



POLICY BRIEF

Breaking Somalia's cycle of electoral crises

Selam Tadesse Demissie

Somalia has struggled with state-building for over a decade due to divisions among its political elite that have prevented consensus on state structure and left institutions fragile and insecurity entrenched. Constitutional and electoral reforms remain central to disputes, and the proposed transition to direct elections has heightened tensions. Implementing these reforms requires a sequenced transition that aligns political incentives, builds trust and gradually expands inclusion.

Key findings

- ▶ Different visions for Somalia's federal state, held by the Federal Government and the opposition, including key Federal Member States, have left the political environment deeply divided. These divisions have undermined trust and prevented consensus on the constitutional and electoral reforms the country has tried to implement since the Federal Government was established in 2012.
- ▶ Somalia's recurring electoral crises stem from disagreement over the electoral framework and the timing of elections. These disputes reflect a deeper state-building dilemma of how to reconcile clan-based legitimacy with democratic governance in a fragile security environment.
- ▶ The way forward does not lie in abruptly adopting one system over the other, but in carefully sequencing a transition that aligns political incentives, builds trust and gradually expands inclusion.
- ▶ Without a holistic and calibrated approach, Somalia is likely to stay trapped in a cycle of recurring electoral crises. Rather than resolving political disputes, each election risks triggering renewed political fragmentation and further deterioration of the security situation.

Recommendations

- ▶ Do not rush the transition to universal suffrage. A gradual transformation of the 4.5 voting system would preserve inclusion while enabling population-based adjustments, a blend of clan quotas and geographic constituencies and a bicameral system in which one chamber reflects clan equity and the other is elected by popular vote.
- ▶ Avoid an immediate shift to nationwide direct elections. Adopt a phased approach by expanding local-level elections, building on the Mogadishu pilot, then scaling up to regional elections and ultimately national universal suffrage. This reduces the risk of contestation during the transition while building institutional credibility.
- ▶ Renegotiate the federal compact through a political settlement between the Federal Government and Federal Member States to define the country's federal structure.
- ▶ Clarify the division of powers over security, elections and the judiciary, the role of regional administrations in national elections and mechanisms for dispute resolution. This will help break the cycle in which elections become proxies for unresolved constitutional conflicts.
- ▶ De-risk elections through political guarantees. Given the high level of mistrust, confidence-building measures are essential, such as agreement on neutral electoral management bodies, joint federal and state security arrangements and pre-election codes of conduct among political actors.
- ▶ Prevent a term extension crisis. Develop a clear, binding framework that defines interim arrangements to reduce differences among political actors.

Introduction

Somalia has, for over two decades, struggled with a difficult state-building process in which government legitimacy, power-sharing and constitutional foundations have been repeatedly challenged. While constitutions establish a formal framework for power distribution, elections determine who holds authority and generate legitimacy that helps stabilise political structures.

The country has been undergoing challenging constitutional and electoral reforms aimed at replacing its 2012 provisional constitution and transitioning from a clan-based indirect electoral system to universal suffrage. Both reforms have been contested over the nature of Somalia's federal system, whether centralised governance or fully autonomous Federal Member States (FMS), as well as the electoral framework and timeline. This difficult transition, marked by delays, has left the country with destabilised political structures and increased insecurity.

Somalia's electoral system, often described as a 'selection' rather than an election, is based on the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula (see Chart 2) and relies on clan delegates electing parliamentarians, who then elect the president. This process stands in contrast to a one-person-one-vote democratic system and reflects the country's unsuccessful attempts to reconcile state-building with a deeply entrenched clan structure. Somalia's electoral trajectory reflects a persistent tension between moving beyond the 4.5 formula towards direct elections and maintaining stability through inclusive but indirect mechanisms.

The present government's mandate expired on 15 May 2026 despite claiming a non-consensual one-year term extension. Nevertheless, preparations for the election remain delayed, mainly due to disagreements among key stakeholders over the nature, sequencing and feasibility of electoral reforms. These tensions are compounded by persistent insecurity, particularly from extremist groups, the failure of elite bargaining and severe financial and institutional constraints.

