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The Formation of Hirshabelle State

Challenges and Opportunities



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Executive Summary

The formation of Hirshabelle state, established in 2016 as the fifth federal member state of Somalia, represented a pivotal yet contentious milestone in Somalia's federalization process. Created through the merger of the Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle regions, its establishment was driven by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to fulfil constitutional requirements and facilitate elections. However, the process was widely criticized for its rushed and exclusionary nature, which exacerbated unresolved grievances among key stakeholders. These grievances, rooted in clan-based power-sharing disputes, inadequate consultation, and perceptions of political marginalization, have undermined the state's legitimacy and functionality.

Dominant clans, such as the Hawadle and Abgal, wield disproportionate influence over Hirshabelle's political and security dynamics, leaving other clans marginalized. This imbalance, coupled with fluid and contested clan affiliations, has deepened socio-political fragmentation. Security provision remains fragmented, shaped by a complex interplay of actors, including al-Shabaab, clan militias like the Macawisley, the Somali National Army (SNA), and African Union forces under ATMIS. While the Macawisley militia has played a critical role in countering al-Shabaab, the group continues to exploit governance deficits and clan divisions to maintain its foothold in the region.

The state formation process was characterized by elite-driven, transactional politics that prioritized short-term gains over inclusive governance. The FGS's dominant role in shaping power-sharing agreements and institutional frameworks sidelined grassroots participation, resulting in a hastily adopted provisional constitution that lacks broad-based consensus. This top-down approach has eroded trust in state institutions, further compounding governance challenges.

Hirshabelle's governance deficits are multifaceted, encompassing unresolved disputes over clan representation, resource allocation, and the state capital. The 2016 agreement designating Jowhar as the capital and allocating the presidency to the Hawadle clan was breached in 2020 when the presidency shifted to the Abgal clan, intensifying grievances. The emergence of a parallel administration, Hiiraan state in Beledweyne, has further complicated governance and security, creating a power vacuum and deteriorating living conditions.

Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, though trusted, often fail to address root causes of conflict, while al-Shabaab courts have gained traction due to their perceived efficiency. Elite functionalism continues to dominate Hirshabelle's political landscape, with governance decisions often prioritizing clan interests over public accountability. These entrenched patterns of corruption and transactional politics perpetuate instability, leaving the state ill-equipped to address its governance and security challenges effectively.

Background

Hirshabelle was established in 2016 through the merger of the Middle Shabelle and Hiiraan regions, with Jowhar as its capital.¹ Hirshabelle has a total land mass of 56,000 km² and borders Ethiopia to the west; Southwest—which includes Lower Shabelle, Bay, and Bakool regions—and Banadir to the south and west; Galmudug to the north; and the Indian Ocean to the southeast. According to the Population Estimation Survey for Somalia conducted in 2014, the state has around 1.03 million residents.² Of this population, approximately 19 percent live in urban centers, 37 percent inhabit rural areas, and 34 percent maintain a nomadic lifestyle. The state also hosts a significant number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), who make up about 10 percent of its total population due to ongoing conflicts in the region. These categories often overlap, especially in regions where agriculture and livestock coexist along the riverbanks.

Against this backdrop, this research examines the state formation process and governance challenges in Hirshabelle, to address critical issues affecting the state's governance, stability and development. It analyzes Hirshabelle's governance structure, focusing on its formation process and identifying key challenges that threaten its unity and sustainability as a Federal Member State (FMS). The analysis is vital for informing evidence-based policy decisions, fostering sustainable development initiatives, and contributing to the broader discourse on state-building in Somalia.

Additionally, it identifies potential solutions to longstanding governance issues and enhances understanding of the complex interplay between local clan dynamics and state formation. Ultimately, it endeavours to provide valuable insights that can guide stakeholders in strengthening Hirshabelle's political settlement in a way that promotes sustainable stability for the state.

Finally, the study provides recommendations for improving the governance of the state and the cohesion of the society.

1. Introduction

Hirshabelle is a significant agricultural and pastoral region in Somalia, with fertile land and a strong agricultural heritage. The state has a long history of hosting agricultural projects, including sugar cane plantations, cotton, irrigation schemes, and a thriving fishery industry.³ The Shabelle river, which originates in the Ethiopian highlands, provides a vital source of water for agricultural activities.

1. Janel B. Galvanek, 'Grass-Roots Dialogue in Hirshabelle State Recommendations for Locally-Informed Federalism in Somalia,' Berghof Foundation Project report, May 2017, 3.
2. Somalia National Bureau of Statistics (Formerly Directorate of National Statistics, Federal Government of Somalia), Somali Health and Demographic survey - Hirshabelle Report 2021.
3. Sheikh, Abass Kassim. "Conflict Assessment Report: Hirshabelle State, Somalia."

Despite its potential, the region faces challenges, including limited rainfall, communal conflicts over grazing land, and security and governance issues such as corruption, lack of fair representation amongst local clans, and poor accountability.⁴ However, with its proximity to Mogadishu and the traditional trade route through Beledweyne, Hirshabelle has the potential to be a key strategic player in the agriculture and livestock businesses. Addressing its challenges is crucial for the state's stability and development.

The formation of Hirshabelle in 2016 was marred by political expediency and deep-rooted grievances. Hiiraan, established in 1954 as one of the original eight founding regions of the Somali Republic, remained unchanged for decades while other regions were created under the military regime. This led to a sense of marginalisation among the Hiiraan community. President Sheikh Sharif later divided Hiiraan into two regions, a move intended to help it qualify as a standalone FMS – this is a key historical narrative often overlooked by proponents of Hirshabelle. However, the FGS rushed the formation of Hirshabelle by merging Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle, primarily to meet federal electoral timelines rather than to ensure meaningful state-building. Middle Shabelle itself had been carved out of the original Banadir region in the 1970s, and many Hiiraan state advocates view this merger as both historically unfounded and politically unfair.

