

Selling the Somaliland illusion: A Modern-Day Brooklyn Bridge Scam

The phrase "selling the Brooklyn Bridge" has become a symbol of gullibility, rooted in a famous scam from the early 20th century. Completed in 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge was an engineering marvel and a New York City icon, but it also became a target for fraud. George C. Parker, a notorious con artist, famously "sold" the bridge—and other landmarks—to unsuspecting victims by forging documents and even setting up fake toll booths. His targets were often immigrants or tourists who lacked knowledge of local property laws and customs. Parker's schemes were elaborate; he sometimes enlisted other fraudsters to pose as government officials, lending an air of legitimacy to his scams. These victims, unfamiliar with the language and legal systems, were easily duped into handing over their hard-earned money. They fell for the illusion of legitimacy, a hallmark of classic con artistry.

In East Africa, we are witnessing a modern-day equivalent of this scam: the push for international recognition of "Somaliland." Just as Parker sold the Brooklyn Bridge to unsuspecting rubes, the Isaaq clan is attempting to sell the idea of an independent "Somaliland" to the Western world. Their claim is based on the assertion that the territory formerly known as British Somaliland was historically a separate nation that voluntarily united with Italian Somaliland in 1960 to form the Somali Republic. According to their narrative, this union was a mistake, and they now have the right to secede. However, this claim is fundamentally false. The territory in question was never the exclusive domain of the Isaaq clan. Historically, it has been home to multiple clans, including the Warsengeli, Dhulbahante, and others. These land rights predate colonial borders by hundreds of years and cannot be erased by the Isaaq's revisionist narrative. By presenting themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of the region, the Isaaq are attempting to con the international community into granting them control over land that does not belong to them exclusively.

Over the past 30 years, the Isaaq-led administration in Hargeisa has fraudulently marketed itself to Western governments as a democratic, peaceful entity yearning for freedom. However, the reality is far darker. The Isaaq-led Somaliland governance has engaged in brutal tactics to maintain control, including extra-judicial killings of non-Isaaq elites which lead to a nine-month military campaign of shelling civilians in Las Anod in a failed attempt to suppress an uprising. Sadly, the war against SSC civilians continues under guise of "protecting Somaliland". These actions are neither progressive nor democratic—they are acts of violence and oppression that have destabilized the region and deepened divisions. The Isaaq have repeatedly pointed to their suffering under the Siad Barre regime, including allegations of genocide, as justification for their independence while simultaneously exercising state violence against clans that oppose them.

The few foreign profiteers and lobbyists for Western project, eager to support Somalia Balkanization and what they perceive as a progressive movement in a troubled region, have poured millions of dollars into "Somaliland". These funds were ostensibly meant to build infrastructure and foster democracy, but they have largely lined the pockets of successive administrations from the Habr Awal subclan, who spent funding suppressing opposition and on public relation campaigns to promote "Somaliland" as a bastion of democracy tethered to a failed state.

Ironically, the "Somaliland" administrations exhibit classic signs of being a failed state itself. The "democratic elections" held in so called Somaliland (one clan enclave of Isaaq) are a façade, with voting limited almost exclusively to the Isaaq clan. Despite decades of international support, the region has seen little development. The significant infrastructure—such as the main road in Hargeisa

and the port in Berbera—were built during the Barre era. The millions spent have left no lasting legacy, except for the enrichment of a few within the ruling Habr Awal subclan.

This is a classic con, no different from George C. Parker's schemes. The Isaaq clan has created an illusion of legitimacy, presenting themselves as the rightful owners of a territory that belongs to multiple clans. They have duped Western governments into buying the idea of "an independent Somaliland", despite the lack of historical, international, and indigenous legal justification. Just as Parker sold the Brooklyn Bridge to unsuspecting victims, the Isaaq are selling the idea of Somaliland to a world eager to believe in a feel-good story of liberation and democracy. But the truth is far more complex, and the international community must see through this charade before it legitimizes a fraudulent claim and further destabilizes an already fragile region.

For over 30 years, the people of SSC (Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn) have consistently resisted Somaliland's rule, rejecting the Isaaq clan's claims over their territory. This resistance culminated in SSC's decades and recent declaration of autonomy and recognition as an interim federal member state. Unfortunately, the desire of the SSC-Khatumo people to have self-determination has been met with brutal force from the Isaaq clan under the banner of "Somaliland" and aided by Foreign agents and private Isaaq militias. This has resulted in the deaths and displacement of thousands of civilians. The international community must not turn a blind eye to these atrocities and the ongoing oppression of SSC communities under Somaliland's disputed rule.

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