

Managing the New Political Order

03 | Commentary

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Somalia's electoral dispute is described as a constitutional disagreement. The federal government wants direct elections, or a hybrid version. Opposition groups insist that any departure from the clan-based selection system requires a consensus that has not materialized. International partners call for dialogue. This description is correct but incomplete. The central issue is that the balance of power that has shaped Somali politics for 30 years is changing.

For most of the period since the civil war, Somalia's political order has rested on two overlapping forms of outside support.

The first was political and ran through a Nairobi-based international structure. The Kenyan capital served as Somalia's diplomatic hub, while the United States, the European Union, the United Nations and other international actors provided diplomatic recognition, coordinated funding and stepped in as referees when Somali politicians reached deadlock. This was more than a support structure. It shaped the conditions under which Somali parties could disagree, bargain and reach settlements. Above all, it provided a framework within which political life could continue when domestic agreement broke down.

The second operated inside Somalia itself. The African Union military mission provided a security perimeter around Mogadishu. The United States concentrated on counterterrorism and the training of small, specialized units. Turkey established a program of state reconstruction that included military training and the rehabilitation of infrastructure and administration in the capital.

The two layers complemented each other. One provided political recognition, funding and external structure. The other made it possible to exercise authority inside the country.

The changing political landscape

This arrangement is now changing. As the Federal Government in Mogadishu has gradually built up some of the ordinary machinery of government, the Nairobi-based international structure has become less central. Decisions once shaped largely in Nairobi are increasingly made in Mogadishu by Somali officials themselves.

The clearest change has been in the security of the capital. For years, Mogadishu existed under the constant threat of al-Shabaab violence. Major attacks were frequent, commerce was constrained, ministries operated behind blast walls, and nearly every part of political and civic life worked under extraordinary security restrictions.

Between 2022 and 2024, that pressure eased. The government offensive launched in August 2022, fought alongside clan militias and supported by American and Turkish air power, recovered more than 215 towns and villages in its first phase. Inside the capital, large-scale attacks became much less frequent, a change that observers on the ground attributed to the offensive and to tighter control of entry points into the city.

The easing of pressure opened space for recovery. Commercial activity expanded, diaspora investment increased, and a building boom began. Activity at the port and airport grew, and with it the revenue passing through the state's hands.

The change was recognized at the international level as well. In December 2023, Somalia reached the Completion Point of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries process, securing \$4.5 billion in debt relief and cutting its external debt from 64% of GDP in 2018 to under 6%. This restored its access to international lending for the first time in three decades. Government institutions began to operate with more continuity and public agencies carried out plans and projects more regularly.

The gains are real, but they come with two important qualifications.

The first is that the recovery is reversible and being tested now. Since early 2025, al-Shabaab has mounted a renewed offensive, threatening to retake some of the ground it lost in 2022. In March 2025 the group attempted to assassinate the president with a bomb inside Mogadishu itself. Conditions in the capital continue to improve, but the gains cannot be taken for granted.

The second concerns the kind of state that is taking shape. It is young in everything but name. Institutions that other governments inherit, Somalia's federal government is building for the first time: a revenue administration, a functioning civil service, a body of law and regulation, and a diplomatic service of its own. This work is being done decades behind schedule and under difficult conditions. Procedures are still developing and are being applied inconsistently. Many of those implementing them belong to the first generation to hold such positions. The federal budget remains largely dependent on external support, and domestic revenue is still concentrated at Mogadishu's seaport and airport. External partners continue to provide much of the support on which these institutions depend.

Yet these limitations do not erase the broader change. The federal government in Mogadishu now has greater administrative reach and a greater ability to influence national decisions than it did in the past. The Nairobi-based structure remains influential, but it increasingly operates alongside a federal government capable of initiating, negotiating, and shaping outcomes.

The politics of transition

The FGS position is that political decision making should be led from Mogadishu, but this is not a call to end international engagement. The objective is to transfer responsibilities currently managed through external mediation to Somali institutions.

A sitting administration has an obvious incentive to favor an electoral system that gives it more influence over how power changes hands. The case for a greater Somali role therefore combines two elements: an argument about where authority now sits, and the immediate interests of an incumbent government.

The opposition argues that the existing framework remains necessary. It maintains that Somalia's institutions are not yet independent or trusted enough to manage electoral competition without broader guarantees of consensus and external support. This reflects a real feature of post-war Somali politics, which has depended on negotiated settlements enforced in practice by external mediation. The concern is that greater domestic control over electoral processes could allow a single actor to write the rules of the competition before the institutions needed to referee disputes have matured.

But the argument is also shaped by the order it seeks to preserve. Opposition forces have operated most effectively within a system where no single domestic actor controls the terms of the competition and where external actors enforce compromise. A transition toward domestically-controlled political processes would alter the balance on which opposition politics has long rested.

The federal member states complicate the picture further, and no account of the dispute is complete without them. Puntland and Jubbaland have rejected the constitutional and electoral changes advanced from Mogadishu and both have previously suspended cooperation with the federal government. Their friction with the capital has run deep enough to hamper coordination even against the insurgency.

The member states are domestic actors, but they occupy a distinctive position in this argument. Their autonomy has been protected in practice by the same dispersed, externally guaranteed order that the opposition defends. A political system centered on Nairobi and mediated from outside left room for multiple Somali centers of power. A system centered on Mogadishu narrows that room. The member states' resistance to the federal government's electoral project is therefore not just a disagreement about election design. It is resistance to the same shift of authority, expressed between Mogadishu and the regions rather than between government and opposition.

