



Commentary

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How the Somali PM Could Seize the Fleeting Momentum

On 1 May 2021, the Lower House of Somalia's Federal Parliament rescinded its 12 April resolution to extend its own mandate and that of President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo by two years. This move brought the country back from the brink of civil war following a few days of armed conflict in Mogadishu between factions within the security forces loyal to the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the opposition.



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According to the United Nations, tens of thousands of civilians fled their homes due to the gun battles in Mogadishu, and political tensions in the capital city took a dramatic turn for the worse after the parliament's controversial decision on mandate extension. The armed conflict in the capital and sustained international pressure ultimately forced Farmaajo and the House of the People to reverse their political course and announce that the FGS would return to electoral negotiations based on the 17 September 2020 agreement between Farmaajo and leaders of the federal member states (FMSs).

Most importantly, president Farmaajo announced that his prime minister (PM), Mohamed Hussein Roble, would lead the electoral negotiations on behalf of the FGS. Farmaajo tasked the PM with managing the security of the electoral process—a major demand for opposition groups, who are now united under the banner of the National Salvation Council (NSC). Both the opposition and the international community enthusiastically welcomed this move and threw their weight behind the PM. All of a sudden, the PM, who was previously perceived as far less influential than president Farmaajo, found himself at the center of national attention with significant political capital.

Immediately after assuming his new role, PM Roble established a joint security committee to recommend concrete measures to withdraw security forces engaged in armed conflict from the city. Within a few days, the PM oversaw the rapid redeployment of those forces to their previous duty stations, including those on the frontlines against al-Shabaab. On the electoral front, the PM called for a meeting between the FGS and FMS leaders on 20 May.



For starters, the PM should make every effort to ensure that there is no delay to the 20 May dialogue

In achieving those quick wins, PM Roble has not only fortified his political capital, but he has also significantly increased the confidence of all stakeholders in his ability to bring about a breakthrough to resolve the underlying political crisis. While the PM undoubtedly has the potential to help all sides find common ground, capitalizing on this fleeting window of opportunity requires a combination of political acumen, strategic foresight and deep understanding of the sticking points that led to the failure of previous talks between the FGS and the opposition.

This commentary aims to shed light on how the PM can seize the fleeting momentum that prevails in the country following an intense period of political and security crises. For starters, the PM should make every effort to ensure that there is no delay to the 20 May dialogue. Even a slight delay would deflate the current momentum, with potentially fatal consequences. Additionally, PM Roble should make every effort to include all key stakeholders in the upcoming dialogue. In addition to the FGS and FMSs, the Council of Presidential Candidates (CPC) and the speakers of both houses of parliament have earned a seat at the table, taking into consideration the prominent role they played during the recent crisis and its rapid resolution. Failure to ensure that the 20 May meeting is inclusive would hamper the meeting's expected outcomes.

Key outstanding issues

Virtually everyone agrees that the basis of the 20 May dialogue should be the much-touted 17 September agreement and the 16 February technical agreement. However, different stakeholders have different interpretations of each of those agreements. As far as the FGS is concerned, the agreements are final and binding, and the parties just need to recommit to them for implementation. For the CPC, the Upper House speaker and their FMS allies (Puntland and Jubaland), these agreements are merely water under the bridge and are not binding. For them, the 17 September agreement is just a framework within which a substantive dialogue is profoundly needed.



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PM Roble needs to bridge these fundamental differences of opinion. However, he also needs to be seen as an independent political actor who maintains an equal distance from both president Farmaajo and the opposition. His ability to lead the electoral dialogue rests almost entirely on his capacity to navigate this narrow path. In fact, it was his decisive decision to oppose the two-year extension that garnered him significant political capital. The substance of the core issues remains largely unchanged, and the PM is uniquely qualified to unpack these issues in a way that engenders confidence.

In our assessment, six key issues require honest and substantive dialogue:

First, the PM must reconcile the splits within the upper echelon of the security forces, particularly the Somali National Army (SNA). The armed confrontation in Mogadishu from 25-29 April was largely among various SNA units who sided with different political factions. Prominent commanders have aligned themselves with the opposition on the principle of “defending the constitution and the democratic system.” Following their rapid redeployment, the PM is in a strong position to work with all sides to rebuild confidence among the top brass. Among other things, this would likely require decisive action to change or reassign some of the commanders who were responsible for the security forces’ politicization. This is not an easy task, given the highly flammable political situation in the country. But if he does not mend the rupture within the security forces, the PM will struggle to lead a meaningful political dialogue.



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Second, PM Roble must avoid past mistakes regarding the Federal Electoral Implementation Team (FEIT), the controversial electoral management body that he appointed in October 2020, ostensibly at the behest of president Farmaajo. Several members of the FEIT were senior officials in the offices of the president and prime minister, and their inclusion profoundly undercut the FEIT’s credibility. The PM has a fresh opportunity to form a new FEIT and ensure that its members can gain the trust of all Somali stakeholders. Fortunately, Somalia has no shortage of qualified people, and the PM knows many of them personally. This could send a powerful signal that the PM is genuinely interested in an inclusive electoral process that leads to free and fair elections. The FMSs would also be compelled to appoint a similarly respectable committee if the PM sets a great example.



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Third, PM Roble has to quickly solve the Somaliland electoral conundrum. Luckily, this is relatively easy to achieve absent deliberate political machinations. The key stakeholders on this issue are the deputy PM, Mahdi Gulaid, and the speaker of the Senate, Abdi Hashi. Under his mediation, the PM can pressure them to agree on a formula to jointly appoint the committees responsible for managing the Somaliland elections. There is no doubt that the leaders involved have the will and capacity to work out a fair deal. With respect to the venue, it would make sense to hold the Somaliland parliamentary caucus elections inside Mogadishu International Airport under the protection of AMISOM, given their vulnerability to undue pressures.

Fourth, the PM can play a mediatory role in the Gedo crisis, by far the most complex issue on the table. Unlike the president, who has a vested interest in Gedo and is perceived to have played a leading role in deepening the crisis, the PM can be viewed as a neutral figure. Under the 17 September agreement, FMSs are supposed to run their own elections. However, the parties in Jubbaland must negotiate in good faith and determine a formula under which elections can take place in Gedo while accommodating the legitimate concerns of the regional community.



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Fifth, the electoral timetable should be given special consideration. The legal mandate of the elected officials expired three months ago, and protracted negotiations could lead to a 'stealth extension.' During the first day of negotiations on 20 May, the PM should set a target date for both the parliamentary and the presidential elections to take place within 90-120 days. The sooner the parties agree on elections, the better it will be for long-term stability.

Finally, the role of the international community remains profoundly important. Their sustained pressure on Somali leaders has helped to unlock this political impasse. The African Union's mediation, which came at the behest of president Farmaajo, should be allowed to proceed. The FGS's decision to cast doubt on the mediation role of the AU envoy sends the wrong signal. Regardless of who becomes the AU envoy, Somali stakeholders will undoubtedly need mediation over the course of the dialogue. For nearly 15 years, the African Union, through AMISOM, has made incalculable sacrifices for the peace and stability of Somalia. On behalf of the rest of the international community, the AU envoy could also act as a guarantor should the parties request that in the course of the negotiations. Past electoral negotiations required mediation by the international community.

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