

**The Cost of Political
Brinkmanship:
Somalia's Need
for Dialogue,
Accountability and
Stabilization**

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For more than 18 months, the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) has warned that Somalia's political trajectory was becoming increasingly fragile, polarized, and unsustainable.

Through a series of analyses – including *Fix Somalia's Broken Political Trajectory*, *Unpacking the NCC Decision*, *From Gridlock to Governance*, *Preventing Chaos in Mogadishu*, and most recently *With Time Running Out, Government-Opposition Talks Must Deliver a Consensus Electoral Model* – HIPS has consistently argued that unresolved constitutional disputes, unilateral political actions, deepening mistrust among political actors, and the absence of genuine consensus were pushing the country toward a serious institutional crisis.

Much of what we've been warning about has now happened. On 3 June, armed confrontations between opposition forces and the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) erupted in Mogadishu, claiming the lives of young Somalis. This violence marked a dangerous turning point in Somalia, where political uncertainty, insecurity, institutional fragility, economic stress, and external pressures have combined to create one of the gravest crises the country has faced in years.

Recognizing the growing risks, international partners – including the United States and the United Kingdom – have publicly urged the country's leaders to resume dialogue and swiftly agree on a consensual electoral roadmap, saying Somalia is at a “delicate moment”.

Political tensions are unfolding against an exceptionally difficult backdrop. Al-Shabaab remains a potent threat to national security. Economic hardship, humanitarian vulnerability, and recurring climate shocks continue to place immense pressure on society. At the same time, geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa, maritime rivalries, and continued efforts to detach Somaliland from the rest of Somalia have intensified concerns about sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Meanwhile, relations between the Federal Government and several Federal Member States have deteriorated sharply while key national institutions face contested mandates. Constitutional disagreements remain unresolved, trust among major stakeholders continues to erode, and disputes over elections, representation, and the distribution of federal authority have deepened political fragmentation across the country.

The Provisional Constitution was intended to serve as a framework through which Somali stakeholders would gradually complete federal arrangements, resolve outstanding constitutional questions, and negotiate a path toward democratic governance. Instead, recurring electoral crises, constitutional ambiguities, elite fragmentation, and increasingly transactional politics have weakened the foundations of the post-transition political order. Consensus-building has steadily given way to unilateralism, zero-sum competition, and political brinkmanship, leaving institutions more vulnerable and public confidence increasingly strained.

Political disputes are not new to Somalia's post-conflict transition. However, the current crisis, increasingly reflects the erosion of the broader political compact that has underpinned Somalia's federal order since 2012. This has resulted in growing disagreement over legitimacy, authority, constitutional ownership, and the future direction of the Somali state.

This trajectory is neither sustainable nor without consequence. Somalia cannot indefinitely absorb the combined pressures of institutional paralysis, contested mandates, insurgency, economic hardship, humanitarian distress, and intensifying geopolitical competition without risking deeper destabilization.

Nor can it assume that international support will remain constant regardless of the conduct of the political elite. In an increasingly turbulent global environment, where major powers are becoming more selective in their engagement with fragile states, prolonged political deadlock and the normalization of crisis risk eroding both international patience and strategic attention.

The confrontation in Mogadishu on 3 June placed the lives of prominent traditional and political leaders at risk, including Ugas Abdirizaq Ugas Abdullahi Faracadde, highlighting how quickly political disputes can escalate into threats against public safety and respected voices of national leadership, mediation, and reconciliation. The deteriorating political climate was further illustrated on 5 June by the treatment of former President and opposition leader Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, whose movement was obstructed while he was en route to his residence after having already vacated his stronghold in accordance with understandings reached through extensive negotiations.

These incidents are particularly concerning because they involve leaders whose constituencies share close social and clan linkages, meaning such grievances can penetrate deeply into society and leave behind enduring wounds. Beyond the immediate tensions they generate, these developments risk reinforcing mistrust, hardening political positions, and undermining confidence in dialogue and negotiated settlements. If left unaddressed, they could further complicate future efforts to build consensus and foster constructive engagement between the government and opposition, at a time when trust and political compromise are essential for Somalia's stability and state-building efforts.

