



Electoral Showdown in Somalia: Averting Another Round of Turmoil

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What's new? Somalia is heading toward more political tumult. The government's electoral reforms, planned to take effect in 2026, have prompted fierce resistance from opponents who view these as a bid to tilt the scales in the incumbent president's favour. Left unaddressed, the standoff could turn even more violent.

Why does it matter? Squabbling among political elites has shifted attention away from priorities such as the battle against the jihadist group Al-Shabaab. It may also encourage Somalia's foreign backers to dial back their engagement, which could further weaken the federal government.

What should be done? The Somali government and its opponents need to fashion a compromise by agreeing to hold direct elections in districts where possible, while negotiating an improved version of the indirect electoral system for upcoming state and national polls. They should also develop a roadmap toward universal suffrage for future contests.

I. Overview

Somalia is heading toward the familiar terrain of an electoral dispute, bringing with it the risk of a fresh flare-up of violence. Borrowing from his predecessor's playbook, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud introduced a package of electoral reforms, moving from an indirect system in which clan leaders represent constituents to a "one person, one vote" model. Opponents of the change, including rival politicians and assertive subnational units known as federal member states, believe it is designed to favour the president's bid for re-election in polls due in 2026. Important constituencies are in effect boycotting the process, with parallels to the electoral strife of 2021-2022, which saw street fighting in Mogadishu and polls delayed for over a year. The government has recently shown a newfound openness to rejig its plans, but an electoral framework with broad buy-in remains out of

reach. To ease tensions, the government and opponents of the reforms should agree to hold direct votes in districts where possible, and negotiate more representative indirect elections as a halfway house to universal suffrage for state and national polls.

The electoral standoff comes at a perilous moment. In 2025, the Somali government suffered major setbacks in its war against the jihadist group Al-Shabaab and is in the midst of a peacekeeping transition, with an uncertain future for the African Union's Support and Stabilisation Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). This mission, which remains crucial to the federal government's standing by containing Al-Shabaab within rural areas of south and central Somalia, lacks dedicated funding. With Somalia's traditional partners increasingly disillusioned by the lack of progress in a host of areas, including security, governance and inclusive politics, another election-related crisis could spur further reductions in donor support for a weak and underperforming federal government.

Recent history suggests that concerns over looming electoral unrest are warranted. During the 2021 elections, the federal government – led at the time by President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, or “Farmajo” – proposed a one person, one vote election before reversing course after pushback from federal state leaders and political competitors. Later, he attempted to extend his term in office by two years due to disagreements over the polls, tipping Somalia close to a major conflict. Fighting broke out between clan-based factions within the national army in Mogadishu. Farmajo eventually lost at the ballot box after a lengthy and disruptive delay that cost Somalia international goodwill and distracted the government from its day-to-day responsibilities, including the campaign against Al-Shabaab.

At root, the tensions both on this occasion and under Farmajo are less about the proposal for universal suffrage – which few politicians openly oppose – than the benefits that might accrue from a change in system. Like his predecessor, President Mohamud views reform as a way to improve his re-election prospects. Those eager to dislodge President Mohamud worry that rapid introduction of the new system will cramp their election chances. Moreover, the electoral reforms form part of a wider package of constitutional amendments that Mohamud's critics claim centralise power in Mogadishu, and specifically the presidency.

Political tensions are rising as the polls approach, despite the increasing likelihood that the government will not be able to implement the bulk of its electoral reforms in time. District elections were due by the end of June 2025 but are being pushed back; the government now plans to hold its pilot district elections in Mogadishu on 30 October 2025. State level polls had been set for September 2025 but will also be delayed; and national parliamentary and presidential polls should be held by May 2026. Wrangling has intensified as differences over

who controls elections at both the state and national level widen between member states that are run more independently from Mogadishu, such as Puntland and Jubaland, and the federal government.

