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A Near End to Somalia's Election Conundrum?

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The Somali electoral process is nearing its end. The process has been plagued by postponements and totalitarian tendencies and is not the 'one person one vote' process that many hoped for. It has been determined by a combination of clan factors and financial resources, but also real political agendas, abilities to build alliances, and political images. It is not a pure clan-based process, nor is it a process determined by money alone—it is not 'all about the money'. What we see is rather a hybrid system where many factors interact. The hybrid system has, for all its faults, in the past ensured that opposition candidates have had a chance to win elections in Somalia, which stands in contrast to many of its neighboring countries. In order for this to continue to function in the long run, continued checks and balances, including in the federal system, are needed, and the quality of processes becomes more important than artificial benchmarks.

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Election Background

The current Somali electoral process is drawing closer to an end. Since 2017 the country has been marred with political tensions and cascading problems involving standoffs between the federal and regional states, which has contributed to the delays of the current elections for more than a year. We have seen totalitarian tendencies from the incumbent president, Mohamed Abdulaahi Farmajo, such as the removal of Mohamed Osman Jawari, the Speaker of the Lower House without due parliamentary process, the arrest of opposition candidates, the removal of then Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire, and the use of force, with Ethiopian military support, to intimidate electoral processes in regional states, such as in Southwest State and Jubaland. [1] The president and the federal states played a game of cat and mouse, where Farmajo successfully managed to insert his preferred candidates in the Southwestern, Galmudug and Hirshabelle states. Although, some regional states, such as Jubaland and Puntland, acted as a check on the president's power. Meanwhile, the federal parliament became increasingly controlled by the president.[2] At the same time, the tension between the political opposition in Mogadishu and the president grew, and there were accusations of the abuse of power as well as violent confrontations.[3]

Yet, Somalia has in the last month finally managed to elect its Upper and Lower House parliamentarians, and the speakers and deputies of both chambers. This development signals positively the prospect for ending long political tensions. It also marks the incumbent president's waning power, partly because of the Ethiopian civil war that draws the attention of one of his close allies, Prime Minister Abiye Ahmed of Ethiopia, away from Somalia, and the ascending power of the opposition. In addition, the opposition has succeeded in installing their own allies to the leadership of both parliament chambers. Despite this, the leaders of Southwest State (Hassan Mohamed Laftagareen) and Glamudug (Ahmed Abdi Karie) remain clear allies of President Farmajo, and the former kept control of the nomination processes of federal parliament members from his respective regional state.[4]

The nominal goal for all parties in Somalia was initially the 'one person one vote' principle. However, as early as 2018 several observers, including the authors of this policy brief, saw that this principle would be hard to uphold given the lack of progress on improving the security situation in the country. Also the time factor, lack of capacity of institutions and logistical challenges that it entails were undermining the prospects of universal suffrage.[5] The principle of 'one person one vote' served as an early excuse for delaying the election, originally scheduled to be concluded on 8th February 2021.[6] Adherence to the 'one person one vote' modality of the election has been central to the delays, but also tensions and obstacles prevented its timely conclusion. For that reason, president Farmajo abruptly fired then Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire who opposed the two-year extension of the president's mandate in 2020. Again, the president postponed the elections by delaying the nomination of a new Prime Minister and by continuously adhering to the 'one person one vote' model until under intense pressure nominated Mohamed Hussein Roble as the Prime Minister on the 23 September 2020.

After further delays resulting from disagreements over the modalities and processes of the election that almost threatened to return the country to civil war, the president accepted the model of an indirect election. Yet, disagreements continued, and more than five rounds of talks failed to produce any tangible agreement on the election. This has forced international partners of Somalia to mount pressure on the president that finally enabled the handover of the election portfolio to the Prime Minister.

The continuous power struggle between Prime Minister Roble and the President Farmajo forced the Prime Minister to remove a close ally of Farmajo, the then head of Somali intelligence, Fahad Yasin in September 2021. The Prime Minister's removal came after Fahad Yasin as the head of NISA rejected to report on the circumstance pertaining to the disappearance of NISA agent Ikran Tahlil Farah without President Farmajo calling for the National Security Council meeting.[7] Both President Farmajo and Prime Minister Roble have actively contested each step of the senatorial and parliamentary selection processes, both trying to promote their own candidates.