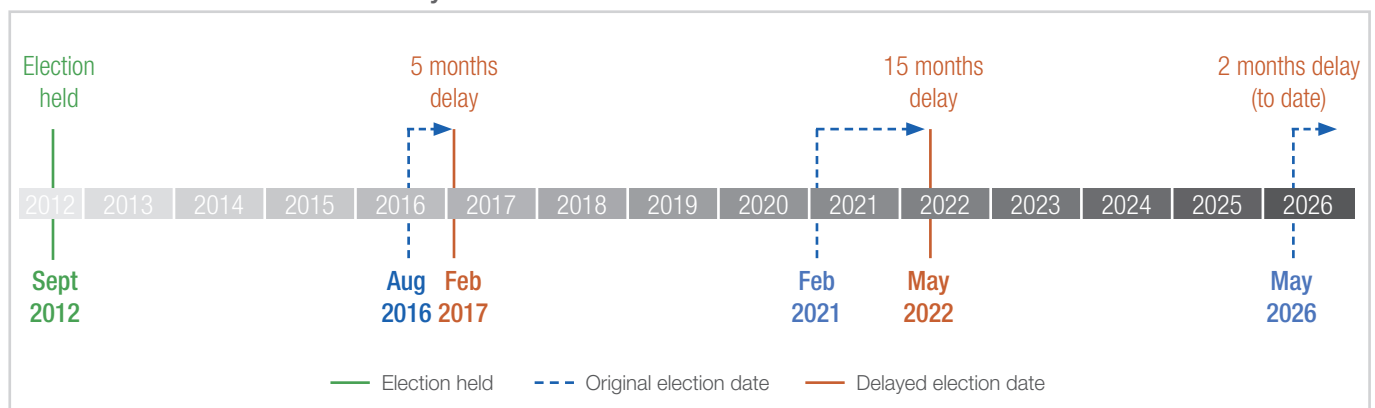
The recurrent delays associated with electoral deadlocks have far-reaching implications. They undermine governance, stall service delivery and weaken counter-terrorism efforts. More critically, they heighten the risk of political instability and violence, particularly in the context of contested authority following the mandate's expiration. Against this backdrop, a central policy question emerges: what measures can be undertaken ahead of the 2026 election to mitigate escalating tensions and prevent another cycle of crisis?

Understanding the cycle of electoral crisis

While Somalia began post-colonial governance with direct elections, the 1969 coup and subsequent military rule, followed by state collapse and civil war, fundamentally altered its political trajectory. Since the reconstruction of the Somali state in 2000, Somalia has held six elections, with a seventh scheduled for 2026.

A systematic examination of the country's recent electoral history reveals a recurring pattern of crisis characterised by elite fragmentation and contested electoral frameworks and timelines, driven by the political class's inability to agree on the type, sequencing and management of elections.

Chart 1: Election timeline and delays



Source: Author

The following phases illustrate how unresolved structural tensions continued to reproduce electoral deadlock and political instability since the establishment of the transitional government.

PHASE 1

Transitional government and institutionalised clan power-sharing (2000–2012)

The 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula was adopted during the establishment of the Transitional National Government in 2000. The transitional period witnessed two elections based on the 4.5 formula. Abdullahi Yusuf was selected president in 2004 and Sharif Sheikh Ahmed succeeded him in 2009. These processes were, however, held outside Somalia – in Djibouti and Kenya – underscoring the severe security challenges that prevented domestic elections and a pattern of externally facilitated, elite-driven settlements that fuelled tension and contestation.