The political settlement that was established during Hirshabelle's formation resulted in significant leadership roles being held by the Hawiye sub-clans Abgaal and Hawadle. This elite pact aimed to maintain a balance of power between the two, with high-level positions distributed accordingly. However, despite being given political prominence at the executive level, both Abgaal and Hawadle are minorities in terms of their share of legislative seats in Hirshabelle. The arrangement sidelined broader clan representation and failed to reflect the actual demographic makeup of the region. The process was also hasty and exclusionary, triggering resistance—particularly from groups in Hiiraan who opposed the merger and demanded independent FMS status.

These tensions culminated in widespread political instability and weak governance structures. The disputed election of Ali Abdullahi Hussein 'Guudlaawe' as president in 2020, combined with the mobilization of clan militias to suppress dissent, deepened the crisis. Many viewed the Abgaal clan's control over both the presidency and the state capital Jowhar as a betrayal of an earlier agreement that had designated the presidency for the Hawadle clan—further fuelling discontent and weakening Hirshabelle's legitimacy as a functional federal entity.

4. Rift Valley Institute. "Hirshabelle Federal Member State Profile."

Additionally, Hirshabelle continues to face deep-rooted disputes over its capital and presidential power-sharing. For the Hiiraan community, grievances stem from the loss of its historical regional status and the demotion of Beledweyne—larger and more diverse than Jowhar—as the capital. Many believe Hiiraan, as an original region, should have absorbed Middle Shabelle, not been subordinated into it. Tensions worsened when the FGS forcefully closed the state formation conference in Beledweyne in 2016, prompting some elders to boycott the parallel process in Jowhar. Although Jowhar was designated as the capital and the presidency allocated to the Hawadle clan under an FGS-brokered deal, the 2020 shift of the presidency to the Abgaal clan reignited claims of betrayal and deepened the political divide.⁵

Proponents of Middle Shabelle, however, present counterarguments. They point out that Beledweyne's location, being distant from Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia and close to the Ethiopian border, poses logistical and security challenges. They also argue that the internal cohesion and stability of Hirshabelle's communities are comparatively stronger than those in other states such as Galmudug and Jubbaland. Moreover, they highlight that the Hawadle clan, which contests the dominance of Middle Shabelle, also has a significant presence within Middle Shabelle itself, indicating the need for broader intra-clan reconciliation rather than regional realignment.

The criteria for distributing the 99 seats in the Hirshabelle legislature remain unclear, leaving some clans dissatisfied with their representation. Efforts to include more clans in the cabinet have resulted in Hirshabelle having the largest FMS executive in Somalia, with 82 nominal cabinet members. Leadership roles in security institutions are also contested among the state's clans. As a result, clan-based power sharing influences civil service appointments, provoking grievances and hindering the recruitment of competent individuals, further weakening the state's already fragile capacity.⁶

Local intra- and inter-clan conflicts are prevalent in the state, including disputes over land ownership, resource-based conflicts between pastoral communities and farmers, and politically instigated clashes. Among these, clan conflicts over land ownership are the most common. The absence of proper land demarcation and ownership documents, coupled with the desire to expand land boundaries, has led to multiple clans claiming the same land and resorting to armed conflict to resolve disputes. Clan militias frequently erect roadblocks to protect their vast lands which often results in violence and acts of revenge.⁷

5. Ibid.

6. Platform for Political Dialogue and Somali Public Agenda. "Hirshabelle's Political Settlement: Opportunities for Meaningful and Inclusive Political Processes." Policy Brief SDP01, February 2023.

7. Sheikh, Abass Kassim. "Conflict Assessment Report: Hirshabelle State, Somalia."

The current resource-based conflicts in the state and the country are compounded by the impact of climate change, including extreme weather events such as droughts and floodings, and degradation of the environment in Somalia in general. In Hirshabelle in particular, extreme weather events have created a knock-on effect on farming and pastoralist communities in the state. The resulting scarcity of resources has increased competition amongst communities for the meagre resources, thus igniting violent conflicts.

1.1 The Presence of Al Shabaab and Clan Fragmentation

Hirshabelle's security landscape has been significantly complicated by al-Shabaab's pervasive presence. The group continues to control vast rural territories and critical supply routes, which facilitates the movement of arms and insurgents, and disrupts commerce and free movement of people.

In the lead-up to the May 2022 federal presidential elections, a militia group predominantly composed of the Hawadle clan launched a military offensive as a self-defence measure against Al-Shabaab's incursion. However, this initiative stalled shortly following internal clan divisions. The internal political dynamics – formation of the parallel state in Hiiraan circumscribed to the Hawadle clan and rejected by other Hiiraan clans; grievances of local clans; and lack of support by dysfunctional state and federal institutions – have contributed to the stagnation of the offensive against the group, if not an outright failure.

Ongoing clan violence following the 2022 campaign underscored the ineffectiveness of both Hirshabelle and FGS authorities in managing inter-clan conflicts. Furthermore, the absence of a coherent strategy to expand the governance in the liberated areas, coupled with the al-Shabaab attempts to thwart national and international stabilization programs, have exacerbated the state's security challenges. These internal divisions have hindered joint operations and information sharing among key stakeholders leading the military effort of the government thereby enabling al-Shabaab to exploit the clan allegiances of the security officials and subsequent fragmentation for its strategic benefit, leaving the state more vulnerable to continued instability.

There is an emerging consensus that the federal government must directly intervene to revise Hirshabelle's constitutional framework, particularly to correct the imbalance in clan representation. Although the Abgal and Hawadle clans hold less than 30% of the parliamentary seats (combined), they continue to control key executive positions and maintain influence through executive authority and militias. Despite their limited representation in parliament, these clans remain dominant in state governance, which contributes to ongoing political stalemate.

Parliamentary representation must better reflect the region's demographic realities, including increased seats for marginalized riverine Bantu communities. Additionally, equitable access to natural resources should be prioritized, with a comprehensive land registry established to protect indigenous land rights. These complex but essential reforms cannot be left solely to dominant local clans and must be overseen by federal institutions with expertise in governance, land rights, and equitable resource management

2. Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative approach to gather comprehensive insights into the state formation process and governance challenges in Hirshabelle State.

The methodology combined extensive literature review and field data, which enabled the study to establish a solid theoretical foundation and context.