On the eve of of the election of the Speaker of the Parliament, there was distrust between the parties. Divisions between the federal government and regional states (with the leadership of Southwest, Galmudug, and to a lesser extent Hirshabelle states allied to the President and Jubaland, Puntland and the opposition leadership allied with the Prime Minister) also played their role in the election delays. However, the incumbent president remains to a certain extent popular in circles that admired his debt relief initiative and his anti-foreign rhetoric and see his centralization effort as a modernization of the state in the country, although this centralization was probably a move to control

opposition.

Election Processes

Somalia has not had a direct 'one person one vote' election since its democratically elected government was overthrown in 1969 by the country's military that ruled it for the next 21 years.

With the civil war in 1991 and collapse of the central state, many international initiatives for restoring peace and reconstructing the state in the country failed. In 2004 conflict actors in the country agreed on a federal power sharing system known as the 4.5 formula. This formula entails full representation for the four dominant clan families (Hawiye, Darod, Dir and Rahanweyn) and the half portion to minority clans. This formula continues to be the basis for the electoral system in Somalia to the present day. Based on this formula, different clans represented by their respective elders elect their parliamentary representatives for the Lower House of the Parliament. Each regional state sends 8 senators, except Puntland and Somaliland that each send 11 senators to the Upper House of the Parliament. This means that while the Lower House parliamentarians are selected by their respective clan elders, senators are appointed by the leaders of regional states. It should be noted that the deliberative Somali clan system does mean that there are real discussions within the clans, and that clan elected representatives will have a form of constituency of their respective clan members. They are not elected by 'one person one vote' of their clan members. Rather the clan members are represented by their clan elders that conduct the election of candidates to the parliament. The clan-based system means large disadvantages for females who often are seen to be between clans, since they tend to be married into other clans. Clan leaders are also , as politicians, open to intimidation and corruption.

There have been discussions about and attempts to move away from the 4.5 system and its associated election processes by implementing 'one person one vote' or a direct election for the last five successive governments without much success. Since 2017, in attempts to reform the current electoral system, the five regional states, the Mogadishu administration and the federal government have failed to achieve much progress, despite a series of meetings between 2018 and 2021 held in Baidoa, Mogadishu, and Garowe, as well as three initial rounds of Dhusamareb meetings that failed. This resulted in reverting back to the to the indirect election system, which also faced various disagreements between Somali leaders later on. Following intense international pressure, heads of the regional states and the federal government agreed to hold an indirect election with some modifications, including two electoral districts for each regional state and expanding electoral delegates electing members of parliament. The National Independent Election Commission (NIEC) was initially to conduct and oversee elections. However, it was disbanded after it allegedly failed to prepare the country for 'one person one vote' elections in 2020/2021. The opposition's distrust of the parliamentary processes after the removal of the then speaker of the Lower House, Mohamed Osman Jawari and after the NIEC endorsed the mandate extension of the present president played a role in its demise as the sole commission for conducting the country's election. Consequently in 2020, the NIEC was replaced by three electoral teams, namely the Federal Electoral Implementation Team (FEIT), the State Electoral Implementation Team (SEIT), and the Electoral Dispute Resolution Team (EDRT), by the National Consultative Council which consists of the leadership of the regional states, the Mogadishu administration, and the Federal Government. These three new electoral institutions implement federal parliamentary elections, oversee the processes, and resolve any disputes that may arise.

Problems with the Current Process

Although the parliamentary elections have now been finalized, there have been irregularities, controversy, and obstacles during the elections. For instance, instead of clan delegates electing their respective members of parliament, regional states and other political actors manipulated the processes and installed their own candidates in the federal parliament. Also, money changed hands in many instances. Different presidential candidates have also attempted to get their own allies elected to the parliament by exchanging money and other bribes.

In other cases, candidates were denied accessing the venue of an election in certain regional states. These irregularities became more visible as the president and his allies encouraged a parallel parliamentary electoral process in the Gedo region of Jubaland state.

In the current presidential election, to be held on the 15th of May, there are more than 30 candidates which makes this election the most crowded election in Somali history. The most prominent presidential contenders include three former presidents (Hassan Sheikh, Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo, and Sharif Sheikh Ahmed) as

well as former Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire, the current President of Puntland (Said Abdullahi Deni) and former minster Abdirahman Abdishakur. **Clan** is important in the electoral process, but it exists as part of a bigger electoral game where **resources** (often financial), **personal image**, and **the ability to build alliances** and strike political deals with other candidates becomes equally important. **Political** issues are also of some importance.