The violence shattered any remaining illusion that the crisis was merely a political disagreement among elites. Once political disputes spill into the streets and draw blood, they become a national tragedy with profound consequences for public safety, social cohesion, and state stability – one that demands accountability from those whose actions, decisions, or rhetoric contributed to the escalation.

The violence underscored a fundamental reality: when political elites are not held accountable for reckless actions, constitutional violations, and the deliberate escalation of disputes, it is ordinary Somalis who feel the consequences. The violence serves as a stark reminder that impunity among competing political actors is not merely a governance problem – it is a direct threat to peace, public safety, and the survival of Somalia's state-building project.

The question facing Somalia today is how to prevent a broader unraveling of the political settlement on which the country's stability depends. The answer is a renewed sense of responsibility, courageous leadership, and a willingness to place the national interest above partisan advantage – not only from Somalia's political elite, but also from influential civic actors and principled, vigilant international partners. It will require a commitment to dialogue that extends beyond competing political camps and draws upon the legitimacy, wisdom, and influence of Somalia's broader civic leadership.

Only a genuinely inclusive process, anchored in civic engagement and supported by responsible international facilitation, can rebuild trust, encourage compromise, and restore confidence in the state-building project. These steps must be taken before the costs of inaction – and the human, political, and institutional damage they entail – far exceed the concessions necessary to reach an agreement.

History is unlikely to remember who prevailed in today's political disputes. It will remember whether Somalia's leaders – both political and civic – rose above factional interests to protect the state during one of the most consequential moments in its post-conflict transition.

The Perils of Winner-Takes-All Politics

Countries emerging from civil war – particularly those in which no side has achieved a decisive victory – are rarely stabilized through winner-takes-all politics. Durable peace and effective governance are more often built on compromise, power-sharing, inclusive institutions, and broad political consensus. Somalia is no exception.

Indeed, Somalia's modern political history repeatedly demonstrates the limits of unilateralism. Attempts by individual leaders or political coalitions to dominate the political landscape have seldom produced lasting stability. Progress has generally been achieved when competing actors have recognized their mutual vulnerabilities and chosen negotiation over confrontation: accommodation over exclusion: and consensus over coercion.

This lesson carries urgency today because Somalia's history also illustrates a more sobering reality: political conflicts are often easier to initiate than to contain. Once disputes cross the threshold into violence, their trajectory becomes increasingly unpredictable, and their consequences extend far beyond the calculations of those who set them in motion.

The events of 1991 remain a powerful reminder. The collapse of the military regime was widely expected to usher in a new political era. Instead, divisions among former allies quickly degenerated into armed confrontation, transforming a struggle against authoritarian rule into a devastating conflict among competing factions. What began as a political dispute evolved into a prolonged national tragedy whose effects continue to shape Somalia decades later. The central lesson is clear: in Somalia, the end of one political conflict can easily become the beginning of another if disagreements are not managed through inclusive political arrangements.

This warning is particularly relevant in the current climate. Recent tensions between President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and former President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed are concerning not only because of their national political significance but also because they involve leaders whose constituencies share close social, political, and clan linkages. Conflicts among actors with overlapping communal ties often prove especially difficult to manage, as political divisions penetrate deeper into society, complicate mediation efforts, and leave behind grievances that are more personal, emotional, and enduring.

The assumption that any confrontation would remain limited, manageable, or short-lived would therefore be dangerously complacent. Somalia's experience demonstrates that once political disputes acquire a security dimension, events frequently develop a momentum of their own, beyond the control of those who initially sought to exploit them. The costs are ultimately borne by ordinary citizens and the institutions upon which national stability depends.

The Cost of Political Recklessness

One of the enduring weaknesses of Somalia's political transition has been the near absence of meaningful accountability for leaders whose actions undermine constitutional order, destabilize institutions, or place the public at risk. This has encouraged a culture of impunity in which brinkmanship is rewarded, institutional norms are weakened, and public trust steadily erodes.