The field data collection was conducted through two main methods: key informant interviews (KIIs) with government representatives, political elites, and community leaders as subject matter experts; and focus group discussions (FGDs) with civil society groups, community leaders and members of the general population. Specifically, the profile of the interviewees included regional governors, district mayors, key state-level ministers, local member of parliaments, community leaders and federal-level politicians such as senators and members of parliament. The FGD discussants comprised of community elders, religious leaders and civil society groups such as youth and women—selected based on diverse societal segments ensuring balanced representation.

To ensure broad representation and inclusivity, the research was conducted across key urban centers in Hirshabelle, specifically Jowhar, Beledweyne, Bulo Burte, and Cadale. These towns were deliberately selected to encompass both administrative capitals and historically marginalized communities, capturing the political, social, and security perspectives of diverse constituencies. Complementary interviews were carried out in Mogadishu with federal-level politicians to contextualize state-level dynamics within the broader framework of national governance and to solicit strategic insights into addressing Hirshabelle's enduring challenges.

The data collection process was led by an experienced researcher assisted by local researchers. It primarily involved audio-recorded interviews and FGDs conducted with explicit consent by participants, while maintaining strict confidentiality protocols. Throughout the process, the lead researcher managed and provided quality control, working closely with the field research team to ensure both efficiency and data quality. This rigorous methodology allowed for a thorough examination of Hirshabelle's governance structure, its formation process, and the challenges affecting its unity and sustainability as a federal member state.

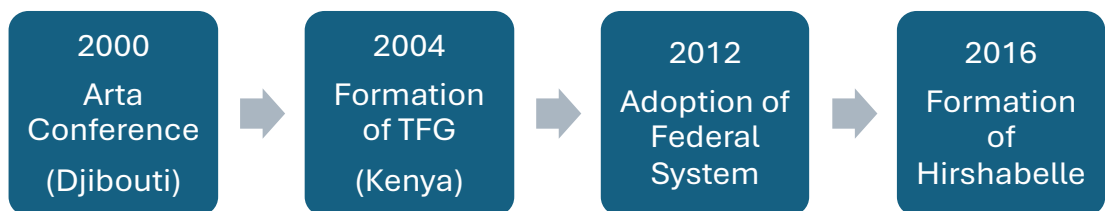
3. The State Formation Process in Hirshabelle

3.1 Historical Context and Precipitating Factors

The state formation process of the federal member states was borne out of a pathway towards the re-establishment of a Somali government that would be welcomed and accepted by all its citizens.

Following the Mbagathi peace process and the subsequent establishment of transitional, national, and federal governments, timelines were set to guide the proper formation and implementation of processes and procedures required for creating federal member states. These measures were intended to enable the devolution of responsibilities within a functioning federal system.

With an interim constitution, serving as the governance framework that outlines the terms of the instructional structure that forms the basis of a formed state, Hirshabelle became the last member state to the federalisation process ahead of the 2016 election.



Key Milestones in Somalia's Peace and State-Building Process

The formation of Hirshabelle involved merging the Hiraan and middle Shabelle regions which had been part of Banadir before the military coup of 1969. According to key stakeholder interviews, the merger was formed on the basis of an informal power-sharing agreement that would see the president elected from the Hawadle clan and elect an Abgal vice president in Jowhar as the capital city. With a deadline looming to complete the federal process of the third republic in time for the 2017 election, the federal government and local community groups, including politicians, clan elders, civil society groups and other stakeholders, convened to negotiate the basis of power sharing for Hirshabelle. This eventually led to its formation as the fifth federal member state.

Furthermore, the international community, through the New Deal and the Somali Compact, played a significant role in state formation in Somalia in 2016.⁸ Despite warnings from some experts, external actors, including the United Kingdom, the United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary-General (UN-SRSG), the European Union, and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), pressed Somali stakeholders at both the federal and Hirshabelle levels to “complete the federal map.”⁹ The international community leveraged its economic and political support, asserting that the completion of federalization was necessary for continued development assistance. Alex de Waal commented on this, stating, “In effect, external financial flows fuel the dynamics the international community seeks to contain—especially in terms of reducing insecurity.”¹⁰

The state formation process was significantly undermined by widespread accusations against the federal government, particularly regarding the rushed nature of consultations, the inconclusive negotiation of power-sharing arrangements, and the exclusion of key stakeholders including prominent clan elders.¹¹ An inter-regional conference intended to bring together representatives from Hiiraan and Jowhar faced substantial challenges, as many elders boycotted the proceedings over disagreements concerning political representation.¹²

As is often the case in Somali political dynamics, power brokering and negotiations involved a complex interplay of community elders, clan representatives, government officials, and private sector actors.¹³ Hirshabelle was no exception. The consultations leading to the establishment of the state unfolded over a 10-month period and were largely driven by a top-down, federal government-led process.

Since its formation, Hirshabelle has had three presidents, all selected through an indirect process. Two were from the Hawadle clan while the current president, Ali Abdullahi Hussein (Ali Guudlaawe), previously the vice president, is from the Abgal clan. According to key informants,¹⁴ the election of the Ali Guudlaawe in 2020 breached the power-sharing agreement brokered by the FGS in 2016. That agreement outlined the executive branch’s power-sharing framework, specifying clan representation for the positions of president and vice president. The new arrangement, however, was seen to disrupt this balance, with the presidency and the capital’s location perceived as concentrating power in favor of Middle Shabelle.¹⁵

8. Skeppström, Emma, and Per Nordlund. “Security, Stabilization and State Formation in Somalia.” Swedish Ministry of Defence (2014).

9. For discussion on this theme, see Afyare A. Elmi, *Decentralized Unitary System: A Middle Ground Solution for Somalia*. Published by Doha Institute.