PHASE 2

Post-Federal Government of Somalia consolidation and first indirect election (2012)

The current president of Somalia, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, became the country's first post-transitional president in an indirect election in September 2012, in Mogadishu, signalling a degree of improved security and institutional recovery. Even so, the election took place under fragile security conditions due to continued attacks by al-Shabaab, despite the group's weakening in 2011.¹

PHASE 3

Expanded indirect election and persistent constraints (2017)

Hassan's first term was tasked with implementing key state-building priorities, including constitutional finalisation and the transition towards universal suffrage and holding a one-person-one-vote election in August 2016. However, this objective proved unattainable due to a combination of persistent insecurity, primarily linked to al-Shabaab, and significant administrative constraints.²

The government reverted to an indirect electoral model, though with modifications intended to increase inclusivity.³ While the election, delayed by five months, culminated in the election of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmajo' in February 2017, the process was marred by allegations of fraud, coercion and pre-election violence.⁴

PHASE 4

Political fragmentation, electoral deadlock and crisis (2020–2022)

Despite its renewed commitment to transition towards universal suffrage through constitutional and electoral reforms, Farmajo's administration was unable to deliver direct elections as a result of deepening political tensions with key FMS, particularly Puntland and Jubaland. These tensions were especially evident over their regional elections in January and August 2019. This eroded trust and undermined consensus on the parliamentary and presidential elections in December 2020 and February 2021.

Although an agreement was reached to proceed with indirect elections in September 2020, disputes over the composition of electoral management bodies and security arrangements, particularly in the contested Gedo region, led the opposition group to boycott the process. This prompted the formation of a new opposition coalition, the National Salvation Council, bringing together leaders from Puntland and Jubaland, along with prominent political figures including former president Hassan. The coalition sought to challenge Farmajo's administration following the expiration of his mandate in February 2021.

The House of the People unilaterally extended Farmajo's term for two years in April 2021, triggering armed confrontations in Mogadishu between pro-government forces and factions opposed to the extension.⁵ Ultimately, indirect elections were held 15 months late, and President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud was elected in May 2022 for a second term.

Phase 5 – 2026 election: recurring patterns and escalating risks

In the 2026 election, Somalia faces familiar electoral challenges involving the same political actors and repeating patterns seen in previous cycles, notably the contested process that returned Hassan to power. Despite incremental institutional developments,⁶ the political environment remains deeply polarised, with tensions between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and opposition actors, including FMS such as Puntland, Jubaland and South West State, and opposition coalitions such as the Somalia Salvation Forum (SSF), led by former president Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. This polarisation continues to undermine consensus on the electoral framework and timeline.

The National Consultative Council (NCC), a forum for dialogue and coordination between the FGS and FMS leaders on governance, security and electoral issues, has proven increasingly ineffective. Its cohesion has been undermined by disagreements over core political questions, particularly power distribution and constitutional agreements. Puntland's withdrawal from the NCC in December 2022 marked a critical turning point. It rejected agreements on power-sharing and judicial restructuring, perceiving them as efforts to centralise authority in Mogadishu.

These tensions escalated following the federal Parliament's decision on 30 March 2024 to amend the first four chapters of the provisional constitution,⁷ prompting Puntland to sever ties with the FGS and revert to recognising only the 2012 constitutional framework. Amid escalating tensions, Parliament approved all amendments to the constitutional review process in March 2026, including extending the FGS's mandate from four to five years.

Similarly, relations between the FGS and Jubaland deteriorated sharply. President Ahmed Mohamed Islam (Madobe)'s decision to organise a unilateral regional election in Kismayo in November 2024, contrary to the FGS's preference for synchronised national electoral processes, deepened political fragmentation. These developments have effectively excluded important FMS and opposition actors from ongoing reform processes, resulting in parallel and competing political tracks.⁸

At the national level, the FGS's unilateral push to advance electoral and constitutional reforms has intensified contestation. Efforts to amend the provisional constitution, redesign the electoral system and redraw the federal structure have been framed by the opposition as attempts to consolidate executive power and extend presidential authority.⁹ In response, opposition groups established a new coalition platform, the Council for the Future of Somalia, in October 2025, to coordinate resistance to the government's approach. The emergence of such parallel political formations underscored the fragmentation of Somalia's political landscape and erosion of a unified national framework for managing the transition.