Somalia cannot continue to build a viable state if political actors are permitted to trigger crises without consequence. Civic leaders, working alongside concerned international partners, should therefore champion the creation of credible accountability mechanisms to identify and publicly expose those responsible for incitement, political obstruction, unconstitutional actions, or efforts to derail the state-building process. The purpose of such mechanisms is not retribution but deterrence: to raise the political costs of irresponsible behavior and reinforce respect for constitutional governance.

A democratic system cannot depend solely on the restraint or goodwill of individual leaders. It requires institutions, legal safeguards, and public accountability capable of protecting constitutional order regardless of who holds power. Strengthening these safeguards – including adherence to constitutional timelines, respect for negotiated agreements, and accountability for actions that endanger public stability – is essential not only for democratic governance but for the long-term legitimacy and survival of the Somali state itself.

The deaths of Somali citizens should serve as a stark reminder that political crises have real human consequences. Those who fuel instability, obstruct compromise, or place personal ambitions above national interests should no longer be allowed to do so without scrutiny or consequence. If Somalia is to move beyond its cycle of recurring crises, accountability must become an integral part of the political settlement rather than an afterthought once the crisis has passed.

Influential Civic Voices Must Speak Up

The responsibility for navigating Somalia's current crisis cannot rest solely with the political elite. A durable political settlement requires the active engagement of the country's most credible civic actors. Religious leaders, traditional elders, academics, professional associations, civil society organizations, and business leaders possess legitimacy and social influence that political institutions alone cannot command. Their role is not merely consultative; it is essential to preserving national stability.

Traditional elders remain the most enduring mechanisms of mediation and conflict resolution, providing channels for dialogue that often outlast formal political arrangements. Religious leaders, as trusted moral authorities and providers of social services, are uniquely positioned to promote moderation, restraint, and a sense of collective responsibility at moments of heightened polarization.

The professional and intellectual community offers the expertise and long-term perspective needed to strengthen governance, broaden political inclusion, and move national debate beyond elite bargaining.

Meanwhile, the business community – whose investments, taxes, and economic activity sustain much of the country's recovery – has a direct stake in political stability, accountable governance, and the preservation of public order.

At a time when political competition is increasingly dominated by zero-sum calculations, these civic actors can serve as a counterweight to partisan interests by articulating a broader national interest. They are often better placed than political factions to advocate compromise, defend institutional continuity, and ensure that state-building remains responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens, including women, youth, and other underrepresented groups.

The immediate national priority is not political victory for one side or another, but stabilization through de-escalation, dialogue, and renewed consensus on the rules governing Somalia's political transition. Achieving this will require civic leaders to move from the margins of political debate to the center of efforts to forge a new national understanding.

A credible pathway forward would involve a structured national dialogue that brings together influential civic actors whose voices have largely remained on the margins despite their considerable social legitimacy. These actors are often better positioned to articulate public concerns, build consensus, and provide political pressure for compromise than the competing political camps themselves.

The Need for a New Political Settlement Initiative

The recent engagement of the United States and the United Kingdom in efforts to ease tensions and encourage dialogue reflects growing international recognition that Somalia's current political challenges require active diplomacy rather than passive observation. While these efforts have helped preserve channels of communication among federal leaders, opposition figures, and federal member states, Somalia's experience demonstrates that lasting solutions cannot emerge from elite negotiations alone. Repeated political crisis have shown that Somali political actors often struggle to resolve disputes they themselves create, frequently allowing short-term political calculations to override broader national interests. A more credible and sustainable path forward would therefore involve an inclusive national dialogue that brings together with political actors and influential civic leaders—including religious leaders, traditional elders, academics, professional associations, civil society organisations, and the business community—whose social legitimacy, independence, and proximity to public concerns position them to foster consensus, encourage compromise, and help bridge political divides.

Türkiye and Djibouti are uniquely placed to play a constructive role in facilitating this process. Both maintain working relationships across Somalia's political spectrum, enjoy a degree of trust among key stakeholders, and have demonstrated long-term commitments to Somalia's stability. Working in coordination with international partners, they could help create an additional channel for dialogue, de-escalation, and confidence-building at a moment when formal political processes are increasingly strained.