10. See De Waal, Alex. “Somalia synthesis paper, 2017.” (2017). Available at https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/100162/4/De_Waal_somalia_synthesis_paper_published.pdf, p. 11

11. Focus Group Discussions.

12. Jowhar conference opens despite Hiiraan elders’ boycott. Accessed at: https://hiiraan.com/news4/2016/Jan/103544/jowhar_conference_opens_despite_hiiraan_elders_boycott.aspx

13. Jowhar conference opens despite Hiiraan elders’ boycott. Accessed at: https://hiiraan.com/news4/2016/Jan/103544/jowhar_conference_opens_despite_hiiraan_elders_boycott.aspx

14. Focus Group Discussions.

15. Andrea Carboni, ACLED Africa (2022). *A Turbulent Run-up to Elections in Somalia*. Accessed at: <https://acleddata.com/2021/04/07/a-turbulent-run-up-to-elections-in-somalia/>

The election of Ali Guudlaawe was also an attempt to temper growing opposition to the administration and policies of the then-President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo. This was part of a larger political strategy towards consolidating a support base to support his reform policies and presidential term extension. Farmaajo believed that finalising an election in Hirshabelle could gain him some ground in other states and the country at large.¹⁶

3.2 Key Actors and Stakeholders

The push for a federated state emanates from decades of fragility, and cries for devolved functions within due to grievances around representation, resource sharing and political inclusion.¹⁷

Across Somalia's political spectrum, an intricate dynamic of clans and clan affiliations wield political power. These affiliations are prevalent at all levels of governance and society as well as within the formal and informal sectors. Key actors in the political arena are backstopped by clan affiliation, resource and revenue mobilisation capability.¹⁸ In Hirshabelle, the Hawadle and Abgal clan groups have the dominant representation within the political apparatus. Other clans have limited roles within the political and security arena. However, clan dominance is geographically fluid and complex umbrella and sub clan affiliations are used for political dominance to further specific goals.

The Macawisley, pre-dominantly from the Hawadle community, have played a significant security role in the state and nationwide since the withdrawal of the Burundian contingent from Middle Shabelle under the ATMIS drawdown created a significant security vacuum, leaving the region vulnerable to al-Shabaab. Most recently, they spearheaded the FGS-supported offensive against al-Shabaab.

Consequently, the Macawisley's role as a major security actor and stakeholder cannot be understated, especially given the high number of al-Shabaab attacks in Hirshabelle; potential investment by local communities in the private sector, particularly agricultural sector in the state; its proximity to Mogadishu; and its large agricultural sector. Their emergence highlights the growing reliance on community-based security actors to fill operational gaps, particularly in strategically vital areas like the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM).

16. Somali Public Agenda (2020). The Hirshabelle election conundrum. Accessed at: <https://somalipublicagenda.org/the-hirshabelle-election-conundrum/>
17. Somalia: A Country Study (1992). https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/frd/frdcstdy/so/somaliacountryst00metz_0/somaliacountryst00metz_0.pdf
18. Focus Group Discussion (Cadale),

In Hirshabelle, a significant source of revenue generation is checkpoints, controlled by a variety of state and non-state actors and strategically placed across main economic arteries. The location of the checkpoints usually assumes an autochthonic characteristic and control over them has triggered resource and unresolved conflicts. Clan militias, police, al-Shabaab as well as government actors all struggle for control of these checkpoints.

The use of checkpoints to generate the necessary control and rents to either sustain operations or control the flow of people and goods by state and non – state actors also feed into the complex web of the political economy of the state and influences socio-political, economic and security dynamics in the state. Contested roles and questions of legitimacy have limited the state's ability to extend its influence beyond certain areas and districts, where its authority often overlaps or competes with that of other actors. This not only impacts the legitimacy of the state and its ability to govern, but reinforces further grievances and fragmentation as competition over renewable resources, land and grazing rights become pervasive.

3.3 Negotiation Dynamics and Power Sharing Arrangements

Several stakeholders interviewed said that initial power sharing agreements were impeded by the political elites that skewed political decisions as a result of larger interests.¹⁹ The fate of several federal member states has unfortunately devolved into political adventurism, enveloping them in part of a broader political transactional equation.

An example of this is the National Consultative Council (NCC) where leaders of all the federal member states, the Banadir regional administration, the prime minister and deputy prime minister and the president meet on matters regarding national political economic and security issues. The recent meetings around election timelines and models have underscored the fact that the member state leaders do not employ or exhibit any agency that addresses the immediate needs of their constituents. Rather, these meetings have been notorious for reinforcing the very dynamics and issues that plague their states.

19. Focus Group Discussions – Elders (Bula Burte).

A clear example of this transactional dynamic is how members of the NCC, under the guise of political consensus, conveniently extended their terms in office in 2022, 2023 and again in 2024 with minimal adherence to procedural or constitutional frameworks. These extensions were framed as necessary for stability or electoral preparation but were largely seen as self-serving moves that further entrenched elite dominance while sidelining broader democratic processes.

This political adventurism trend is further exemplified in the recent recognition of SSC-Khaatumo as an FMS without following the constitutional procedures. Such unilateral moves deepen political contestation and undermine the aspirations of groups like the Hawadle clan who seek to establish their own state within the Hiiraan region. Circumventing constitutional protocols, this recognition not only delegitimizes local political claims but also highlights how elite-driven decisions exacerbate clan-based divisions and weaken federal cohesion. The lack of buy-in and implementable outcomes at the national level is mirrored almost to the letter at the state levels, perpetuating instability and eroding trust in political processes.

In Hirshabelle today, political agreements, power and resource sharing are transactional, not based on a holistic approach that draws on the needs and aspirations of the wider community.²⁰ Rather, it is seen to cap growing sentiments of grievances which unfortunately means that the necessary reforms or policies do not gain traction or legitimacy.

The inextricable linkages of decision-making processes and directives reinforced by clan power dynamics is a challenge that penetrates all levels of governance. The linkages to the federal government for the Hirshabelle state cannot be minimized in that the reliance of resources from either international actors, and political support from the federal government, continues to enable the fragmentation and lack of urgency to address key and underlying issues that pervade the state and cripple its legitimacy and ability to govern.

The states' leadership - keenly aware of the limitations of its ability to influence any political or security strategy - is heavily dependent on the support of the federal government, hence will likely play a role where transactional dynamics will continue to skew the balance of power and resources, further entrenching division and grievances. A response to this is the continued frustration and lack of political will from various key stakeholders.

