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Overcoming Somaliland's Worsening Political Crisis

Somaliland is going through considerable political turmoil. The government and opposition disagree over the sequencing of two forthcoming high-stakes elections, and both sides are digging in. International partners should push the two sides to reach consensus, while standing by to mediate if talks fail.

Somaliland's hard-earned stability is at risk. November and December were supposed to bring two important elections: one to select the president, and the other to licence the three parties that will be allowed to participate in formal politics. But the first has been delayed, and both are mired in schedule-related controversy. The ruling party and opposition both see the evolving electoral calendar as central to their political fortunes, and both are trying to control it. Tensions already boiled over into violence in August, when government forces and opposition protesters frustrated with the electoral process [clashed](#), resulting in five deaths. The opposition threatens to no longer recognise the government led by President Muse Bihi after 13 November, which was the scheduled date for the presidential election until the parliament's upper house, the Guurti, agreed to extend Bihi's mandate by two years. To defuse the risk of unrest, Somaliland's international partners should push its political elites to chart a consensus path forward, offer to mediate if they fail and volunteer to serve as guarantors for whatever resolution emerges.

Delay, Deadlock and Crisis

Since proclaiming independence from Somalia in 1991 after a years-long insurgency led primarily by members of its dominant Isaaq clan, Somaliland has developed many trappings of a state. It has pursued political, economic and social reconstruction that has helped it establish a largely stable and functional administration. No country recognises Somaliland's independence, but its many international partners have encouraged the development of its democratic institutions.

Now, however, a dispute over two delayed elections is threatening Somaliland's stability. The government and political opposition in the capital Hargeisa are locked in a bitter disagreement over the timing for both a forthcoming presidential poll and a vote to licence the three parties that will be allowed to participate in Somaliland's politics for the next ten years. (This licencing process is a singular feature of Somaliland's political architecture.) Chronic delays placed these polls within six weeks of each other, on 13 November and 26 December, respectively, creating capacity issues for election authorities and an unfortunate confluence of logistical and sensitive political issues that need to be resolved simultaneously.

Tensions between the two sides have been simmering since late 2021. The core of the dispute relates to timing: President Bihi and his Kulmiye party insist that the political parties election occur prior to the presidential vote. By contrast, the opposition Waddani and UCID parties want the presidential vote to be held first. Both sides invoke legal arguments, but political calculations likely explain their preferences regarding the electoral calendar. Bihi appears to believe that holding the presidential contest after the selection of new and potentially less experienced political parties augments his chances of staying in office. For the same reason, the opposition worries that the parties vote, if it comes first, could compromise its own bid for the presidency. Waddani bested Kulmiye in the May 2021 elections for parliament's lower house before forging an alliance with UCID, the third party, to form a majority in the chamber. This result boosted Waddani's confidence that it can win a presidential race.

Normally, the two votes would follow a set calendar, with some space between them, and the question of sequencing would not present itself. But a cascade of postponements and ad hoc scheduling decisions has led to the present situation. The presidential election, which takes place every five years, was slated for the present month because the last one slipped from June 2015 to November 2017. As for the party licencing vote, it is on schedule in one sense (it is supposed to occur every ten years and the last one was in 2012) but out of sync in another. Conventionally, it occurs with local council elections, but that coupling was severed because the latter, thanks to yet another set of delays, were held off cycle in May 2021.

Somaliland's system does not account for a scenario in which the political parties vote is organised separately from local council elections. Rather than wait for the legislative process to complete enactment of a law that could overcome this conundrum, the government pushed the process forward, opening the [registration](#) for new associations bidding for licences in June. The government's actions, coupled with the sense that its move tilts the system in favour of the ruling Kulmiye party, angered the opposition and served as a catalyst for the August protests.

Given the logistical challenges and political sensitivities, the prospect of having these two votes in such close proximity should have alarmed Somaliland's elites long ago. Yet they failed to arrive at a consensus solution on timing and sequencing, even as the deadlines approached. In late September, the National Election Commission said it needed nine months to organise the presidential poll, which would cause it to slip into 2023. Rather than follow the commission's guidance, the Guurti extended the government's mandate by two years, pushing the presidential vote to November 2024. (The government has since [said](#) it nonetheless will strive to abide by the commission's timeline, but it remains uncertain if this commitment is sincere.) The upper house also added five years to its own tenure, though its original six-year constitutional mandate expired in 2003. But it was quiet about the schedule for the political parties vote, which still is not set. There is no obvious legal mechanism for extending the soon-to-expire party licences beyond ten years.

The status quo is thus marked by uncertainty and lack of consensus. In October, the opposition [rejected](#) the Guurti's extension on grounds that the body did not adhere to proper protocol and argued that the conditions under which the constitution permits it to extend the executive's term in office, namely insecurity, are not present. But they stopped short of lodging a legal challenge. Instead, they say they will not recognise the government after 13 November, although they have not explained what they will do in practice to implement this posture. To resolve the dispute, Somaliland business leaders stepped in with a proposal back in August to hold the presidential and party licencing votes at the same time. Parliament's lower house endorsed the idea, but the Guurti said no on ostensibly legal grounds. Bihi has also voiced his opposition to it.

A Failure to Compromise

Election delays are a fixture of Somaliland politics, as are mediated solutions, but absent a course correction, prospects for compromise are dim this time around. The reasons are several.

First, the current crop of politicians shows little enthusiasm for the consensus-based problem solving that has helped Somaliland navigate prior crises. Leaders on both sides have a winner-take-all mentality. The presidency appears less inclined to seek consensus, instead arguing that its positions are formally and legally correct, and that others should fall in line. Among the opposition, many feel that they have benefited too little from backing down previously, as they did after initially disputing the 2017 presidential election result. In parallel, Somaliland's state institutions, like the Guurti, appear weaker and more deferential to the government than in the past, partly due to the individuals heading them and government efforts to bring them in line. They seem unwilling to put forth compromise solutions lest they antagonise the president and his circle. Clan elders, influential businesspeople, religious leaders and civil society representatives have attempted to bridge the gap, with little success.

