

What next for Somaliland's foreign policy after the election?

Published on Pambazuka News (<https://www.pambazuka.org>)

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Thursday, November 9, 2017 - 12:15



After delays, on November 13 Somaliland will elect its fifth president since 1991 when it declared independence from Somalia. One month later, the new president will be sworn and inaugurated in the presidential palace, according to the constitution of Somaliland. A recent report published by Mohamed Farah Hersi from the Academy of Peace and Development (APD) and Omar S. Mahmood from the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) mentioned that the 2017 presidential election 'could strengthen Somaliland's bid for recognition' while it solidifies 'the nation's democratic credentials'.

Still a de facto state in terms of international law, Somaliland is struggling to gain a de jure status in order to receive a seat in the United Nations and other important international and regional bodies including the African Union. During the last 26 years, Somaliland has been peaceful in a region of instability, terror, piracy, chaos and violence. Somaliland has conducted a new foreign policy of engagement with the neighbouring countries, although relations with Somalia were all time 'low' due to the fact that Somaliland declared independence, while Somalia claims that Somaliland is still part and parcel of Somalia. The ruling party presidential candidate Musa Bihi recently argued that Somaliland's neighbours are separated into 'allies and adversaries'.

Somaliland-Ethiopia relations in terms of security will remain after the election; trade relations will be boosted as the two countries will sign new trade deals. Omar S. Mahmood from the Institute of Security Studies recently mentioned in an interview that as Berbera is developed, the economies of Somaliland and Ethiopia will be more 'linked' and this can provide a strong 'basis for cooperation'. Ethiopian interdependence with Somaliland can in turn be 'leveraged' by Somaliland and potentially may receive support within IGAD and AU for Somaliland's recognition, Mahmood argued.

Although there is a trade deficit that needs to be addressed, in general Ethiopians are interested in maintaining a good cooperation with Somaliland. Recently, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Haile Mariam Desalegn met with the presidential candidates in order to discuss relations between the two states, the future relations after the election, and also some regional issues that matter to both countries. While Ethiopia sees Somaliland as an important ally in terms of security and trade, Somaliland is thinking about a new approach to its relations with Ethiopia, especially in terms of trade.

The UCID party presented a new policy of creating a trade deal between the two countries in the 'first hundred days' of their presidency if elected. Although there is on going talk on trade, there is no doubt that the security relations between Somaliland and Ethiopia will even grow stronger, based on the interest of the two countries and as regional challenges increase.

For Djibouti, the two countries now enjoy good cooperation in terms of security since Djibouti suffered a horrible terrorist attack in 2014. Djibouti also has good trade links with Somaliland,

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although analysts disagree about the extent of the trade relations. Kulmiye and Waddani both agree that they will work closely with Djibouti in matters of security and trade, while UCID argue that they will work to build the confidence of Djibouti in their trade relations with Somaliland. Djibouti is not happy about the deals between Somaliland and the UAE in terms of developing the Berbera port as it seems to them a potential economic challenge in the future. The next government in Somaliland must focus on security cooperation with Djibouti while creating a 'united front and common understanding' about the importance of the relations between the two states, as Mahmood, again, pointed out. As a potential competitor, there is no doubt that relations between the two states will suffer if the leaders of the two states don't focus on their common interest rather than their differences.

On Somalia, the issue is different. Relations between Somaliland and Somalia are all-time hostile. President Silanyo announced a new policy of engagement (seeking cooperation and promoting reconciliation is the foundation of this policy), but the new policy has failed as Somalia hasn't implemented the agreements reached. Before President Silanyo, President Rayale was a hardliner when it came to relations with Somalia. His foreign minister Abdilahi Dualeh recently mentioned that their government was 'not against a dialogue with Somalia' but they believe that there is 'not a possible way to reach a deal' with Somalia. Future relations between Somaliland and Somalia were discussed in a recent debate between the presidential candidates, while the ruling party candidate Muse Bihi, a hardliner, took a fanatical stand on Somalia. He presented his policy towards the neighbouring countries and mentioned that he is ready for a dialogue that the international community 'is mediating', not 'facilitating'. A totally different stand from President Silanyo's policy towards Somalia, which he was negotiating while seeking a 'facilitating role' from the world.