20. Focus Group Discussion – Elders (Bula Burte).

3.4 Constitutional Framework and Institutional Design

The Hirshabelle constitution is still a provisional one, drafted by a state constitutional committee and adopted by the newly-inaugurated state assembly in October 2016. Just like the formation of the state, the process was seen as hasty and continues to be met with fierce resistance from members aggrieved by the lack of consultation. The provisional constitution therefore serves as a legal framework, laying out the governance, laws and functions of the state and its institutions. Its completion and widespread adoption or application is hampered by the contested legitimacy of the state itself from its constituents.

Hirshabelle's constitutional process is indicative of the central role the federal government had in the state's formation process compared to other federal member states. The power-sharing agreement at executive levels articulating the clan division of power and the institutional governance structures were a heavily top-down driven endeavour and not a process that enjoined general popular support.²¹ Underscoring the rushed nature of the process, substantive public consultations — which could have strengthened the state's legitimacy and mitigated claims of exclusion — were not conducted within a reasonable timeline.²²

3.5 Analysis of the Formation Process

The formation of Hirshabelle, driven by political expediency, lacked substantive, consensus-based engagement with key stakeholders. According to Somalia's Provisional Constitution, two or more regions from the former administrative divisions may voluntarily unite to form a Federal Member State. If a region opts not to join, it remains under the administration of the FGS. While this framework sets a clear territorial threshold, its application is complicated by Somalia's clan dynamics, as clans are often dispersed across multiple regions and states making inclusive and representative state formation a persistent challenge.

Consequently, challenges around power and resource dominance, leadership proximity, and control of security institutions have persisted. Eight years after its establishment, Hirshabelle continues to grapple with unresolved grievances stemming from its inception. Notably, in early 2024, a faction of Hawadle political and community leaders announced a parallel administration in Hiraan, citing exclusion from parliamentary seat allocations, disputes over the state capital's location, and the suspension of prior clan power-sharing agreements at both the executive and legislative levels.²³

21. <https://berghof-foundation.org/work/projects/promoting-reconciliation-in-hirshabelle-state-somalia>

22. Focus Group Discussion – Elders (Bula Burte).

23. SPA and SDP brief, Focus Group Discussion (Cadale).

Reconciliation and a genuine distribution of resources and representation in politics is necessary to allow for any state to be functional. Addressing long-standing grievances and mitigating justice through functional institutions will take considerable effort and time but are imperative to ensure cohesion, cooperation. These will limit pathways for exploitation by violent extremist groups and other spoilers that seek to maintain the status quo of political and resource power.

The need to ensure the application of justice, fair representation and transformational development and governance is not unique to Hirshabelle, but is necessary throughout Somalia. Three decades of civil war upended any trace of a functioning state or institutions, and prior to the collapse of the state, judicial and resource grievances were present but were either suppressed or protractedly frozen. The devolution of governance functions through a federated model was borne out of a need to address the mistrust in governance practices and attempt to unite the country following three decades of conflict.

4. Governance Challenges in Hirshabelle

4.1 Political Instability and Governance Challenges

The lead-up to the outbreak of civil war has largely been accepted as being due to repressive governments and general exclusion from political participation, economic and social development. Therefore, the struggle for political representation has its roots in a historical context marked by colonial-era grievances and aggravated post-independence neglect, which have contributed to a deep mistrust among clans.²⁴

The rushed and haphazard formation of Hirshabelle failed to take into consideration lessons from historical practices and is the main harbinger for the stagnation and dissatisfaction in the state formation, governance system and ultimately its legitimacy. Clan-based politics affects how the government works, reinforcing perceptions that it serves the interest of certain clans. This focus on clan representation has delayed political progress and has increased divisions and conflicts.²⁵

The Hirshabelle government faces challenges such as limited capacity, characterized by inadequate resources and training that hinder its ability to mediate disputes effectively.²⁶

24. Berghof Foundation, (2023). Conflict Transformation and Reconciliation in Somalia: Lessons for Local Peacebuilding. Accessed at: www.berghof-foundation.org

25. Horn Observer. (2024). Eight Years of Hirshabelle: Celebrations Amid Stagnation in Security, Reconciliation, and Humanitarian Crisis. Accessed at: www.hornobserver.com

26. Focus Group Discussion – Elders (Bula Bulte).

Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms, such as elder mediation, remains the most common form of remedial justice.

Al-Shabaab courts have also been an alternate option for dispute resolution due to their ability to ensure enforcement of verdicts and speed of resolution, however this has also served to delegitimise government institutions. The use of these courts is due to widespread perception and grievances of bias, with many citizens viewing state institutions as favoring dominant clans, which reduces overall trust and participation in governance.²⁷

Resource competition plays a significant role in the region's conflicts, particularly concerning fertile land and water along the Shabelle River. Environmental issues, including recurring flooding and drought, further exacerbate competition among clans and inflame tensions over resources.²⁸

Extremist groups like al-Shabaab exploit these clan divisions, undermining the states' legitimacy and its efforts to address insecurity and democratization. The presence of such groups complicates the stabilization process and hinders effective governance in the region.²⁹

The lack of reconciliation among clans and mediation efforts aimed at fostering reconciliation have often been inconsistent and politicized. For example, partisan mediation methods typically reflect clan and individual-specific interests rather than pursuing genuine conflict resolution.³⁰ Furthermore, national-level political manoeuvres can exacerbate local disputes, preventing the establishment of a cohesive political environment.³¹

Economic inequality and power imbalances serve as barriers to unity: marginalized groups experience resentment due to unequal resource distribution, while dominant clans remain resistant to reforms that might dilute their influence.