Secondly, sub-clan rivalries are on the rise. Each political party corresponds to an Isaaq sub-clan or collection of sub-clans. The Garhajis, whose two main branches form the base of opposition parties Waddani and UCID, respectively, argue that it is their turn to govern because the previous four Somaliland presidents have hailed from either the Isaaq sub-clans Haber Awal and Haber Jeclo (whose *jeegan*, or "rainbow", alliance secured the presidency in 2010 and 2017) or the Dir sub-clan Samaroon. The Garhajis appear to see Bihi's determination to forge ahead with the political parties vote as part of a ploy by other Isaaq sub-clans to prevent the Garhajis from obtaining the presidency. As a manifestation of their discontent, Garhajis elders have vowed to obstruct elections in their areas unless the three political parties find consensus regarding the electoral schedule.

Thirdly, an influx of foreign investment into Somaliland has upped the stakes for political control, and dampened appetites for compromise. The Emirati firm DP World has underwritten a multi-million-dollar expansion of the port at Berbera, on the Gulf of Aden, while others including the UK have supported development of the Berbera corridor road connecting Somaliland to Ethiopia, bolstering the economy. A range of other external partners are interested in courting Somaliland, due to its [strategic location](#) along shipping lanes linking the Red Sea and Indian Ocean. Some are also drawn to the [anti-China stance it has developed](#) after forging relations with its unrecognised counterpart, Taiwan, in recent years. (The latter has grown closer to Somaliland and now maintains a representative office in Hargeisa.) Somaliland's heightened international standing has swelled the government's confidence that it can chart its own course both abroad and at home, including by pursuing unilateral solutions in domestic affairs that override traditions of consensus.

Outside Engagement

A great deal of uncertainty now hangs over Somaliland politics, and social unrest may grow if the dispute drags on. The clashes and heavy-handed government response to opposition protests in August were worrying signs. While elites in Hargeisa generally have an interest in avoiding a spiral into violence, communal tensions are rising, and clan elders may take matters into their own hands if they are not convinced that national politicians are sufficiently defending their interests. Additionally, a protracted political or social conflict could create recruiting and safe haven opportunities for the Islamist insurgency Al-Shabaab, which has made subtle inroads in Somaliland in recent years – particularly in the eastern Sanaag region. A distracted Hargeisa may tempt some Al-Shabaab members, on the run following a fresh government offensive in central Somalia, to seek refuge in Somaliland.

The immediate priority is for Somaliland's government and opposition parties to chart a consensus way forward on the scheduling and sequencing of the two elections. In the process, they should consult the approved political associations waiting for the opportunity to seek licencing in the political parties vote, though these associations should not be placed on an equal footing with the three existing parties. Though time is short, ideally, the parties and government should reach an agreement before 13 November. A logical resolution would be to resurrect the business leaders' proposal for a joint election, within the timeframes outlined by the electoral commission.

If the stalemate persists, international partners should be prepared to mediate. External involvement is not ideal. But foreign powers have stepped in during previous Somaliland disputes to jump-start talks, and their combined pressure could well calm tempers in Hargeisa. These partners – both Western states (in particular the U.S., UK and European Union) and others like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Taiwan – should closely coordinate messages and actions to press the government and opposition to resume dialogue. They should also get ready to choose a representative from among their ranks to mediate if the situation in Somaliland deteriorates. Few appear keen to take on this task at present, but the UAE, which has already demonstrated an interest in mediation in the Horn of Africa, may be the best positioned.

Partners need to stress to Somaliland's leadership that the relationships it has developed to buttress its goal of attaining recognition as an independent state, and the investment environment it offers, are predicated on internal stability, which the current dispute undermines. They could send a coordinated message that if 13 November passes without an agreement, and the parties fail to find a stopgap arrangement to keep the situation from unravelling while they search for a solution, they will suspend aspects of their cooperation with Somaliland. These might include assessments to explore economic or security collaboration, defence assistance programming and invitations for high-level Somaliland government visits. (This suspension, of course, should not affect humanitarian relief efforts amid a historic drought in the Horn of Africa.)

Somaliland has also cultivated supporters in places like the U.S. Congress and UK parliament, in addition to influential advocates outside government. These interlocutors should make clear that they will be hard-pressed to continue their efforts to promote increased government contact with Somaliland if its stability is at risk.

Even if the three parties reach an agreement without foreign mediation, international partners should be prepared to serve as guarantors of any electoral roadmap – monitoring implementation and applying political pressure if tasks slip. This step may be unusual, but it is probably the most reliable way to help ensure that the government and opposition will stick to their commitments, given the high levels of mutual distrust and the declining independence of Somaliland's institutions.

The current dispute also illustrates the need to reinvigorate Somaliland's political system through reforms that close gaps in electoral legislation, shore up its institutions (eg, by establishing an independent constitutional court) and begin to address structural [problems](#) such as increasing clan dominance at the expense of broader inclusivity in politics. A good first step toward reform would be determining the mechanics and fixing a date for the long-overdue selection of the next Guurti well before the five additional years the body has given itself come to an end in 2027.

The political dispute in Somaliland is veering close to the point of spinning out of control, but there is still time to avert a worst-case scenario. Urgent action by Somaliland's international partners is necessary to convince domestic actors to uphold the tradition of consensus-based politics, rather than rely on unilateral solutions. Somaliland's precious stability, bolstered by the real but fragile political and economic progress the country has made over the past 30 years, may well be at stake.

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