The emergence of parallel political formations underscored the fragmentation of Somalia's political landscape

A core contention is the nature of the electoral system itself. The FGS continues to advocate for a transition to universal suffrage, citing its successful organisation of local elections for district councils in Mogadishu on 25 December 2025. Yet, opposition actors and several FMS are sceptical, pointing to persistent insecurity, especially in rural and contested areas, and the absence of nationwide administrative capacity. They also argue that a direct electoral system could disproportionately benefit incumbent presidents,¹⁰ especially given relatively improved security conditions in urban centres such as Mogadishu, where the current administration enjoys stronger support.

Compounding these tensions is the FGS's one-year term extension under the amended constitution, which has inflamed opposition resistance. Violence erupted in Mogadishu in early June 2026 between government forces and opposition-aligned militias ahead of planned protests against the president's term extension, raising concerns over security force fragmentation. Despite a call for de-escalation and return to dialogue from the United Nations, the African Union, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the United States and the United Kingdom, the political environment remains polarised and tense.

Underlying drivers of the crises: 4.5 framework versus universal suffrage

At the heart of Somalia's recurrent electoral crises is a fundamental tension between two competing political models: the entrenched 4.5 clan-based power-sharing system and the aspirational shift towards universal suffrage.

Somali is ethnically homogeneous, but it is deeply segmented along clan lines, with social, economic and political life structured around complex clan affiliation. This reality has profoundly shaped the country's political institutions.¹¹ Clan identity is the basis of political organisation, and many political actors are widely perceived as representing a specific clan's interests rather than an ideological constituency. While clannism has historically operated as an informal organising principle, increased political competition has formalised and intensified its role in governance.

The 4.5 power-sharing formula: inclusion, distortion and transition risks

The 4.5 formula, a clan-based power-sharing and leadership selection system, initially emerged as a practical conflict management tool during the transitional period in 2000. However, it has increasingly become a source of contention as the country's political and socio-economic landscape has evolved.

Although it provides inclusive representation by allocating power among clan families and minorities, it

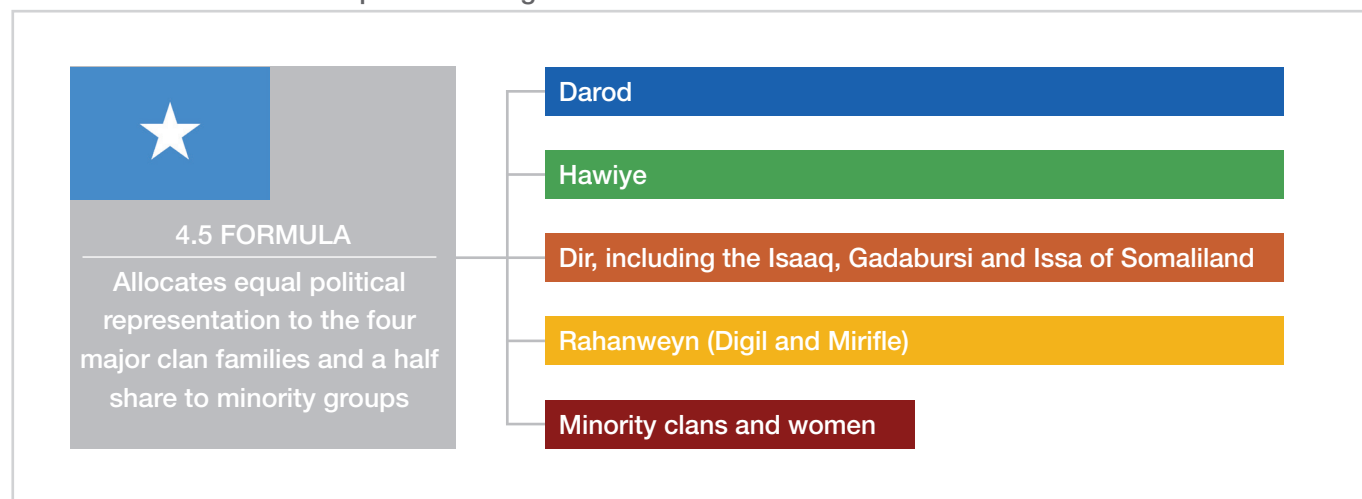
fails to reflect evolving clan dynamics or accommodate demands for merit-based or population-proportional representation. The system reinforces clan identity as the primary organising principle of politics and is flawed because almost all Somali clans beyond Somalia's borders are represented,¹³ which further entrenches irredentism and risks future fragmentation. Consequently, it has become both a tool for inclusion and a source of grievance.