The fact that there are two or more rounds of elections for the presidency, where only the four with the most votes reach the second round, means that cross-clan alliance building becomes especially important. The candidates for president will also be potential candidates for prime minister after the presidential election, a position that is to be nominated by the new president. This means that there might be combinations of different presidential candidates. According to past practice, the two positions are given to members of the two largest clans, the Darood and the Hawiye, although this is not a rule based on legislation. Clan background plays a gatekeeping role for becoming a candidate in the first place. For the presidential election, every Somali that meets certain criteria, regardless of clan or his or her affiliation in theory (in practice the speaker has hailed from the Rahanwein clan) can stand as a candidate for the post of speaker of parliament. Once the election of the speaker is concluded, individuals hailing from the speaker's clan are automatically excluded from contesting for president.

Clan as a factor is neither always there in the election processes nor absent given the 4.5 power sharing formula. Candidates hailing from the same clan can, and will often, endorse candidate hailing from another clan. This has happened several times, including during the last election particularly after the second round, and it will be the case for this election.

Politics is far from left out of the equation. Somali politics is not an outright marketplace as has been repeatedly claimed by analysts. Evidence from past elections suggests that the effect of money is limited, as it cannot translate into the full loyalty of parliamentarians. The 2017 election suggests that presidential candidates who were certain that they would be elected due to the resources they used in swaying members of parliament were defeated in the second round, because of defections caused by a candidate's image and political deals entered into after the first round, and shifting alliances. Political issues also held real importance. Incumbent President Faramajo, for example, won the last election partly based on his campaign platform and nationalistic and modernistic narratives, claiming to bring an end to the negative interference of neighboring countries in Somalia and to modernize Somali society. However, in the current election, all candidates have similar political programs. The only detectable difference between candidates seems to be that opposition candidates are largely for federalism while Farmajo seems to be for more centralization, whereby the federal government in Mogadishu dictates all regional matters, which can potentially ignite violent conflict in the country and has done so in the past. Opposition candidates informed by the country's experience with the centralized state under the dictatorship of Siad Barre (1969-1991), which caused the civil war, and the recent role of Jubaland and Puntland in rallying against the centralism of the president and his allies, now see federalism as the best guarantor of the country's stability, survival, and progress towards democracy and prosperity. Farmajo, despite his 2017 agenda of preventing foreign influence, also prefers to continue aligning Somalia with Eritrea and Ethiopia, while the opposition believes that Somalia's economic and commercial interest lies with the country becoming closely tied to and joining the Eastern African Community.

Somali politics is thus not a purely clan system, nor is it based on pure corruption, it is rather a hybrid form of political system, where clan interacts with money, personal skills, political image, and political agendas. It should be noted that clan in this equation also provides channels of influence for clan-based constituencies.

Conclusion

Despite the electoral system and candidates being clan based, there is a large public engagement. Somali citizens voice their concerns and endorsement of candidates through various traditional, and modern channels that influence who the parliamentarians elect as president. Public discussions are rampant. However, it is not well-structured and objective as it often relies on multiple channels, such as traditional, digital, and social media, as well as highly influential individuals with diverse backgrounds that often promote certain candidates that are connected to them.

The Somali electoral process is anarchic and yet with some order, but it is also an achievement for the country. Opposition candidates have a real chance of winning, and there is no war between the parties. Indeed, Somalia, despite having suffered a civil war, has had more open political debates than many of its neighboring countries, including Ethiopia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Uganda, and Tanzania, over the last

decade, and opposition candidates have won the last two elections, in drastic contrast to the countries mentioned above. The current drawbacks of the system should be addressed gradually, in a process that includes checks and balances. At the federal level, the type of checks and balances need to prevent the 'totalitarian lifelong president' phenomenon that is so common in the region. This means that processes have to be prioritized above artificial benchmarks, and above building strong centralized institutions open for abuse by totalitarian politicians.

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Raad Peace Research Institute (RAPRI) is a non-profit research institute founded in 2018 with its main offices in Mogadishu, Somalia. It conducts research on peace, security, and governance issues with the aim of advancing peace and stability in Somalia and the region.

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