The effects of these divisions on state legitimacy are profound. Exclusionary governance practices erode public trust, creating a perception that it mainly serves certain clans rather than a neutral authority committed to representing all citizens. This dynamic has led to further deterioration of security, as unresolved clan conflicts create openings for extremist groups like al-Shabaab to exploit vulnerabilities.³² The socio-economic impact is equally troubling; frequent conflicts disrupt agriculture, trade, and education, thereby exacerbating poverty and displacement. Environmental disasters, such as floods, further compound these socio-economic issues.³³

27. Ibid.

28. Berghof Foundation, (2023). Conflict Transformation and Reconciliation in Somalia: Lessons for Local Peacebuilding. Accessed at: www.berghof-foundation.org

29. Horn Observer. (2024). Eight Years of Hirshabelle: Celebrations Amid Stagnation in Security, Reconciliation, and Humanitarian Crisis. Accessed at: www.hornobserver.com

30. Focus Group Discussion, Elders (Beledweyne).

31. Ibid.

32. Horn Observer. (2024). Eight Years of Hirshabelle: Celebrations Amid Stagnation in Security, Reconciliation, and Humanitarian Crisis. Accessed at: www.hornobserver.com

33. Focus Group Discussion – Elders (Bula Barte).

To address these multifaceted challenges, a set of comprehensive assessments and reforms are essential.

First, assessing the role of grassroots organisations for meaningful participation in reconciliation is crucial. Assessing the plausibility of establishing local peace committees with representation from all clans can help mediate disputes impartially, that can be integrated with functional government institutions.

Additionally, leveraging traditional elders to facilitate dialogue and address historical grievances could foster improved relationships among clans.

Strengthening governance is also key, requiring inclusive representation in state institutions to build trust and enhance state capacity through federal support and training.

Moreover, addressing resource-based conflicts is vital for stability. Developing equitable frameworks for resource sharing could significantly reduce competition among clans and competing stakeholders, while investment in sustainable development projects, such as flood management and irrigation systems, is essential for long-term stability.

Finally, countering extremism involves strengthening security to rebuild trust in state security forces and addressing the drivers of radicalization through targeted development programs.

In conclusion, the challenges facing Hirshabelle, particularly regarding clan divisions and political fragmentation, threaten its functionality as a stable federal state. Addressing these issues requires an integrated and multi-layered approach that emphasizes reconciliation, inclusive governance, and sustainable resource management. Without steadfast efforts in these areas, Hirshabelle risks remaining fragile, which may have long-term consequences for the broader federalization process in Somalia.

4.2 Social Division and Its Impact on Governance

Hirshabelle faces a complex array of ongoing challenges that significantly impact its governance and socio-political landscape. Persistent shortcomings in governance structures undermine public trust and operational efficiency, leading to a decline in the quality of public services and erosion of respect for legal frameworks. These interconnected issues create a cycle of ineffectiveness that threatens the core functions of government. Acute clan-based divisions and competing interests among political elites stem from the perceived marginalization of key groups absent at the state's inception.

Without a clear path to address these grievances, insecurity and political fragmentation persist, obstructing meaningful collaboration and effective decision-making as clan interests dominate political priorities.³⁴

Weak institutional frameworks emerge as political distrust undermines public faith in governance systems. This dysfunction affects essential institutions such as the judiciary, law enforcement, and local governments, rendering them ineffective or incapacitated. The lack of strong institutions alienates citizens and fuels scepticism about the government's ability to provide services and ensure public safety.³⁵ Mistrust also hampers service delivery, as political conflicts distract leaders from critical sectors like healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Mismanagement and poor inter-agency coordination exacerbate inequalities, disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups.³⁶ Consequently, the disconnect between government and the public deepens, making reconciliation and cooperation more challenging.

The inability to address these issues has serious security implications. Frequent disputes among political figures often lead to the mobilization of clan militias, further destabilizing an already fragile environment. The accumulation of unresolved conflicts prevents grievances from being addressed, hindering the establishment of effective governance and peace agreements. Past injustices and political exclusion have left lasting wounds that continue to influence current political interactions.³⁷

Exploitation of protracted conflicts by al-Shabaab and competing clans—seeking control over grazing lands, water points, and economic resources—further undermines governance. Political spoilers often manipulate militias to advance their interests, deepening mistrust and weakening state institutions. This results in poor adherence to the rule of law and erodes the legitimacy of governing bodies, fuelling a broader governance crisis.³⁸ The resulting insecurity negatively affects economic prospects, deterring foreign investment due to political unpredictability and risk. This cycle perpetuates instability and impedes economic development, worsening Hirshabelle's socio-political landscape.³⁹

The decline in regional stability intensifies the difficulties faced by already fragmented institutions, which struggle to uphold the rule of law and provide essential services amid limited resources and political strife.⁴⁰ As a result, the population endures persistent frustration and disillusionment, increasingly aligning along clan lines for protection and support.

34. Kaplan, S. (2019). Fixing fragile states. Praeger Security International.

35. Focus Group Discussion - Community Members (Beledweyne).

36. UNDP (2021). State-building in fragile contexts. United Nations Development Programme.

37. Focus Group Discussion - Community Members (Bula Burte).

38. (World Bank, 2023).

39. World Bank, (2023). Somalia Economic Update 2023, World Bank Group.

40. Ahmed, I. (2020). Political mistrust and governance challenges in Somalia. Mogadishu University.

In light of this situation, it is becoming increasingly evident that achieving a more stable Hirshabelle requires a comprehensive strategy⁴¹ which fosters trust among political leaders, clan elders, and communities through open dialogue, negotiations, and inclusive political and economic development. Creating neutral platforms for such engagement promotes collaboration and reduces social divisions.

Additionally, strengthening institutions to enhance transparency and accountability is foundational for effective service delivery in education, healthcare, and infrastructure,⁴² as well as limiting feelings and perceptions of marginalization. Without such reforms, good governance remains elusive. Community-driven initiatives led by local organizations can promote public participation and responsiveness, helping to rebuild trust in government.⁴³ For Hirshabelle to stabilize and contribute to security and economic growth, addressing these core issues is essential for sustainable development and resilience amid ongoing insecurity.

The urgent necessity to strengthen inclusive political and reconciliation dialogue is a necessary and overdue component of Somalia's restoration. These mechanisms go beyond facilitating communication, they foster opportunities for collaborative decision making, which is critical for the long-term viability of governance structures. Emphasizing transparency and accountability reduces corruption and conflict risks, fostering greater public trust. Federal systems that balance clan interests have shown promise in reducing conflict and promoting shared governance.⁴⁴ Therefore, promoting inclusive governance that accommodates collective interests is crucial for social cohesion.

