ABSTRACT

TRANSITION FROM A CLAN-BASED SYSTEM TO MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY IN SOMALILAND

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In the media, Somaliland is frequently referred to as one of the most promising examples of statehood in Sub-Saharan Africa. This unrecognized republic proclaimed its independence in 1991 following the collapse of the central government in Somalia prompted by a civil war. In the light of sad notoriety Somalia has recently received for the surge in piracy off its coast, Somaliland is actively trying to attract international attention to its achievements in state-building. Piracy is virtually inexistent near Somaliland’s shores; furthermore, the government has put dozens of suspected pirates to trial and offered international patrols to use its ports for the anti-piracy mission.

Despite the government’s ability to exercise control over the Somaliland’s territory, there are numerous problems that prevent this proto-democracy from being considered a regional role model. It is marred by corruption, institutional weakness, limited press freedom, and a possibility of inter-clan conflict. Throughout the previous decade, the government was based on a power-sharing agreement among three major clans. At the beginning of the 2000s, a transition to a multi-party system was initiated. At present, the parliament has two chambers, the House of Representatives elected for five years and the House of Elders representing clan leaders. However, there are fears of electoral fraud and results contestation in the upcoming September presidential elections. The current president’s term in office expired in 2008 but was extended by a controversial decision of the upper house of the parliament. Two other threats to the fledging democracy are the strengthening trend for voting along clan lines and consolidation of power in the hands of the ruling Unity, Democracy, and Independence Party. Reconciling the traditional clan-based system of governance with Western institutions is a challenging task for Somaliland.