



# Politics, Language, and Thought: The Somali Experience

*David D. Laitin*

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
When the Somali Republic received independence, its parliamentary government decided to adopt three official languages: English, Italian, and Arabic—all languages of foreign contact. Since the vast majority of the nation's citizens spoke a single language, Somali, which then had no written form, this decision made governing exceedingly difficult. Selecting any one language was equally problematic, however, because those who spoke the official language would automatically become the privileged class.

Twelve years after independence, a military government was able to settle the acrimonious controversy by announcing that Somali would be the official language and Latin the basic script. It was hoped that this choice would foster political equality and strengthen the national culture. *Politics, Language, and Thought* is an exploration of how language and politics interrelate in the Somali Republic. Using both historical and experimental evidence, David D. Laitin demonstrates that the choice of an official language may significantly affect the course of a country's political development.

Part I of Laitin's study is an attempt to explain why the parliamentary government was incapable of reaching agreement on a national script and to assess the social and political consequences of the years of nondecision. Laitin shows how the imposition of nonindigenous languages produced inequalities which eroded the country's natural social basis of democracy.

Part 2 attempts to relate language to political thought and political culture. Analyzing interviews and role-playing sessions among Somali bilingual students, Laitin demonstrates that the impact of certain political concepts is quite different when expressed in different languages. He concludes that the implications of choosing a language are far more complex than previously thought, because to change the language of a people is to change the ways they think and act politically.

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