

Turkey-Somalia Relations After a Long-awaited Election

After many delays and postponements, the long-awaited presidential election was recently held indirectly in Somalia and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud became the new president again, defeating Mohamed Farmaajo at the third round. The election process was followed by Somalia's neighbors, regional powers as well as the West; and it was also followed closely by Turkey. I can say the election created a sort of excitement for Ankara since Somalia is a close ally of Turkey since 2011. Later, Turkey congratulated Hassan Mohamud's election victory.

Turkey-Somalia ties dates back to 16th century but the states' modern relations started only at the end of the 1970s after Turkey opened its embassy in Mogadishu. At the beginning of the 1990s Turkey closed its embassy due to civil war and the US-led "Operation Restore Hope" joint military campaign by sending 700 troops to UNISOM II mission under the leadership of General Çevik Bir. After the failure of the operation Turkey pulled over its military staff from Mogadishu following the UN missions and never turned back to Somalia again.

However, 2011 was an important turning point for Turkey-Somalia relations after Turkey's intervention during the deadly famine in Somalia. Turkey took a different initiative at that time and it can be described as more civic than military. Humanitarian aid and development campaigns as well as business and trade have been frontrunner instruments of Turkey's new approach to Somalia given its strategic location in the Horn of Africa. And then Turkey reopened its embassy in Mogadishu.

Turkey's entrance to Somalia coincided with the last days of President Sheikh Sherif Ahmed who was also candidate for presidency in the last election but failed to pass the second round. From 2012 until 2017 Turkey worked with Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and at that period Turkey started its mega projects in Mogadishu such as paving the roads of the capital, building the largest embassy compound, building a teaching & training hospital and building a military training center for the Somali National Army. Turkey's cooperation continued after 2017 when Mohamed Farmaajo defeated Hassan Mohamud at the presidential election. Considerable number of Somali youths received Turkish scholarship and Somali communities in the big cities of Turkey became more visible. Somali restaurants, cafes, communication and internet shops along with trade offices mushroomed.

According to Turkey's ambassador to Somalia Mehmet Yılmaz, in this new era Turkey-Somalia interaction will gain new momentum especially at the mediation process between Hargeisa and Mogadishu.[i] As known, Turkey once started an initiative inviting both sides to Ankara for talks in order to achieve Somalia's unity but failed to reach a concrete outcome. Hassan Mohamud's interview with Turkey's Anadolu Agency after the election result was announced also reflects positive expectations in regard to the future of Turkey-Somalia interaction. He indicated that Turkey won the hearts and minds of Somalis as a result of its sincere efforts in the country.[ii]

Although faces in the Somali political arena changes in every 4-5 years throughout peaceful elections, the country's chronic problems such as terrorism, fragmentation and poverty remain unsolved. For example, ending terrorism and bringing 1-person 1-vote system were amongst the strong promises of Mohamed Farmaajo but the last election was held indirectly due to security concerns; terror attacks still remain as a major obstacle ahead of Somalia. Meanwhile, Farmaajo portrayed an anti-democratic outlook due to his delays in the election calendar in the past one and a half year. This might be resulted in the fall of his popularity.

Expecting swift solutions may not be logical when we consider Somalia's hard reality. But, for sure, the country needs strong support and funding in order to defeat obstacles ahead. So far, Turkey's TURKSOM trained 5.000 Somali troops, the country also recruited 1.000 police force along with implementing many other development projects for Somalia. And bilateral trade volume between Turkey and Somalia reached from scratch to 300 million dollars recently.

[iii] Future expectations in the improvement of bilateral relations between both countries seem positive.

Since 2011, Turkey has worked with Sheikh Sherif Ahmed, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Mohamed

Farmaajo and established a very positive image in the eyes of Somalis. Although Turkey is filling a very important gap in Somalia, there are some serious challenges ahead of both countries.

Turkey's political and economic stability played an important role in establishing such an image and success story so far. But the current economic hardship and xenophobic attacks of opposition groups to all sort of immigrants including Somalis and other Africans in Turkey started disrupting this positive perception. Acts like forcing Somalis to change their business names or demanding them to move from central places to the outskirts of cities reflect increasing xenophobia in Turkey. In addition to that, there will be a presidential election in Turkey in a year's time and AK Party is experiencing its toughest times since it came to power in which the party guaranteed a chain of election victories. For Turkey-Somalia relations, the continuation of AK Party rule seems important because President Erdoğan himself is the main promoter of bilateral relations between both countries. His historic visit in 2011 and other visits later are all remembered well and appreciated highly by people of Somalia; which might explain why Istanbul and Erdoğan became most popular names in Somalia.

Endnotes

[i] "Turkey-Somalia ties to gain momentum in new era: Turkish envoy", *Daily Sabah*, 18 May 2022, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-somalia-ties-to-gain-momentum-in-new-era-turkish-envoy>

[ii] Mohammed Dhaysane & Tufan Aktas, "Turkey has touched minds and hearts of Somalis: Somalia's new president", *AA*, 17.05.2022, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/turkiye-has-touched-minds-and-hearts-of-somalis-somalias-new-president/2590347>

[iii] "Turkey-Somalia ties to gain momentum..."

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