Principle and interest collide

The evolution of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's political position illustrates the change described above. During the 2021 electoral crisis, he stood with an opposition coalition that argued for consensus guaranteed from outside and resisted efforts by the federal government under Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo to exercise greater discretion over the electoral process. At the time, the federal government had fewer resources of its own and depended more heavily on outside support than it does today.

He now occupies the presidency in a different setting. The federal government runs more of the country's administration, deals more directly with foreign partners and plays a larger part in organizing political life from Mogadishu than it did in 2021. From this position, the argument that responsibility for electoral processes should rest with domestic institutions carries more weight than it did then.

His record separates the argument from the man making it. He came to office promising a completed constitution and direct elections. Four years later, the election has not been held. In March 2026, parliament extended presidential and parliamentary terms from four years to five and postponed elections to 2027. His mandate expired on 15 May with no agreed roadmap in place. Talks mediated by the United States and Britain collapsed that same day. By June the dispute had produced armed clashes in the capital.

The argument for bringing authority home is sound. In his hands, it has also become the justification for staying in office, which is precisely the outcome it must not be allowed to produce. The strongest evidence for the opposition's warnings about capacity and accountability is the incumbent's own unmet timetable.

The dispute is about both principle and interest. The same changes that strengthen the case for bringing authority home also expand the discretion of those who presently hold it. Hassan Sheikh's presidency illustrates the central tension of the transition now under way. The building of the state and the interests of the man presiding over it have become difficult to separate.

A framework for transition

The objective should be to manage the transition from the old, externally-mediated order to a new system of domestic authority. This means strengthening the Somali state without undermining its political legitimacy, which requires specific commitments from each of the four actors involved.

For the federal government, the national project must be separated from its own fortunes and built into institutions rather than just promised. In practice this means four things:

1. An electoral commission whose members are nominated jointly by the government, the opposition, the member states and civic actors, and confirmed by a parliamentary supermajority, so that no side can pack it.
2. A fixed election date, agreed by all parties and placed beyond the power of any single institution, parliament included, to change.
3. Publication of the voter registration timetable and the electoral budget, so that slippage is visible early rather than discovered after the fact.
4. An agreed caretaker arrangement for any period in which a mandate has expired, so that an incumbent who overstays can administer the country but cannot reshape the contest. The president could recover much of his lost credibility with a public commitment to leave office on the agreed date, whatever the result.

For the opposition, the first step is to be honest about its own incentives. It does not defend the status quo because it is traditional or fair. It defends the status quo because the status quo is a scramble. It is fought through clan deals, payments, and shifting regional alliances. The opposition knows how to work that scramble. It has the networks and the resources to compete, and it has a realistic chance of winning or at least of blocking the incumbent. The federal government, by contrast, finds that scramble costly and uncertain. It prefers a national election because it controls the instruments of state power and can shape the national rules. Each side prefers the arena where it thinks it has the advantage. The debate is not about constitution versus expedience. It is about which battlefield each side expects to win.

This does not make the opposition wrong on the immediate agreements. Deals cannot be thrown away when they become inconvenient to those in office, and an incumbent who has stayed past his mandate cannot expect a presumption of good faith on process. But the opposition weakens its case when it converts a legitimate complaint into a blanket defense of the old scramble which was built for a country that no longer exists.

Defending it as permanent is not constitutionalism. It is defending a familiar hunting ground.

The opposition must also avoid backing Federal Member States that try to tailor the process in their own favor. Some FMS presidents want control over who votes and who sits on the commission, and they want state-level rules that guarantee their own influence. If the opposition supports those efforts, it is doing exactly what it accuses the federal government of doing. That would destroy its credibility on the very process issue it has championed.

The stronger course is to accept one person, one vote as the destination while making agreement on the process conditional on meaningful safeguards: seats on the electoral commission, a fixed election date, and agreed caretaker rules. Having secured those guarantees, the opposition should participate. A boycott would hand the incumbent exactly the uncontested field he should be denied.

International partners should change how they engage. For much of the past three decades, their role combined political mediation with direct support for the basic functions of government. They helped manage disputes, financed essential systems, and provided expertise in areas where Somali institutions had limited capacity. That approach was necessary at the time, but the context has changed. Somalia remains dependent on external support, but its institutions now have greater capacity and a greater role in national affairs.

The emphasis should therefore move gradually from political management toward institutional support: strengthening the civil service, security institutions, public administration, revenue systems, and the structures required for elections. This work is most effective when carried out through Somali institutions rather than alongside or around them. The measure of success is not the number of disputes managed externally, but the extent to which Somali institutions are able to manage these responsibilities themselves.

Turkey has a key role in supporting dialogue among Somali actors as it has done more than most external partners in rebuilding state institutions, particularly the security sector and government administration. Its involvement is also visible in Mogadishu, giving it a level of access and credibility that many other partners do not possess.

Turkey's engagement should extend beyond political leaders to include business figures, civil society, and other groups whose views are often absent from formal negotiations. Its influence will be strongest when it is understood as support for Somali state institutions rather than for any administration.

The electoral dispute is therefore a test of the changing balance of power. The government must demonstrate that stronger state institutions can coexist with political limits. The opposition and member states must demonstrate that constitutional safeguards do not require preserving a system built around external mediation. Somalia's partners must adapt to a country that remains dependent on support but has greater capacity to manage its own affairs.

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