To prevent renewed unrest in the run-up to next year's polls, the government and its opponents need to agree on a workable electoral framework that can be organised within the government's remaining mandate but stops short of full universal suffrage for all elections, which is an unrealistic goal in the near term; has buy-in from major political constituencies; and sets down a road map for the future implementation of a one person, one vote system. Direct elections should be held in districts wherever they are possible – such as Mogadishu – since these would represent a milestone in the country's path towards a genuine public vote. For state and national polls, a revamped indirect election is more feasible in the short timeframe to the next vote, but reforms could still increase the number of Somalis who will choose their next leaders, lifting the electorate from its 2021 total of around 28,000 voters.

President Mohamud's August 2025 concessions over constitutional reforms, and his pledge to continue discussing electoral changes with the opposition, are an important first step toward negotiating a more workable framework for future votes. They have not, however, resolved the tensions, particularly as Puntland and Jubaland remain absent from these discussions. Somalia's international partners should apply pressure on both the government and all of the opposition to come together for genuine discussions sooner rather than later – if necessary, by playing a mediating role to get all sides to the table, and making clear that without a peaceful settlement to the country's recurrent election quandary, further interruptions to aid flows are likely.

II. The Pitfalls of Universal Suffrage

Somalia's last elections under a multi-party system with universal suffrage were held in 1969, months before Siad Barre, who ruled the country for more than twenty years, came to power in a military coup.¹ After the fall of Barre in 1991 and the collapse of the Somali state, there were no elections until the reconstitution of the country's central authority in the 2000s, initially as a transitional government which later became the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012. Under the new voting system, the country chose leaders through indirect elections, relying on clan elders to select members of parliament, or MPs, who then choose the president. More recently, Somali presidents have pushed to return to universal suffrage, only to find their way blocked by political rivals.

¹ Barre's one-party state held parliamentary elections in 1979 and 1984.

A. Incumbent Disadvantage

Although the voting system has remained indirect, it has evolved over time. In the 2012 electoral cycle, 135 clan elders (all men) selected the entirety of parliament's 275 seats. In 2016, Somalia introduced a new system, whereby elders selected electoral colleges of 51 clan members for each parliamentary seat, who in turn voted for the MPs.² In 2021, the size of the electoral colleges grew to 101 members each, meaning nearly 28,000 Somalis participated in the process.³ Women are allocated 30 per cent of the seats in both electoral colleges and parliament, but in practice their proportion of seats has fallen short of this quota.⁴

One consequence of indirect polls is that re-election is arduous. Somalia's intricate clan system ensures that political power is so diffuse and fractious that it is difficult for a sitting leader to marshal a wide enough coalition to be re-elected, especially if initial election victory depended on making promises to numerous clans and sub-groups that could not later be fulfilled. There is also an informal expectation that power will rotate among clans.⁵

As a result, incumbents tend to believe that the most expedient way for them to stay in office is by bypassing entrenched clan and political elites and including more Somalis in the electoral process.⁶ Clan elders for their part do not seem to oppose universal suffrage on principle. Although elders might appear to prefer the indirect system because it assures them greater sway over the results, they are perfectly able to exercise considerable influence under conditions of universal suffrage as voting would still take place largely along clan lines, as seen in the case of Somaliland.⁷ That said, the built-in anti-incumbent advantage in the current system is one that political opponents would prefer not to change. The various opponents of the government are also reluctant

² Somalia established the Upper House of parliament in the 2016-2017 electoral cycle. As it represents member states rather than clans, states have selected its membership.

³ Another expansion was in the locations where voting can take place. In 2012, it was only in Mogadishu. In 2016-2017, state capitals were added. In 2021-2022, each state added an additional voting location.

⁴ Women secured 24 per cent of parliamentary seats in the 2016-17 elections, a figure that fell to 20 per cent in 2021-22. "Enabling women's representation and participation in political dialogues in Somalia", Somali Dialogue Platform, July 2023.

⁵ For the presidency, the expectation is that it will rotate between Somalia's two most politically dominant clan families, the Hawiye and Darod.

⁶ They also expect they will be better able to manage the process and thus influence the outcome of direct elections. Crisis Group interview, political observer, Mogadishu, February 2025.