Evidence suggests that federal systems designed to balance the interests of various clans can lead to promising outcomes, effectively reducing conflict and promoting a sense of shared governance.⁴⁵ Therefore, promoting inclusive governance that recognizes and accommodates collective interest and benefit is essential for fostering social cohesion and unity within the region. Enhancing and professionalizing security actors - itself a critical component of ensuring stability – requires a comprehensive review and sector reform to serve as a foundation functional aspect of good governance and restoring credibility to formal government institutions.

Reforming the security aspect is vital to avert exploitation by security actors, especially along clan dimensions and outfitting it with an apolitical reputation to guarantee impartial law enforcement. Creating a neutral and competent security framework is even more critical for ensuring stability in politically unstable situations.⁴⁶

41. UNDP, (2021). State-building in fragile contexts. United Nations Development Programme.

42. Kaplan, S. (2019). Fixing fragile states. Praeger Security International.

43. Braldbury, M. (2008). Becoming Somaliland. James Currey.

44. Transparency International, (2022). Corruption Perceptions Index 2022. Transparency International.

45. International Crisis Group, (2018). Somalia: Transforming clan dynamics. ICG Reports.

46. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (2020).

Addressing these interconnected issues requires genuine and cohesive efforts to rebuild trust, promote inclusivity among different groups, allowing for a governance structure that prioritizes transparency, accountability, and the rule of law.⁴⁷

In summary, Hirshabelle faces widespread socio-political distrust and a prolonged lack of reconciliation. These challenges, across the executive, legislative, and community levels, have created major obstacles to effective governance. As a result, existing governance deficits have deepened, fuelling insecurity, social fragmentation, and economic challenges. The absence of inclusive politics in Hirshabelle mirrors trends in other federal member states, where clan dynamics, competition over resources, and shifting alliances influence political arrangements. This creates space for non-state actors to exploit unresolved grievances. Promoting stability across the federal system will require active engagement and leadership from the FGS.

It will also require all levels of government to take a lead in promoting cohesion, reconciliation and equitable sharing of resources. Working together with a wide array of stakeholders—including political figures, civil society representatives, and international partners—is vital for cultivating a sense of trust and for developing robust governance frameworks that prioritize the interests of all community members. This collaborative endeavour will be the lynchpin to tackling the root causes of distrust and nurturing a more equitable and stable socio-political landscape. By working together, stakeholders can tackle the challenges posed by clan dynamics and resource competition, ultimately strengthening the governance structure and stability of Hirshabelle and other member states.

WThe role of political elites in negotiating power and resource distribution is a critical factor shaping political stability in Hirshabelle and Somalia more broadly. While elite bargaining is common across political systems, the nature and legitimacy of political stakeholders varies considerably. In most democracies, district, regional, and state representatives are accountable to their constituents, who confer legitimacy through direct electoral mandates and exercise oversight through periodic elections. In Somalia, however, political elites derive their influence through transactional relationships within a “political marketplace” — a system where political allegiance, influence, and access to resources are negotiated and exchanged, often informally, rather than earned through democratic accountability.

The federal model combined with the 4.5 clan power sharing formula creates a system where accountability flows from the top to bottom, meaning that representation is decided by leaders rather than by the general population. Somalia’s political elites’

47. Transparency International, (2022). Corruption Perceptions Index 2022. Transparency International.

functions are widely seen to extend or maintain the interests of regional states, businessmen and clan elites, to whom they are accountable to and can manifest either their satisfaction or dissatisfaction of.⁴⁸

As a result, the root causes of resource and power sharing that would holistically support a non-political class reinforces the patrilineal lineage collective as opposed to responsible and accountable leadership.⁴⁹ Referred to as the “elite bargain”, it is a political institution, a roadmap of political outcomes, an exclusive ecosystem essential for the survival of this group. The expansion of the political sphere and restructuring of the political and governance structure will continue to face challenges because the current setup is not designed to instil accountability to and from the larger public, neither is it designed to expand the competitive political space.

Elites play a significant role in the resolution of conflict, provision of resources, legislation of laws, amongst other mandate responsibilities. The relationship, however, is transactional and often marred with accusations of corruption because the central tenant of governance - accountability – has not been a central component of the rights and responsibilities of the political class.⁵⁰ Therefore, in respect to Hirshabelle, the elites have an integral role to play in the resolution of grievances emanating from the general public, but the extent to which they utilize their influence is seldom seen, mainly due to the limited political will across various levels of the government. This may also be self-defeating if power and resource reasons conflict.⁵¹

However, the way the elites have behaved during major political crises has at times surprised stakeholders, as they have exhibited actions that appeared to be motivated by the national interest. Unfortunately, these events are limited and come with general high political legitimacy costs due to previous patterns of engagement, especially if marred by allegations of corruption.

5. Challenges to Unity and

48. Key Informant Interview, Government official (Hiiraan).

49. Elite Bargains and Political Deals projects: Somalia Case Study 201. Accessed at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5c191358ed915d0c3d63f6ab/Somalia_case_study.pdf

50. Key Informant interview, Government Official (Hiiraan).

51. Key Informant Interview – Somali Politician (Hirshabelle).

Stability

5.1 Clan Divisions and Political Fragmentation

Interclan conflict in Somalia is one of the most destabilising challenges to peace and development.⁵² The lack of functional judicial systems, equitable land reforms, and enforceable rule of law perpetuates cyclical conflict. Traditional reconciliation mechanisms, while vital for conflict resolution, prioritize collective clan accountability over individual responsibility, undermining legal enforcement. These approaches often reinforce clan-based social cohesion without addressing structural grievances, allowing conflicts to recur. When transplanted into the political sphere, such dynamics compel elites and elders to mediate temporary ceasefires rather than sustainable resolutions. Critically, the absence of formal institutional adjudication renders these agreements unenforceable, ensuring repeated conflict resurgence.

