
Strengthening Accountability in Somaliland: Parliament's Role and Prospects for Reform

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Hon Abdirahman Mohamed Abdillahi "Irro" MP

It gives me great pleasure to be with you here today. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Royal Institute of International Affairs for organizing this event. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Somaliland diaspora in the United Kingdom for their dedication and support to Somaliland. On behalf of the Somaliland people I would like to convey a sincere and deep gratitude to Her Majesty's Government and Prime Minister Theresa May. We are forever indebted to the UK for their unwavering and consistent support over the years.

Let me begin with a brief recap of democracy in Somaliland. In 2002 district council elections were held to determine which political parties could contest the first Presidential elections. From this process three parties were given 'official' status, the United People's Democratic Party (UDUB), the For Justice and Development Party (UCID), and the Peace, Unity and Development Party.

In 2003 President Dahir Riyale Kahin was elected and the first parliamentary elections occurred in 2005. In 2010 President Kahin was replaced by Ahmed M. Mahamoud 'Silanyo,' who is our current President. President Riyale's peaceful transfer of power was a remarkable milestone for our democracy and we hope the incumbent administration will honour the result of future elections in a similar fashion.

The second Parliamentary elections were originally scheduled for 2010 but have been repeatedly delayed and are now currently scheduled for 2019. The Presidential elections were meant to take place in 2015 but have been delayed to 28 March 2017 by a Supreme Court ruling. However, the opposition parties Waddani and UCID supported a technical adjustment to the election date due to the current severe drought. All major national stakeholders agreed to shift the elections to 10 October 2017 although the House of Elders (Guurti) again changed the election date to November 2017. My party, the Waddani Party, condemns the norm that has developed whereby elections are repeatedly delayed. While we accept that we exist within a fragile system and one where democracy is in its infancy, we are still concerned by this norm that allows ruling parties to maintain power beyond their elected terms.

Voter registration was recently completed, which represents a major achievement. Nearly 900,000 people have been biometrically registered using iris scans. The Waddani Party is ready and supportive of the elections. One of my key priorities is to get democracy back on track. I want to be clear and bold here, under my leadership there will not be election delays whether this is presidential, local or parliamentary.

I will now turn to the drought, which is the greatest challenge for Somaliland at present. Cyclical droughts are a common feature of the lives of pastoralists in the Horn of Africa. This drought cycle however has been recognized as the most ferocious in recent memory and we are currently facing a famine situation. The Waddani Party has been critical of the current government's response to the crisis. We believe they have not done enough to prepare to mitigate the effects of the drought and have not developed a coherent response plan. My party has a detailed plan of managing recurrent droughts and minimizing their damage to our people and their livestock assets including: building contingency resources in our central government and municipal budgets, investing in water, in fodder production, in environmental regeneration and in the longer term transformation of the nomadic pastoralist way of life.

In the current emergency situation we are appealing to the international community to help Somaliland save its people from the grip of the advancing famine. We are very grateful to the international community for the support it has already given to Somaliland yet the scale of this humanitarian crisis still demands much more. The children and the elderly are already dying and rest of the nomadic families are streaming to urban centres in their destitution. We are also urging the Government of Somaliland to

prepare centres to care for the drought victims and to fully commit to a transparent and accountable process that reach all drought victims.

The importance of transparency and accountability is also raised by the recent and controversial developments in Berbera. For those of you not aware, Berbera is a port city and strategically placed on the Red Sea. It is also a major civilian aviation centre and is crucial for Somaliland's imports and exports. The development of the port by an international company has been rumoured for the last couple of years. In June 2016 a deal was signed between DP World, a Dubai based company, and the Government of Somaliland. According to the initial memorandum of understanding DP World has committed to investing US\$442 million in the port for a period spanning over three decades.

The Waddani Party encourages the development of Somaliland's assets and recognises the potential of Berbera port. It has the potential to serve landlocked Ethiopia's fast growing export-import trade. We are very concerned however by the lack of transparency and accountability in the DP World contract. There was no open tender process and the contract details and impact is still shrouded with secrecy. When done in such non-transparent manner, it has the potential to increase corruption and to rob the Somaliland people of their assets.

I want to declare here that under my leadership this lack of transparency culture will change, and that my government will commit to the application of zero tolerance policy towards corruption in all its shades.

The recent announcement of the agreement between the government of Somaliland and the UAE, whereby the UAE will build a military base at Berbera, is also of great concern to my party and our people. We are generally supportive of assisting our security allies and of agreements that will bring jobs to Somaliland people. This military base however has the potential to bring several serious challenges to Somaliland at a time when we are ill equipped to deal with them. These include Somaliland being drawn into the conflict in Yemen and into the wider geopolitics of the region. There is also risk to Somaliland's national security if we are seen to take sides in geopolitical conflicts without adequate and compensating safeguards. Moreover Berbera and the use of its strategic national assets are a crucial factor Somaliland for its future development, both in building political alliances and in securing economic growth for its people. It is a national heritage intertwined with our hopes for freedom and for prosperity. We cannot afford therefore to take these risks without public debate and a rigorous examination of the details of the agreement to protect our people's interests.

Let me also touch on another burning issue; the current government's record of the Freedom of Press. To quote from the Global Journalist, 'Once considered a democratic beacon in East Africa, despite the fact that its government has not been formally recognized internationally, the Somaliland government has stepped up efforts to silence critical news reporting and dissenting media in recent years.' Scores of journalists are being detained because they are fulfilling their democratic duties to provide information to the public on critical issues such as Berbera port and airport dealings. One recent example is the director of Star TV, Mohamed Bashe Haji Hassan, who was detained for participating in a debate on the issue of a UAE military base in Berbera. Media houses including major TV channels such HCTV and Universal are subjected to acts or threats of closure; and even the indomitable BBC is not spared when it comes to threats. The Somaliland Constitution is clear about the protection of Freedom of Expression in Article 32 and I am committed to uphold the freedom of speech as an inalienable right of Somaliland people. I am also committed to embrace the important role the free press can play in the quest for recognition of Somaliland and in the realization of Waddani Party's vision to build a democratic and prosperous society in Somaliland.

I will conclude by explaining why I am still optimistic about Somaliland's future despite the many challenges we face. Somaliland and its people have experienced conflict, drought, famine, displacement, oppression and familial separation over the last few decades. Lack of international recognition continues to impede us in maximising our development efforts. Yet we have built a largely peaceful democratic state, in contrast to Somalia. With very little resources our people have rebuilt their lives and our private sector is growing rapidly. Somalilanders are resilient people and they are survivors. I am confident the state of Somaliland will continue to strengthen. My role is to lead this process and to facilitate the pooling of our energies to overcome the challenges I have outlined above. I shall be honoured to serve them in that capacity.