



Djibouti — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[formerly known as French Somaliland]

03/25/1885 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of France]: In the late 19th century, France declared a protectorate and colony over the region at the Horn of Africa, which comprised Djibouti and its immediate hinterland, naming it French Somaliland (Lea/Rowe 2001, Roberts 1986). From 1862 until 1894, the land to the north of the Gulf of Tadjoura was called Obock and ruled by Somali and Afar Sultans.¹ French Somaliland was formally established after the Issa and Afar rulers each signed a treaty with the French.² On 03/11/1862, a treaty was signed in Paris by Afar Sultan Raieta Dini Ahmet, relinquishing the territory of Obock and later, that treaty was used by the French to colonize the south of the Bay of Tadjoura: On 03/25/1885 the French signed a treaty with the Gadabuursi, a northern Somali clan, effectively making them a protectorate of France.³ On 03/26/1885 the French signed another treaty with the Issa making the latter a protectorate under the French.⁴ Lagarde was appointed French colonial governor of Obock Territory in Africa, a position he held from 1884 to 1899.⁵ In 1894, he established a permanent French administration in the city of Djibouti.⁶ Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Later, the administrative capital of the colony was moved from Obock to Djibouti to enhance trading from East Africa and Somalia (Lea/Rowe 2001). Both LIED and V-Dem's PCLI classify political liberties as absent. This period is coded as colonial rule because first, the Afar ruler ceded the territory of Obock to France and then the French claimed the southern regions that were under control of the Issa, despite the existence of a protectorate agreement. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, and V-Dem's LCE is similarly interpreted as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. On 10/27/1946, the international status of French Somaliland was changed to an overseas territory within the French Union. It received its own legislature and representation in the French parliament.⁷ Women attained the right to vote, and the Representative Council of French Somali Coast was elected as the colony's parliament.⁸ The council consisted of two sections with ten members each, one of which had to be French. The exact makeup of the section was subject to further restrictions along ethnic lines. For example, ethnic Afars and Arabs could only elect one member of the first section and two members of the second section each while French citizens elected six seats of the first section. Four seats of the second section were not elected but appointed by the Governor.⁹ The allocation of seats in the council did not allow for an appropriate measure of government participation by the indigenous population to justify a regime change to indirect colonial rule. The Representative Council had the power to decide on budgetary and administrative issues.¹⁰ Political liberties were absent according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. Based on our observations, only multiparty legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED categorizes elections during this regime period as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI scores them as not really free or fair. Their CEI scores elections during this time as not clean. These deficits to actual self-governance of French Somaliland mark an edge case between being a direct and indirect colony.

06/23/1956 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of France, Liberal Democracy]/Start Electoral Autocracy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under France, Liberal Democracy]: A decree implementing the Loi Cadre (enabling law) on this day marked the inception of the first territorial assembly and self-governance for French Somaliland. The executive council of ministers, consisting of eight elected assembly members, was entrusted with responsibilities for domestic affairs (Lea/Rowe 2001). The loi cadre granted equal voting rights to all residents and scrapped the dual college system and enabled the creation of political parties.¹¹ The territory's first elections under a system of proportional representation were held on the same day a year later. On 06/23/1957 the territorial assembly was elected while the Republican Union won all 30 seats (Lea/Rowe 2001).¹² In 1958, a referendum was held in the territory to decide whether to join the Somali Republic or to remain with France. The referendum turned out in favor of a continued association with France. However, there were allegations of vote rigging.¹³ Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. According to LIED these elections were not competitive. V-Dem's CEI scored no electoral cleanliness, and the elections were not really free and fair (V-Dem EF&FI). In 1946 universal suffrage was introduced.¹⁴ In 1966 France denied French Somaliland independence as recommended by the UN. Another plebiscite on the relationship with France was held, which was also defined by substantial vote rigging by French authorities.¹⁵ On 05/07/1967, French Somaliland was renamed French Territory of the Afaras and Issas. The position of the Senior French representative changed to that of High Commissioner and the Executive Council was renamed the Council of Government (Lea/Rowe 2001). LIED and V-Dem's PCLI indicate that political liberties were absent. From 1958 to 1976, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. For the year 1977, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

05/08/1977 Continuation Electoral Autocracy [as de-facto independent country]: On this day, a third plebiscite on the territory's future took place. A landslide of the electorate supported disengagement from France making Djibouti's independence.¹⁶ With independence the French Territory of the Afars and Issas was renamed Republic of Djibouti.

06/12/1981 End Electoral Autocracy/Start One-Party Autocracy: On this date, the country became a de-jure one-party-state. Hassan Gouled declared his party, the People's Rally for Progress (Rassemblement populaire pour leprogrès, RPP) the sole authorized one. Leaders of the opposition party PDD were arrested and later released. In national assembly polls, 65 RPP candidates were elected unopposed. As RPP candidate, Gouled was elected without opposition for a six-year term as president on 06/12/1981, receiving 84.58% of the vote. A new government was formed, but in composition similar to the previous one (Lea/Rowe 2001: 133). Why we consider this to be the regime change event, due to the de-jure change into a one-party-regime, the process of regime transformation began earlier: The elections for the national assembly (held on 05/08/1977) were boycotted by the Djibouti Liberation Movement, the National Union for Independence and the Popular Liberation Movement, resulting in the People's Rally for independence winning all 65 seats.¹⁷ Hassan Gouled became the first president appointed by the parliament (Lea/Rowe 2001: 133).¹⁸ Gouled was re-elected as President in 1987 being the sole candidate, which was his third term in office, despite constitutional limits of presidential tenure to two terms. The decision was made on the ground that he had initially been appointed by the Chamber of Deputies rather than having been popularly elected (Lansford 2021: 457). The rebel organization Front for the Restoration of Unity and Democracy (FRUD) was formed by the merger of three Afar groups in April 1991 (Lea/Rowe 2001: 134). They demanded greater political participation of Afar and launched a guerrilla struggle against the government in late October.¹⁹ According to LIED, executive and legislative elections, which weren't multiparty, were held during this period. Per FH, for the regime between 1977 and 1981, the country scores between 6 and 7, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as rather free. For the rest of the regime period the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our

