

The Illusion of Somali Unity

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The recent discussions surrounding the memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland have reignited outdated fantasies of Somali unity, exposing once again the deep chasm between political illusions and on-the-ground realities. While Mogadishu clings to the rhetoric of sovereignty and unity, Somaliland continues to thrive as a de facto independent state, deserving of recognition and respect for its achievements in democracy, governance, and stability. It is time to put aside the illusion of Somali unity and acknowledge the legitimacy of Somaliland's independence.

Somaliland's independence is not a modern invention but a reclamation of the sovereignty it was granted by British colonial authorities in 1960. After voluntarily uniting with Somalia in pursuit of a pan-Somali dream, Somaliland was subjected to decades of systemic oppression, culminating in the genocidal violence of the 1980s under the regime of Siad Barre. Tens of thousands of Somalilanders were slaughtered, their towns bombed into rubble, and their rights trampled under the weight of southern domination. The scars of that brutal era are still fresh, but they also serve as a foundation for Somaliland's decision to reclaim its independence in 1991. For 34 years, Somaliland has functioned as an independent state in all but name, demonstrating time and again that it is not only viable but exemplary.

While Somalia descends further into chaos, Somaliland has emerged as a beacon of democracy in the Horn of Africa. The recent elections on November 13, 2024, reaffirmed this commitment to democratic principles. Opposition parties secured presidential and parliamentary victories in an election process hailed by international observers as free, fair, and transparent. Ambassadors, high-ranking officials, and election monitors from around the globe commended Somaliland for its professionalism and integrity, providing yet another testament to its democratic credentials.

This starkly contrasts Somalia, which remains a failed state dependent on international military and financial support to maintain even the illusion of governance. Outside Mogadishu, Somalia is a fragmented mosaic of clan militias, al-Shabaab insurgents, and autonomous regions that openly defy federal authority. The very idea of Somali unity collapses under the weight of these realities. How can a state that cannot govern its own territory hope to unify with a region that has thrived independently for decades?

The MOU between Somaliland and Ethiopia reflects the shifting geopolitical realities of the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, landlocked and reliant on neighboring states for access to the sea, has long sought alternative maritime outlets. For Somaliland, the partnership with Ethiopia is an opportunity to strengthen its economy, enhance security, and edge closer to international recognition. The agreement, quietly supported by the United States and the United Kingdom, acknowledges Somaliland's strategic importance along the Red Sea and its potential as a stabilizing force in the region.

Opposition to Somaliland's recognition comes primarily from actors like Djibouti, Egypt, and Turkey, whose motivations are rooted in self-interest rather than a genuine concern for Somali unity. Djibouti fears losing its monopoly on Ethiopia's trade, while Egypt and Turkey see Somaliland's independence as a threat to their strategic leverage over Ethiopia. Eritrea and other authoritarian regimes in the region view Somaliland's democratic success as a dangerous precedent that could undermine their despotic rule.

Somaliland's achievements, however, cannot be ignored. Unlike its neighbors, Somaliland has demonstrated an unwavering commitment to democracy, security, and governance. While Somalia struggles under a United Nations trusteeship that has spanned more than three decades, Somaliland has charted its own course, building institutions, holding elections, and fostering a sense of national unity that Mogadishu can only dream of.

The African Union must recognize Somaliland's independence as a matter of principle and pragmatism. Somaliland meets all the criteria for statehood under international law, including defined borders, a functioning government, and a permanent population. Its recognition would not only validate the will of its people but also serve as a powerful signal that democracy and self-determination are valued in Africa.

Recognizing Somaliland would promote regional stability, offering a counterbalance to the chaos in Somalia and strengthening ties between the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea. It would also unlock economic opportunities, attracting international investment and fostering development in a region with immense untapped potential. Somaliland's partnership with Ethiopia, anchored by the MOU, is a step toward realizing this vision.

The argument for Somali unity is not only baseless but also dangerous. It perpetuates a cycle of denial and distraction that prevents real progress in the Horn of Africa. Somaliland's independence is not a threat but an opportunity—a chance to build a more stable, prosperous, and democratic region. It is time for the world, and particularly the African Union, to abandon the illusion of Somali unity and embrace the reality of Somaliland's sovereignty.

Somaliland's people have earned their independence through resilience, sacrifice, and an unwavering commitment to their values. The international community must now honor that achievement by recognizing Somaliland for what it is: a sovereign, independent state. The illusion of Somali unity has persisted for too long. The time for Somaliland's recognition is now.