For Türkiye, such an approach would also help navigate the difficult balance between supporting Somali state institutions and avoiding perceptions of partisanship during a period marked by mandate disputes, electoral disagreements, and growing political polarization. Partnerships that function effectively during periods of institutional continuity often require a different form of engagement during moments of crisis. Support that is perceived as routine state-to-state cooperation under normal circumstances can, during contested political transitions, be interpreted by rival actors as political alignment.

A Turkish-Djiboutian initiative, grounded in Somali ownership and supported by the broader international community, would therefore complement existing diplomatic efforts while helping preserve stability, prevent further political fragmentation, and protect the substantial goodwill that both countries continue to enjoy among the Somali public.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Somalia has reached a pivotal moment. What began as disagreements over electoral arrangements and political mandates has evolved into a broader crisis of legitimacy, constitutional order, and state stabilization. The armed clashes of 3 June demonstrated that the costs of political brinkmanship are no longer confined to elite negotiations; they are now being borne by ordinary Somali citizens. Unless urgent steps are taken, the country risks entering another cycle of political fragmentation at a time when insecurity, economic hardship, humanitarian pressures, and geopolitical competition are already testing the resilience of the Somali state.

Yet this outcome is not inevitable. Somalia retains significant political, social, and diplomatic resources that can be mobilized to prevent further deterioration. What is required now is a shift from unilateralism and confrontation toward dialogue, compromise, and collective responsibility.

To that end, the following recommendations deserve urgent consideration:

1. Launch an Inclusive Political Settlement Process

The Federal Government, opposition groups, and Federal Member States should commit to an immediate, structured political dialogue aimed at reaching consensus on electoral arrangements, constitutional disputes, and the broader rules governing the transition. The objective should be not merely to resolve the current dispute but to restore confidence in the political process itself.

2. Elevate Civic Actors to the Center of the Process

Religious leaders, traditional elders, academics, business leaders, professional associations, women's groups, and civil society organizations should be formally incorporated into any political settlement initiative. Somalia's future cannot be negotiated exclusively by political elites. Civic actors possess the legitimacy, social reach, and moral authority needed to encourage compromise and protect the national interest.

3. Establish a Turkish–Djiboutian Good-Offices Initiative

Building on existing diplomatic efforts by the United States, the United Kingdom, and other partners, Türkiye and Djibouti should jointly facilitate a new round of dialogue among Somali stakeholders. Both countries enjoy broad credibility across Somalia's political spectrum and are well positioned to provide a trusted platform for de-escalation, confidence-building, and negotiated stabilization.

4. Create an Accountability Mechanism for Political Spoilers

Somali civic leaders, with support from interested international partners, should establish an independent mechanism to document and publicly identify actions that undermine constitutional order, incite violence, obstruct dialogue, or threaten the state-building process. Political actors must understand that destabilizing behavior carries reputational and political consequences.

5. Reaffirm Constitutionalism and Institutional Restraint

All political actors should recommit to constitutional governance, respect for institutional mandates, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Future constitutional reforms should strengthen safeguards against unilateral actions, mandate controversies, and recurring electoral crises.

6. Prioritize National Stabilization Above Political Competition

The immediate national priority must be de-escalation and stabilization. No political objective is worth jeopardizing the security of citizens, the cohesion of state institutions, or the gains achieved through decades of state-building efforts. Political actors must demonstrate restraint and recognize that compromise is not a sign of weakness but a prerequisite for preserving the state.

Somalia's future will not be determined by who wins the current political contest. It will be determined by whether its leaders – political and civic alike – can rise above factional interests and forge a renewed national consensus. The country stands at a crossroads. One path leads toward deeper polarization, institutional decay, and instability. The other leads toward dialogue, constitutional order, and a more resilient political settlement. The choice, and the responsibility, rests with Somalis themselves – but the time to act is rapidly running out.

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