A central limitation lies in the disconnect between formal representation and material power

At the same time, efforts to dismantle or bypass the system have repeatedly stalled due to fears of marginalisation, fragmentation and renewed conflict among clans and sub-clans, as trust between stakeholders has long collapsed.

A central limitation lies in the disconnect between formal representation and material power.¹⁴ Certain sub-clans that command significant influence through economic resources and military capacity remain underrepresented within the 4.5 formula. This misalignment incentivises actors to operate as political 'kingmakers,' influencing outcomes outside formal institutions and sometimes contesting the system, often creating impasses when their interests are not met.¹⁵

Chart 2: The 4.5 clan-based power-sharing formula



Source: Author, data from Hashi et al. (2025)¹²

At the same time, groups formally better represented within the framework, smaller clans and minorities, lack the financial and organisational capacity to sustain independent political influence. This creates a system of dependency in which these groups align with more powerful actors in exchange for support, effectively becoming proxies rather than autonomous representatives. Over time, this undermines the very inclusivity the system was designed to ensure, as representation becomes mediated through patronage networks rather than genuine constituency interests, limiting the development of a more responsive political order.

Further distortions arise from the participation of representatives from constituencies politically disengaged from the federal system, particularly from Somaliland. In some cases, Somaliland politicians are embedded within southern (Somalia) clan networks through intermarriage or strategic alliances, enabling them to operate within federal institutions without clear accountability to their original constituencies.¹⁶ This practice deepens existing fault lines and reinforces asymmetries in representation and influence.

Some Somaliland politicians are embedded within southern (Somalia) clan networks through intermarriage or strategic alliances

Collectively, these dynamics create an illusion of comprehensive national inclusion while masking underlying imbalances, thereby creating winners and losers who want to protect and oppose the system.

Still, abandoning the 4.5 formula is not a straightforward solution. Its removal would strip the FGS of its foundational claim to represent all Somali constituencies, however imperfectly it may be constructed. In a context of uneven state authority and limited institutional capacity,¹⁷ a purely majoritarian, one-person-one-vote system risks uneven outcomes. More secure and Mogadishu-aligned regions would likely dominate, while fragile or opposition-aligned areas could be excluded, undermining national legitimacy.

This also raises critical equity concerns. Women and minority clans, already underrepresented despite formal quotas, face significant structural barriers in majoritarian electoral systems, including limited access to resources, entrenched social norms and weak political networks. Without deliberate safeguards, a shift to direct elections could further marginalise these groups, reversing fragile gains made under the current arrangement.

In this context, the 4.5 framework should not be viewed simply as a system to be dismantled, but as a political instrument that needs careful, phased transformation. The central challenge for Somalia is managing an abrupt shift from clan-based power-sharing to universal suffrage without first reconciling these systems, and in ensuring a gradual process that balances inclusion and representation with stability and legitimacy.



SOMALIA'S CHALLENGE
HOW TO GRADUALLY
RECONCILE CLAN-BASED
POWER-SHARING WITH
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Transitioning to universal suffrage presents its own set of structural and political challenges. A direct electoral system would shift political authority away from clan elders towards individual citizens,¹⁸ fundamentally altering Somalia's political economy. Such a transition risks marginalising traditional power brokers unless their roles are carefully redefined. At the same time, basic technical and security requirements for nationwide elections, such as voter registration, constituency delimitation and election security, are only partially developed.

The indirect system has allowed federal states to exert significant influence over national politics beyond what is set out in the provisional constitution

There are also entrenched institutional interests at stake.¹⁹ Members of Parliament, who currently derive their authority from the indirect system, would lose their central role in presidential selection, as they may not be elected under a direct voting system. Similarly, the indirect system has allowed FMS to exert significant influence over national politics beyond what is formally set out in the provisional constitution, as it does not clearly demarcate the power of the FGS and FMS, and differences often go unresolved. This has created incentives for regional actors to resist reforms perceived as strengthening federal authority at their expense.

