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Preventing Chaos in Mogadishu: Why Dialogue Must Replace Force

9 | Commentary

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Two separate viral videos of Somali police brutally beating an elderly man and, in another incident, a woman as they resisted forced eviction in Mogadishu's Siinay neighborhood on 24 September 2025 shocked the nation. The outrage quickly became political when senior leaders of the Somali Salvation Forum (SSF) – the main alliance opposing the government – rushed to the scene in solidarity, triggering deadly clashes between police and opposition security guards.

This latest flashpoint comes as President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud nears the end of his term while the country's electoral future remains unsettled. The president insists on delivering one-person-one-vote (1P1V) elections as a democratic milestone. The opposition accuses him of using that promise as cover to extend his mandate and argues that a consensual indirect model is the only realistic option under current security, technical, and financial constraints.

A Familiar Cycle – Now Repeating

Political showdowns are a recurring feature of Somalia's transition: Incumbents attempt to rewrite rules and extend time in office; rivals unite to resist. President Mohamud's second term is now following that well-trodden path.

In March 2024, Parliament passed sweeping constitutional amendments introducing 1P1V, limiting political parties to three, and enlarging presidential powers. Two of the seven federal member states (FMS) rejected the changes, as did the SSF and other non-aligned politicians, including former president Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo.

On 25 August 2025, the president tried to break – or divide – the opposition by signing an agreement with a splinter SSF faction: Federal MPs would be popularly elected and would then choose the president. Puntland, Jubaland and the main SSF bloc refused, insisting the Federal Government of Somalia must revert to consensus-based constitutional and electoral arrangements.

Our own August analysis argued that Somalia's fragile statehood is best served by returning to the 2012 Provisional Constitution and building consensus around any changes. Instead, the president has doubled down on hisposition. In his 25 September speech to the UN General Assembly he reiterated his commitment to 1P1V. In a BBC Somali interview two days earlier, he said the elections commission – appointed by him – would determine the timetable or any needed delay. This message was widely perceived to be the president's strongest signal for a term extension.

The 24 September Siinay shootings therefore echo the dangerous April 2021 standoff, when then-president Farmaajo used force against opposition figures (including today's president). Back then Hassan Sheikh warned that "politicizing security" was reckless. That warning still holds – but now applies to his own administration.

Land, Evictions, and Waning Public Trust

Beyond electoral disputes, public anger has been fueled by controversial state land sales. Since 2024, Mogadishu residents have faced evictions amid opaque transfers of public property to private developers. Assets reportedly sold include iconic or sensitive sites – the National University campus, the Fire Brigade station, and the National TV compound. Even the dead were exhumed from cemeteries. Civil society actors and more than 90 members of Parliament have condemned the process as unconstitutional and corrupt.

The backlash deepened when former presidents Abdiqasim Salad Hassan, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, and Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo issued a rare joint statement alleging that legal and financial safeguards were ignored. For many Somalis, the sale of state land during a humanitarian crisis has reinforced perceptions of elite capture and has deepened distrust in government motives.

Escalation Risks

On 25 September, Internal Security Minister Abdullahi Ismail Fartaag – flanked by the Mayor of Mogadishu and the Commander of the National Police Force – reiterated that the Federal Government and its security agencies would not allow the opposition to hold protests without prior permission. The provisional constitution explicitly allows for protests without the permission of government agencies. Fartaag also cited existing government regulations prohibiting the use of heavy weapons inside Mogadishu. Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre went further, labeling the clashes in Wardhiigley as ”an attempted coup on constitutional order,” and ordered security agencies to prevent “criminal acts” and to safeguard citizens. In response, the SSF denounced the incident as a “coordinated assassination attempt” on opposition leaders and demanded an independent investigation and the persecution of all perpetrators.

If protests called by the SSF proceed on 27 September, heavy-handed security responses could ignite wider unrest. Reports that the government deployed armored vehicles and heavily armed troops across Mogadishu on Thursday – concentrating forces on roads leading to the residences of opposition leaders – have only served to heighten fears of renewed political violence. The opposition has previously shown it can mobilize clan-based forces if attacked – a scenario reminiscent of 2021’s near-civil conflict in the capital. The government’s security sector has made hard-won gains against Al-Shabaab and Daesh; domestic political clashes could undo years of sacrifice and open space for extremists.

The Way Forward

Somalia still has a chance to avoid repeating its most destabilizing cycle. To do so, the following steps should be taken:

- Immediate De-escalation: Security forces must allow peaceful protests, which are a constitutionally protected right, and avoid using lethal force against demonstrators or political leaders. On their part, opposition groups must avoid provocative moves and must ensure that they liaise their movements closely with security agencies.
- Credible Electoral Talks: The FGS should halt unilateral electoral engineering and invite FMS leaders, opposition parties, and civil society to negotiate a workable 2026 election model. Any agreed-upon model must meet minimum standards that include, but are not limited to, avoiding repetition of the the last model that allowed for widespread rigging and fraudulent processes by federal and state leaders. Moreover, any 1P1V ambition should be linked to clear benchmarks (security, census, logistics) and to a realistic timeline rather than used to justify term extension.
- Transparency on Public Land: Publish all recent land transactions; suspend disputed deals; follow legal procedures, including the national procurement law, for reclaiming or selling public property.
- Independent Mediation, If Needed: Somali civil society, respected elders, and – if deadlock persists – neutral international partners can help broker compromise and ensure non-violence.
- Preserve Security Gains: Counter-terrorism forces should remain insulated from domestic politics; Mogadishu's improved security must not be risked for short-term political advantage.

Conclusion

Somalia's leaders know where unilateralism and repression lead – they have lived it from both sides. President Mohamud once urged restraint and dialogue when in opposition; the same wisdom is needed now. Cool heads and genuine consensus are the only path to avoiding another electoral crisis, safeguarding security gains, and keeping Somalia's fragile democratic project alive.

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