

Book Reviews

Michael Walls (2014), *A Somali Nation-State: History, Culture and Somaliland's Political Transition*, Pisa: Ponte Invisible, ISBN 9788 888934440, 358 pp.

With this contribution, Michael Walls presents a book-length account of Somali state formation from a historical perspective. According to the author, the key insight of the text is, “No centralized nation-state system has ever been functional for any more than the briefest of periods in the Somali Horn, with the exception in recent years of Somaliland” (315). Consequently, the book is essentially a political history of the Somalis, with an emphasis on present-day politics in Somaliland (up until 2013). The introduction mentions the most well-established but misleading clichés about Somalis and Somalia as, respectively, a people persistently defying centralised rule and “the world’s most dangerous place.” In the face of these bromides, the key motivation of the author is to understand how Somaliland “achieved a level of success that continues to stand in vivid contrast to the serial failure of state-building efforts in the south” (25). Walls argues that Somaliland’s perseverance shows that, albeit with some problems, an “accommodation is possible between the discursive politics of tradition and a representative system more suited to the Westphalian state” (27). Subsequently, chapters 1 to 6 (30–160) provide socio-cultural and historical background that, if one follows the author, serves to buttress the argument that indeed, the recently established Republic of Somaliland is the first and only centralised nation-state to emerge in the Somali Horn. The second half of the book – chapters 7 to 9 (161–306) – concentrates on Somaliland in the northwest of the collapsed Somali Republic and its formation as a hybrid political order. Chapter 10 presents the conclusions.

It is a clear strength of the book that it digs deep concerning the culture and history of the area. Walls exhibits a good grasp of the older “standard literature,” combining that with references to numerous, often younger, Somali authors and to other (and sometimes less-cited) works on proverbs, gender issues, the role of minorities, and so forth. The first half of the book provides a dense reading of the colonial and early post-colonial period. One obvious criticism, however, at least for the specialist reader, is that the text does not produce new insights in its extensive background section (chapters 2 to 6). That being said, at the end of several chapters Walls provides condensed, sharp analytical statements that weave together his main argument about the successful formation of the

Somaliland nation-state. He highlights, for instance, that even as far back as colonial times, the differences between representative democracy and consensus-based Somali democracy frequently went unnoted by observers and politicians. This remains a problem today (130).

The first decade of Somaliland's post-collapse peace-building and state formation (which Walls covers in chapter 7) has already been examined in two recent academic books by Mark Bradbury (2008) and Marleen Renders (2012). Where Walls becomes really original is in chapters 8 and 9 – and these are extensive chapters, together covering approximately 100 pages. His detailed outline of the wrangling over a formal constitution for Somaliland between President Egal (1993–2002) and the Parliament, and his description of the dynamics leading to the referendum and the first rounds of elections make for an informative and good read. His in-depth description of the complex dynamics and multiple minor and major crises from 2008 (second presidential elections) to 2013 (local district council elections) is brilliant. Here, the fact comes into play that the author was on the ground during those years, involved with observing and analysing elections and helping to overcome deadlocks as an external advisor acquainted with many key actors. The author illustrates the electoral dynamics with helpful graphs. A particular merit of his “dense description” is that he confronts problems such as multiple voting and corruption at the level of the central government with the necessary analytical clarity.

One major criticism, however, is that in the core chapters Walls concentrates almost exclusively on political events in Hargeysa. The author is so occupied with disentangling the political puzzles in the capital that he hardly mentions what is going on elsewhere in the country. Only here and there does he note that certain votes could not be cast in the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli areas in eastern Somaliland. He then states that one of the “most difficult and contentious issues” was that of the east (240). He also mentions the SSC (Sool Sanaag and Cayn) and Khaatumo movements in passing, but does not tell the reader, first, that Somaliland and Puntland, its neighbour to the east, have been engaged in military conflict since 2004 over the contested borderlands (the land inhabited by Dhulbahante and Warsangeli) and, second, that several thousand Somaliland forces have been stationed in the east since 2007, fighting against local resistance in the Dhulbahante areas (SSC and Khaatumo militias). In the course of this fighting, more than 100 people have been killed, many more having been injured and temporarily displaced. Essentially, Walls ignores any serious contestation of Somaliland (except the “Garxajis war” in the mid-1990s) and proceeds as if today,

the existence of a Somalilander political identity is self-explanatory – which it is not.

This directly leads to a further point of criticism: the book carries the term “nation-state” in the title, but the author actually does not present or analyse nation-state formation. He does provide quite an insightful account of the transition from consensus to the multi-party system of politics and the continuing problems related to this. The conclusion that the introduction of a multi-party system “required important compromises that had the effect of reducing the space for political participation” (307) is convincing. But Walls does not really show how Somalilanders could be understood as a “nation” based on a shared political identity that would differ substantially from their co-ethnics (united in language, faith, culture, and traditions) in the south.

At the very end, Walls states that Somaliland “offers real lessons beyond its borders” (316). While this is true in some regards, the author ignores two quite important factors that decisively limit the scope of the lessons that can be learned from this case: First, the political identity of Somalilanders (prevalent in the capital and the central regions) developed against the backdrop of Somalia’s continued failure. At moments of crisis, the desire not to become “like Mogadishu” kept ordinary people in Somaliland motivated to carry on and to pressure their political elites to stay on course. This background cannot be replicated and therefore limits what can be learned from Somaliland for other cases; it makes Somaliland *sui generis*. Second, the political and military competition with Puntland since 1998 and with local clan militias in the east since 2009 was actually a major driving force for politicians and people in central Somaliland to clarify who they are – as a political group. Again, this is something one would not like to recommend for repetition; again, it puts limitations on the lessons to be learned from this case.

In sum: The first half of the book can serve as a modern textbook, introducing Somali society, history, and politics. The original contribution in the book’s second half is its outline of politics in the centre of Somaliland with a strong focus on the period between 2008 and 2013 and the complexities surrounding elections in these years. The argument about Somaliland being the first centralised nation-state to function over a longer period of time in the Somali Horn is interesting, but in the eyes of the reviewer not fully convincing, due to the author’s lack of acknowledgement of internal contestations, the rivalry with Puntland, and the idea that Somaliland flourished only in contrast to failed Somalia. Alongside other recently published accounts on Somaliland based on long-

standing empirical research (Bradbury, Renders, Hoehne),¹ this book sheds light on the fascinating political history of a still poorly understood part of the world.

- Markus V. Höhne

1 Mark Bradbury (2008), *Becoming Somaliland*, Oxford: James Currey; Marleen Renders (2012), *Consider Somaliland: State-Building with Traditional Leaders and Institutions*, Leiden: Brill; Markus Virgil Hoehne (2015), *Between Somaliland and Puntland: Marginalization, Militarization and Conflicting Political Visions*, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.