers. The 2008 attacks included the July assassination of the local head of the UN Development Programme and the November murder of the local leader of Mercy Corps. Worsening piracy off the Somali coast has increased the cost of shipping humanitarian supplies, although there have been no hijackings of UN World Food Programme ships since the initiation of naval escorts by NATO countries in November 2007.

There is no judicial system functioning effectively at the national level. In many regions, local authorities administer a mix of Sharia (Islamic law) and traditional Somali forms of justice and reconciliation. Islamist groups that have regained territory since the ouster of the ICU in late 2006 have reimposed Sharia with varying degrees of severity. The harshest codes are enforced by affiliates of the Shabaab. The human rights situation in Somalia remained grim in 2008, and several international monitoring groups reported abuses by the Ethiopian military, the TFG, and insurgent factions.

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. In October 2008, a 13-year-old rape victim was stoned to death after an Islamic court in Kismayo found her guilty of adultery.

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