Although all the candidates agree that the dialogue has failed, the UCID candidate presented a new policy; a new 'interventionist policy' which will be a win-win for both Somaliland and Somalia as the party thinks. Faisal Ali Warabe said he would work with Somalia to gain peace and stability while creating allies in the political circles of Somalia within two years. Although it is a new strategy, it will need time to discuss and examine its future. But it seems impossible for Somaliland and Somalia to agree in two years. Abdirahman Irro from Waddani Party agreed that the dialogue has failed, but needs to resume under 'possible conditions'.

Beyond the region, there is a need for a new approach towards the Gulf Peninsula and the Middle East in general. The Middle East is in an unstable situation. While efforts of the international coalition to defeat ISIS in Syria and Iraq are doubled, there is a geopolitical challenge between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which some refer to as 'the Cold War in the Middle East', and this has affected a number of countries most notably Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Africa has also become a new '[competing arena](#)' [2] for the Saudis and the Iranians as Gerald M. Feierstein, a former US Ambassador and director of Gulf affairs at the Middle East Institute, stated. While the Arab countries were clearly against the independence of Somaliland since 1991, President Silanyo tried to engage with the Arab countries by asking them to support Somaliland economically. This resulted in the Kuwaiti investment of Hargeisa and Berbera airports while the UAE and Somaliland recently signed an agreement in order to invest Berbera Port.

These new projects have shifted Somaliland's policy towards the Middle East from a position of 'non-alignment' to alignment with the Arab countries. For example, in 2015 when the Saudi-led coalition attacked Yemen in order to support the internationally recognized government of Hadi, President Silanyo announced in a speech to parliament that Somaliland is 'fully aligned' with the Saudi-led coalition, instead of encouraging different factions in Yemen to negotiate.

Yemen is one of the victims of the geopolitical rivalry between the Riyadh and Tehran. Furthermore, after the Gulf Crisis erupted, the government of Somaliland stated its position to 'fully support the AQT position towards Qatar'. These new moves are not welcomed by observers as they argue it may not be a good idea for a non-recognized state to create new foes, but to take a neutral position and engage both sides in the conflict, rather than siding with one.

As Ambassador David Shinn, a former US ambassador to Ethiopia and an adjunct Professor of International Affairs at the George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs, noted in our recent interview, Somaliland has to make 'every effort' possible to 'avoid taking sides'

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in the Gulf conflicts. He listed the Yemen Civil War and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. He said that Somaliland has to encourage 'foreign investment' from the states across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, but also warned that aligning politically with one or more countries in the region could prove to be 'short-sighted' a couple of years from now. Shinn described the Middle Eastern powers' interest in Africa as 'transitory'.

Omar S. Mahmood, from the Institute for Security Studies, recently stated in an interview that Middle East conflicts, in general, are 'internal', and there will be 'little benefit' for Somaliland to pick sides on the conflict.

Alternatively, Somaliland is in a need of designing a new foreign policy that clearly safeguards its national interest. In order to maintain a good cooperation with the international community, Somaliland should be 'more transparent' than it is now, especially with the deals signed by the government as Mahmood reported. Besides the new foreign policy, Somaliland should set up a new policy of engaging the world in general, particularly the powerful states of Europe, US and Asia. The world is in a new, unpredictable order which combines new challenges and opportunities and these need to be considered. At this stage, Somaliland needs to engage, not to create opponents in the international system.

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Issue Number: [844](#) [7]

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(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementById(id)) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src =
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fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));
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Article-Summary:

Somaliland's presidential elections next week offer the self-declared Horn of Africa nation an opportunity to re-examine its foreign policy. Until now, it has sought to engage all its neighbours - except Somalia. But the nation seems keen to take sides in conflicts in the Middle East. Somaliland needs to engage, but not to create opponents in, the international system.

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