5.2 Security Concerns Linked to Governance Challenges

Al-Shabaab and other violent non-state actor groups' role in exacerbating political instability cannot be understated, with reports often indicating correlation between interclan grievances, political instability and a rise in these groups' activities.⁵³ These actors exploit interclan grievances and instability to position themselves as alternative governance providers, capitalizing on the state's failure to deliver services, ensure accountability, or resolve protracted conflicts. These conflicts stem from deeply rooted grievances dating to Somalia's civil war and state collapse.

While post-conflict reconstruction has prioritized urban security operations, such measures remain insufficient without parallel efforts to address systemic corruption, institutional dysfunction, and public needs - deficiencies that continue to erode governmental legitimacy and fuel instability.⁵⁴ Al-Shabaab and other extremist groups position themselves within this void, with significant costs to governing institutions, violently extracting revenue from the public, in turn feeding the cycle of violence and weakening government's ability to focus on state building rather than mostly on security.⁵⁵

5.3 Socio-Political Mistrust and Governance Deficits

Persistent instability stems from both institutional failures across governance levels and the political class's eroded public legitimacy. Decades of conflict have fragmented social cohesion, while the 4.5 power-sharing system - implemented to redress historical marginalization - has failed to deliver substantive representation after 20 years.

Stakeholder analyses revealed persistent patronage networks and ineffective governance, undermining the system's intended inclusivity and perpetuating grievance-based conflicts. Levels of mistrust are deeply entrenched as the administration is preoccupied with short term goals of maintaining some semblance of functionality. These conditions permeate at almost all levels within the member states, where identity politics are concerned, and resource sharing is seen as skewed to those in favour or in line with political patronage. Where it pertains to the national and sub national trust deficit, the same is also true, and adds another layer of complexity that opens the discussion to the way the state was initially formed.

6. Conclusion

The formation of Hirshabelle epitomizes the inherent challenges within Somalia's federalization process, including rushed consultations, contested power-sharing frameworks, and unresolved clan grievances. Although the merger of the Hiraan and Middle Shabelle regions was intended to advance decentralized governance, it has instead heightened political fragmentation. Dominant clans—the Hawadle and Abgal—hold less than 30% of the parliamentary seats combined but maintain disproportionate influence through control of key executive positions and militias, resulting in the marginalization of other groups. Security concerns such as al-Shabaab's persistent presence and competition over revenue-generating checkpoints further exacerbate governance inefficiencies and deepen instability. The hastily-adopted provisional constitution, lacking grassroots involvement, contributes significantly to the state's legitimacy crisis and weak institutional functionality.

The interplay of elite-driven politics, federal influence, and historical grievances undermines Hirshabelle's stability, perpetuating mistrust and prioritizing short-term transactional interests over public accountability. Key governance deficits—including equitable resource distribution, reconciliation processes, and institutional reforms—remain unaddressed, sustaining fragility and instability.

Additionally, the emergence of a parallel administration in Beledweyne has compounded governance and security challenges, creating a power vacuum and deteriorating living conditions for residents. These overlapping structures demand

urgent intervention to reconcile political divisions, reestablish governance legitimacy, and strengthen security. A comprehensive approach—prioritizing reconciliation, inclusive governance, and institutional reform—is imperative to restore stability and foster long-term development in Hirshabelle.

7. Policy Recommendations

To establish a more inclusive, stable, and effective governance structure in Hirshabelle, the following policy measures are recommended:

- 1. Constitutional and Governance Reform:** Political stability in Hirshabelle requires addressing long-standing disputes over governance structures, power-sharing, and the state capital. The FGS should initiate a comprehensive review of the constitutional framework to ensure equitable power-sharing arrangements, prevent political manipulation, and institutionalize balanced clan representation based on verified population data in both regions. Transparent processes and inclusion of marginalized groups must be prioritized to foster legitimacy and trust.
- 2. Inclusive Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue:** The FGS should convene a multi-stakeholder dialogue to address power-sharing disputes and the selection of the state capital. This dialogue must involve representatives from key clans in Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle, religious leaders, state and federal elites, and civil society actors. Mediation by an impartial third party could ensure fairness and adherence to agreed frameworks. Resolution of logistical, security, and accessibility considerations for the state capital is essential, alongside efforts to strengthen social cohesion among stakeholders.
- 3. Institutionalizing Inclusive State Formation and Power-Sharing Agreements:** Strengthening governance necessitates institutionalizing an inclusive state formation process supported by legally binding frameworks. Equitable representation for clans, women, youth, and other marginalized groups must be ensured to prevent exclusion and future disputes. Transparent political negotiations and electoral processes are critical for maintaining adherence to prior agreements, including the 2016 power-sharing deal. Local governance capacity could be enhanced by empowering district councils with greater autonomy in resource and political decisions.
- 4. Enhancing State Legitimacy and Governance Capacity:** Long-term stability requires robust investments in public administration, judicial reform, and service

delivery. Public sector reforms focused on transparency, accountability, and merit-based appointments should curtail the influence of clan politics on state functions. Strengthened rule of law institutions, particularly courts and law enforcement agencies, are vital for effective dispute resolution and mitigating clan-based conflicts.

5. **Security Enhancement and Stabilization:** A coordinated community-led security strategy is necessary for Hirshabelle's stability. The integration of all security actors, including the Macawisley militia, the Somali National Army (SNA), ATMIS, and local police, into a unified security framework should be prioritized. The FGS must adopt a comprehensive disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) strategy to regulate clan militias and reduce competition over checkpoints. Federal-state security coordination must be strengthened to combat al-Shabaab effectively and involve local communities in security planning.
6. **Addressing Clan-Based Grievances and Promoting Social Cohesion:** Resolving clan-based grievances and fostering social cohesion is paramount. Reconciliation forums involving elders, religious leaders, and civil society actors should be institutionalized to address historical grievances. Strengthening inter-clan cooperation through local governance mechanisms will prevent domination in political and security spheres. Targeted development programs should address marginalization and historical injustices, particularly in underserved communities.

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HERITAGE

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