'Inevitable' electoral crises

The recurring electoral crises are not accidental or merely the result of poor planning but structurally embedded in the political system, which combines competing political logics, unresolved constitutional questions and entrenched elite interests without a mechanism to reconcile them.

First, there is a fundamental institutional mismatch. Somalia is trying to transition to a modern, centralised, democratic electoral system led by the FGS while still relying on a clan-based political settlement²⁰ that distributes power through negotiated quotas and manipulation rather than citizen-based representation. These two systems are inherently incompatible unless carefully sequenced and harmonised.

Second, Somalia operates under a contested federal model, which complicates the implementation of elections. The FGS and FMS have divergent visions of the federal state: the centre seeks consolidation and coherence, while regions prioritise autonomy and political survival.

For example, the centre believes it should lead all elections nationwide, while the states believe they should stay in charge of conducting their own elections, even under universal suffrage. Therefore, elections become the arena where this unresolved constitutional question is fought, rather than a neutral mechanism for leadership selection.



A DIRECT ELECTORAL
SYSTEM WOULD
FUNDAMENTALLY ALTER
SOMALIA'S POLITICAL
ECONOMY

Third, there is a political economy of elections. The indirect system creates strong incentives for elites – parliamentarians, clan elders and regional leaders – to preserve the status quo, because it concentrates decision making in their hands and serves as a money-making machine. Any move towards universal suffrage threatens to redistribute power and resources away from these actors, prompting resistance.

Fourth, security constraints are not just logistical, they are political. The persistent threat from al-Shabaab and the fault line, as well as the lack of trust between clans and sub-clans, are often cited as technical barriers to elections, but they also shape political calculations. Actors selectively invoke insecurity to delay reforms or justify a preferred electoral model.

Unresolved disputes carry over into the next electoral cycle, making a recurrence of the crisis highly likely

Somalia's elections are characterised by elite bargaining without institutional finality. Each cycle produces temporary agreements rather than a durable settlement. As a result, unresolved disputes carry over into the next electoral cycle, making a recurrence of the crisis highly likely. Such electoral crises are symptoms of Somalia's contested state-building process that needs to prioritise institutional capacity and mechanisms to resolve disagreements.

The future of the Somali state: fragmentation, hybridisation or consolidation?

Somalia's trajectory remains open-ended, but three broad outcomes can be identified:

- Fragmented federalism or status quo drift: the most likely short-term trajectory is continued fragmentation within a loose federal framework, where the FGS and FMS coexist in a tense equilibrium. Elections will remain indirect, delayed and contested, with periodic crises but without state collapse.
- Hybrid political order or managed transition: Somalia could evolve into a hybrid system combining clan representation with gradual democratisation. This would reform rather than replace the 4.5 system, while slowly expanding voting and institutional capacity. It reflects current socio-political realities while steering towards a more citizen-based system.
- Centralised consolidation or high-risk path: attempts by the FGS to rapidly centralise power through constitutional or electoral reforms could provoke strong resistance from FMS and opposition groups. This risks political violence, institutional fragmentation and security breakdown, as power centralisation continues to be contested by armed actors.

Overall, Somalia is unlikely to achieve a rapid transition to full universal suffrage. Its more realistic future lies in gradual, negotiated hybridisation rather than abrupt transformation.

