



Briefing Note

Another Successful Election in Somaliland

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Ahmed Mohamed Mahamoud 'Silanyo' has been sworn in as Somaliland's third democratically elected President, after his Kulmiye party beat the incumbent Uduub party in last month's elections. The road to these elections was often fraught with tension. But in overcoming the obstacles, Somaliland has demonstrated the durability of its democratic institutions, with few, if any, appropriate role-models amongst neighbouring states. Many in Somaliland hope that this election will finally convince the international community that they fully deserve international recognition.

Somaliland's peace stands in increasingly stark contrast to the violent and intractable political situation in southern Somalia. But it was not achieved overnight. Somaliland has negotiated its own particular brand of democracy and done so at its own initiative. Based on a clear commitment by Somaliland's political leadership to representative democracy, there has been a reconciliation process since 1991 which brings together all the dominant clans.

True to this commitment local, presidential and parliamentary elections were held in Somaliland in 2002, 2003 and 2005. Despite this credible track record, the success of the latest elections was not a forgone conclusion. They had been postponed on a number of occasions since 2008 and by September last year serious political in-fighting and a controversial electoral commission threatened the prospect of a meaningful poll. But eventually a political agreement was reached, a new National Electoral Commission (NEC) appointed and a viable electoral timetable established.

Security was a concern in the run up to the election. An incident involving political Islamists in Burco led to a shoot-out with police and arrests were made. There were warnings by al-Shabaab not to take part in voting but no acts of terrorism occurred. In Sool region a new group called SSC (the initials denote the disputed territories of Sool, Sanaag and Cayn) also engaged Somaliland forces, resulting in the death of an election official but only minor disruption to the voting.

Shortcomings in the election process included documented instances of underage voting and attempts to stuff ballot boxes. However, they were relatively easy to detect and the NEC acted decisively where they could. The vote tally proceeded smoothly and the final result was announced on 1 July, with Mr Silanyo securing a comfortable majority. The next day President Riyale conceded defeat. All the observer groups attending the election - both local and international - declared themselves happy with the process and final result.

Overall, Somaliland achieved an election and a transfer of power that many more established democracies would struggle to emulate, and none in the Horn of Africa could match.

There are lessons here for Somalia. Somaliland does not represent a model for Somalia per se: the social and political settlement is particular to Somaliland. The key point is that it has been a distinctively local endeavour, not driven by outsiders and dependent on Somaliland leadership.

Somaliland needs to see a change of attitude by the outside world. If it is to build on its success then it needs to connect with the international system much more comprehensively than has been possible to date. Full sovereign recognition is their preferred option and the new government will certainly press on with efforts to secure it. But it is not the only option available. Some extension of formal international status is now a priority for Somaliland and should be considered seriously by the international diplomatic community.