interpretation of not free. Moreover, political liberties were absent according to LIED and V-Dem's PCLI. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 1, between unlimited authority and slight limitations. From 1978 to 1991, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent. For 1992, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent.

12/18/1992 End One-Party Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: A national referendum was held on 09/04/1992, that saw the introduction of multiparty politics, although another separate vote supported that the number of legal parties should be limited to four. Opposition members boycotted the legislative balloting of 12/18/1992, resulting in the contestation of only two political parties and the RPP won again all 65 seats. Gouled defeated for other candidates and thus was re-elected for a fourth term in May 1993 (Lansford 2021: 457-458).²⁰ In February 1999, Gouled announced that he would refrain from contesting for another term and the RPP chose his nephew Guelleh as its presidential candidate. With only one opponent who was Ahmed-Idriss Moussa, Guelleh won 74% of the presidential vote on 04/09/1999. A few months later, Idriss was arrested for publishing a critical article about the government (Lansford 2021: 458). In September 2002 President Guelleh announced the establishment of a full multiparty system. The elections were contested between two coalitions, comprised of several parties (Lansford 2021: 458).²¹ The ruling Union for a Presidential Majority won all 65 seats in balloting for the Chamber of Deputies on 01/10/2003, under allegations of significant vote rigging.²² Guelleh was re-elected unopposed in 2005. The UMP again won all 65 seats in assembly elections on 02/08/2008, with opposition parties boycotting the polls on grounds that it was undemocratic (Lansford 2021: 458). Guelleh was re-elected in 2011, 2016 and secured his 5th presidential term in 2021 in elections marked by substantial irregularities.²³ The UMP won 57 seats in legislative balloting on 02/23/2018 and 58/65 in 2023. A coalition of the UDJ and PDD won seven seats, while the CDU secured one (Lansford 2021: 458). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Since 1992 elections were not competitive according to LIED. According to V-Dem's CEI the elections were not really clean from 1992 to 2005, 2011 to 2012 and 2016 and 2017. The remaining years no cleanliness was achieved. V-Dem's EF&FI scores not really electoral freedom and fairness during the entire time. Although Djibouti technically operates under a multiparty political system, the ruling Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) employs authoritarian tactics to uphold its dominant position. The opposition faces significant constraints on its operations, with journalists and activists routinely subjected to harassment or arrest for voicing criticism against Guelleh or the UMP.²⁴ Djibouti in this period is a borderline case between an electoral autocracy and a one-party autocracy. The name of the ruling party, Union for a Presidential Majority, shows the highly personalized character of the political regime. As classified by FH for the regime period until 1998, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. Between 1999 and 2009 a score between 9 and 10 makes the country not free, which aligns with our interpretation of rather not free. From 2010 onward, the country is scored from 11 to 14 as not free, which corresponds to our interpretation of not free. Furthermore, political liberties continued to be coded as absent according to LIED. V-Dem's PCLI considers them as not really present from 1992 to 2001, in 2003 and from 2005 to 2017. In 2002, 2004 and since 2018 the outcomes switched to ambiguous. From 1993 to 1998, as per Polity5's categorization, the executive experienced minimal limitations on decision-making, placing it in the first intermediate category. From 1999 to 2012, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. Since 2013, as per Polity5's classification, the executive experienced moderate limitations on authority, placing it in the second intermediate category. From 1993 to 1997, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were absent, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were also absent. Since 1998, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were

limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

Electoral Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional sources (Thibaut 1999)

Notes

- ¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Territory_of_the_Afars_and_the_Issas
- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Somaliland
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Somaliland
- ⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Somaliland
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%C3%A9once_Lagarde
- ⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Djibouti
- ⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13232162>
- ⁸ <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/DJ/DJ-LC01/elections/historical-data-on-women/>
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1946_French_Somaliland_Representative_Council_election
- ¹⁰ <https://saxafimedia.com/politics-french-somaliland-ch10-somali-nationalism/>
- ¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1957_French_Somaliland_Territorial_Assembly_election
- ¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1957_French_Somaliland_Territorial_Assembly_election
- ¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Territory_of_the_Afars_and_the_Issas
- ¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage
- ¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Territory_of_the_Afars_and_the_Issas
- ¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Territory_of_the_Afars_and_the_Issas
- ¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1970_Cambodian_coup_d%27%C3%A9tat
- ¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassan_Gouled_Aptidon
- ¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassan_Gouled_Aptidon
- ²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_Djiboutian_parliamentary_election;
https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Djibouti_2010?lang=en
- ²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2003_Djiboutian_parliamentary_election
- ²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_Djiboutian_presidential_election
- ²³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Djiboutian_presidential_election
- ²⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/djibouti>

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