⁷ Voting in Somaliland, which has conducted multiple universal suffrage contests since 2002, largely occurs along clan lines. Omar Mahmood, "Somaliland's Peaceful Handover Withstands Neighbourhood Strains", Crisis Group Q&A, 11 December 2024.

to accept the delays in the electoral calendar that often appear to accompany changes to the voting system.⁸

Meanwhile, leaders of federal member states are more able to influence the outcome of indirect elections and thus seek to retain the current model.⁹ Member states are often locked in conflict with Mogadishu over the division of power and resources within Somalia's federal system, and aim to steer national elections so that an ally ends up president. Some member state leaders have also run for the presidency, further stoking the desire to shape electoral outcomes in their favour.

B. Failed Reforms

The first major attempt to introduce universal suffrage came under President Farmajo.¹⁰ In February 2020, he signed into law a bill outlining a one person, one vote system for the next elections, which were due the following year. Many opposition politicians suspected the real aim was to extend his tenure in office, especially since the law was passed only a year before polls were due.¹¹ The government struggled to explain how it could organise one person, one vote elections in a tight timeframe within a limited budget and amid an ongoing Al-Shabaab insurgency – though the expectation was elections would be held only in government-controlled zones. Just months before the election cycle was supposed to begin, in August 2020, the government dropped its plans and reverted to an indirect election. Even so, disputes over details stalled organisation of the polls and in February 2021 the government's four-year term expired without a path forward agreed between Somalia's main political forces, and with no elections in sight.

Serious unrest was soon to follow. The government took matters into its own hands, and in April 2021 parliament announced a two-year extension of both its and the president's terms. In response, members of Somalia's armed forces aligned with opposition politicians, mostly hailing from the Hawiye clan that dominates Mogadishu and its surroundings, flooded the capital to oppose the extension. They called this mobilisation *Badbaado Qaran*, or "National Salvation". Clashes with government forces killed dozens and compelled the authorities to scrap the changes to the electoral calendar. Farmajo then agreed to

⁸ In reality, Somali politicians have demonstrated patience with timing slippages, as long as their preferred voting system is implemented in the end. Elections in 2016 and 2021 did not occur on time. Crisis Group interview, opposition politician, Mogadishu, August 2025.

⁹ Member states have overseen the clan-based selection of national MPs in the indirect model.

¹⁰ The federal government came into existence in 2012 with the goal of moving toward universal suffrage.

¹¹ Relations between the government and federal member states soured under Farmajo after Mogadishu attempted to instal pliant leaders during state elections. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°158, *Ending the Dangerous Standoff in Southern Somalia*, 14 July 2020.

hand over control of the election process to Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble to calm the opposition, whose members still did not trust the president to organise the polls.¹²

It took another year to complete the indirect elections, leading to a prolonged standoff that saw Somalia teetering on the edge of conflict. Under sustained international pressure, including the suspension of EU budgetary support and U.S. visa restrictions on individuals seen as spoilers, parliamentary polls began in November 2021.¹³ On 15 May 2022, parliament selected Hassan Sheikh Mohamud for his second term as president (he first held the role from 2012 to 2017). Despite extensive manipulation and vote-buying throughout the electoral cycle – much of which went unchallenged amid a dearth of impartial and robust oversight mechanisms – political elites from all sides accepted the outcome.¹⁴

While Somalia narrowly dodged more serious electoral unrest, the episode proved damaging for the country given the violence and thoroughly corrupted voting process. The poll also represented a distraction from the day-to-day business of government and undermined a number of other priorities, particularly curbing Al-Shabaab's grip over large swathes of rural south and central Somalia or efforts to bolster its clandestine presence in Mogadishu.¹⁵ This diversion of attention greatly frustrated Somalia's international partners, which the government relies on for both security and financing, and exacerbated foreign donors' already declining enthusiasm for long-term engagement in the country.¹⁶

III. Mohamud's Bid for Electoral Reform

Soon after his electoral victory in May 2022, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud started planning for the next elections. Like his predecessor, Mohamud called for universal suffrage. He embedded changes to the electoral system within a series of amendments aimed at finalising the provisional constitution, triggering intense opposition. Many

¹² Crisis Group interviews, opposition members, 2021.