Notes

- 1 The militant group al-Shabaab continued to pose a substantial threat, having controlled much of southern Somalia, including Mogadishu, between 2009 and 2011. While territorial losses weakened the group's conventional hold, its capacity to carry out asymmetric attacks remained significant. Thus, although the 2012 process symbolised political progress, it also underscored the continued dependency of Somalia's electoral model on indirect mechanisms shaped by security imperatives.
- 2 At the time, Somalia's federal architecture was still in the process of formation. Key Federal Member States, including Jubaland (2013), South West State (2014), Galmudug (2015) and Hirshabelle (2016), were newly established and lacked fully institutionalised governance structures. This incomplete and rushed federalisation process complicated electoral planning, particularly in terms of constituency demarcation, voter registration and administrative coordination.
- 3 A hundred and thirty-five clan elders selected Members of Parliament in 2012, while in 2017, electoral colleges of 51 people for each parliamentary seat, chosen by clan elders and totalling about 14 000 participants, selected Members of Parliament instead. This broadened the representation base and signalled incremental, though limited, progress towards democratisation.
- 4 MA Omar, Pre-election violence: a case study of Somalia, *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 15 July 2023, <https://rsisinternational.org/-journals/ijriss/-articles/pre-election-violence-a-case-study-of-somalia/?categories%5B0%5D=political-science#>.
- 5 Under mounting domestic and international pressure, the term extension was revoked on 1 May 2021. Responsibility for managing the electoral process was transferred to Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, de-escalating tensions within the security sector and restoring a fragile political dialogue.
- 6 Somalia has made progress during President Hassan's second term, such as securing World Bank-backed debt relief that allows the country to normalise relations with international financial institutions, the lifting of the UN arms embargo, a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2025–2026 and membership in the East African Community.
- 7 JA Schmidt, From provision to permanent constitution? Assessing the end of Somalia's constitutional review, *International IDEA*, 7 April 2026, <https://constitutionnet.org/-news/-voices/provisional-permanent-constitution-assessing-end-somalias-constitutional-review-process>.
- 8 South West State suspended its cooperation with Mogadishu due to a similar dispute with the FGS over a constitutional amendment that would have extended the Federal Government's mandates from four to five years. It also objected to the FGS's meddling in the state's March 2026 election, which resulted in the re-election of incumbent President Abdiaziz Hassan Mohamed Laftagareen. Following subsequent federal intervention and the seizure of the state by federal forces, the president resigned, two days after taking office.
- 9 J Siegle and H Wahila, Somalia: electoral process under construction amid a security crisis, *African Center for Strategic Studies*, 13 January 2026, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-elections2026/somalia/#:~:text=President%20Hassan%20Sheikh%20Mohamud%2C%20the,country%20in%20place%20since%201992>.
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- 12 MB Hashi, A-NM Abdi and YH Oo, Beyond the 4.5 clan quotas: evaluating the feasibility of a merit-based and inclusive federal power-sharing model in Somalia, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11:1, 9 August 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2544066>.
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- 14 Somalia Dialogue Platform and Somali Public Agenda, The role of 4.5 in democratization and governance in Somalia, May 2023, https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/-Role-of-4.5-in-democratisation-and-governance-in-Somalia_EN_4.5_WEB.pdf.
- 15 International Crisis Group, Staving off violence around Somalia's elections, *African Briefing No. 163*, 10 November 2020.
- 16 Interview with Somaliland Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, 16 April 2026.
- 17 AA Elmi, Somalia's 2026 election risks a legitimacy crisis, *Al Jazeera*, 19 December 2025, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/12/19/somalias-2026-election-risks-a-legitimacy-crisis.
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- 19 FI Yusuf, Prospects for Somalia's transition from clan-based politics to multipartyism in the 2026 election, *Rift Valley Institute*, February 2024, https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/-uploads/-/2024/03/RCoP-2_Somalia-clan-based-politics_FINAL.pdf.
- 20 The clan-based political settlement also allows FMS to manipulate the election process by overriding clan elders and hand-selecting their representatives.

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POLICY BRIEF

Somalia in the East African Community Opportunities and challenges

Nicodemus Minde and Guyo Turi

Somalia's entry into the East African Community (EAC) presents both opportunities and challenges for the country and for the bloc. For the EAC, the rapid expansion presents economic prospects such as increased intra-regional trade, enhanced geopolitical influence, strengthened collective security and more coordinated regional responses to conflict. A crucial question, however, is how the EAC can capitalise on the prospects of Somalia's entry into the bloc while managing the challenges that accompany it.

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