¹³ The U.S. announced visa restrictions on unnamed election spoilers in February 2022. "Visa Restrictions on Individuals Responsible for Undermining the Democratic Process in Somalia", U.S. Department of State, 25 February 2022.

¹⁴ Corruption is rife in Somalia's indirect selection process, but the level of political manipulation in the 2021-2022 cycle exceeded that of previous contests. Omar Mahmood, "A Welcome Chance for a Reset in Somalia", Crisis Group Commentary, 31 May 2022.

¹⁵ Crisis Group Africa report N°309, *Considering Political Engagement with Al-Shabaab in Somalia*, 21 June 2022.

¹⁶ Two-thirds of the Somali government's 2025 budget is drawn from external sources, while donors like the EU and UK have traditionally funded the presence of African Union troops in the country. Farhia Mohamud, "Somalia's 2025 Federal Budget", Somali Public Agenda, May 2025.

political opponents – including the leadership of Puntland, Somalia’s oldest and most established member state – saw the changes as designed to centralise power.

The government first convened the National Consultative Council (NCC) – a group including the president, prime minister, the heads of federal member states and the mayor of Mogadishu – to consider political reforms to Somalia’s judicial system, financial set-up, security architecture and electoral framework. Following meetings in 2022 and 2023, the NCC, with the exception of Puntland after it pulled out of the grouping early in 2023 to protest against what it saw as Mogadishu’s domineering hand (see below), came to a landmark agreement in May 2023 calling for universal suffrage at all levels by 2026. Mohamud combined the proposed electoral redesign with other NCC agreements to form the basis of a wider reform of Somalia’s provisional constitution.¹⁷

The government tabled the first four chapters of the constitutional review, covering reforms to the state, citizenship rights, land and property, and most controversially, elections, before parliament in early 2024. After making some adjustments, both houses unanimously passed the chapters in March last year.¹⁸ Many provisions, however, generated controversy.¹⁹ These included mandating the direct election of the president (currently, a vote in parliament determines who will hold the office); granting the president the power to remove the prime minister (previously this was parliament’s role); limiting the number of political parties to three (which would also restrict the presidential contest to three candidates); and creating a national electoral commission responsible for all elections, replacing the states’ commissions.²⁰ While parliament passed the legislation, this was not necessarily due to widespread enthusiasm for the government’s project but instead

¹⁷ Somalia’s constitution has been provisional since 2012, pending further agreement on key topics. Following the NCC discussions, Mohamud’s administration developed fifteen chapters containing constitutional amendments. The government plans to present the other eleven chapters for approval in 2025. Crisis Group interview, government minister, Mogadishu, February 2025.

¹⁸ 254 out of 329 (77 per cent) of parliament members were present during the vote. Mohamed Olad Hassan, “Somalia’s Parliament Approves Historic Constitutional Amendments”, Voice of America, 30 March 2024.

¹⁹ For thorough reviews of the planned electoral system and potential challenges, see: “Somalia’s New Electoral Bill”, Somalia Public Agenda, Policy Paper No.7, September 2024; “A Path to Direct Elections?”, Glafpol, Monthly Briefing, September 2024; and Afyare A. Elmi, “Can Somalia’s Third Republic be Saved?”, Policy Note, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, March 2025.

²⁰ Two provisions from the NCC’s proposal – abolishing the position of prime minister and direct elections for both the president and a vice president – proved particularly contentious as they would in effect shift Somalia from a parliamentary to presidential system. Parliament decided to retain the post of prime minister over that of a vice president – although it granted the president power to remove the officeholder.

came down to the administration's effective gaming of the system (some parliamentary votes are up for sale, and the government offered incentives to MPs to galvanise their support).²¹

Parliamentary approval paved the way for the formation of the eighteen-member Independent National Electoral and Boundaries Commission (INEBC) in November 2024, tasked with overseeing all elections.²² The electoral commission got to work in early 2025, focusing on the first step in the electoral calendar – district council polls, initially scheduled for the end of June but which have yet to occur.²³ It launched a voter registration drive in Mogadishu in April, which it has extended to member state capitals and secondary cities. The commission sees district elections, which it ambitiously aimed to hold in 50 to 60 districts, as a rehearsal for state and national polls in 2026.²⁴ The stakes of these district polls were designed to be unusually high in another respect: the three political associations that score the highest vote shares in district elections would become Somalia's national parties for the next ten years.²⁵ Mogadishu seemed to be using the provision to narrow the bloc of political competitors, prompting leading opponents into boycotting the district polls.²⁶

Even though the commission insists that district, along with state and national elections, will take place wherever possible, security conditions remain a challenge.²⁷ Al-Shabaab launched a major offensive in

²¹ One tactic is promising positions for certain communities in order to get votes. For example, a rash of fresh ambassadorial appointments accompanied the parliamentary vote.

²² Due to Puntland's and Jubaland's boycotts, federal government officials from those states selected their representatives. Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu, February 2025.

²³ The Independent National Electoral and Boundaries Commission (INEBC) has not officially announced an updated calendar for district council elections. Privately, officials acknowledge that completing all the necessary technical steps could push them back several months, likely into 2026. Crisis Group interview, electoral official, April 2025.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, INEBC officials, February 2025.

²⁵ The electoral commission registered 43 political associations for participation in the district polls. This includes President Hassan Sheikh's Justice and Solidarity (JSP) association, which counts among its members the current prime minister, deputy prime minister, speaker and first deputy speaker of the lower house, along with the leaders of Southwest, Galmudug and Hirshabelle states.

²⁶ None of the nationally well-known opposition politicians (mostly former high-ranking government officials) registered a political organisation initially, fearing that might be interpreted as an endorsement of the process. Crisis Group interviews, political observers, Mogadishu, February 2025. Following the split of the Somalia Salvation Forum, a grouping of opposition politicians, in August 2025, the government reopened registration of political organisations so that defecting opposition politicians could register their groups. "Somalia's election body certifies 14 political parties", Hiraan Online, 6 September 2025.

²⁷ The INEBC says some police units will fall under its command, while the government will have to supply other security units to help protect the polls, Crisis Group interview, INEBC officials, February 2025.

February 2025 aimed at rolling back government gains made in 2022-23 in central Somalia during the early part of Mohamud's presidency. The future of the African Union mission, vital in securing urban areas that keep the insurgents at bay and enable Somalia's military and allied clan militias to go on the offensive, is uncertain. It is also short of funding, limiting its capabilities.²⁸ Insecurity is likely to restrict the geographic reach of district polls, while the ongoing dispute over how to implement elections distracts the government and spurs political divisions, undermining Mogadishu's attempts to marshal a unified military response to the militants.

In any event, as political challenges to the elections have mounted, time has also started to run out for the reforms to be carried out despite the government's efforts to push ahead. While the electoral commission remains committed to rapid implementation, the failure to hold district polls on time in June 2025 demonstrates the challenges it is facing. It now plans to hold district council elections in Mogadishu alone on 30 October 2025, using this as a pilot run before expanding to other cities later on.

IV. The Pushback

Despite the progress made in drawing up reforms to the election system, political cracks quickly appeared. Roughly speaking, opposition comes from two camps: the leadership of some federal member states – which have had a formal role in discussing the elections through the National Consultative Council – and the president's political opponents, who intend to run for the presidency but have had little formal input into the reform process. As noted above, both camps generally fear constitutional reforms will centralise power in Mogadishu and give it greater influence over electoral proceedings, but each is weighing a different set of specific calculations. Puntland is more concerned by the impact of constitutional changes on its power as a sub-national state and preserving the substantial role it played in overseeing the 2021-22 elections; Jubaland is focused on securing the legitimacy of state elections it held in late 2024 against Mogadishu's wishes; and opposition politicians are seeking a national electoral system that gives them the best chances of success.

At the state level, the electoral dispute has already turned violent. Clashes between the Jubaland administration and federal government broke out in December 2024 and between July and August 2025. On the political front, the make-up of the opposition is similar to the

²⁸ Daniel Forti, "Security Council Misses Funding Deadline for AU Mission in Somalia", Crisis Group Analyst's Notebook, 16 May 2025; and Omar Mahmood, "Al-Shabaab Recaptures Key Town, While Mogadishu Struggles to Regain the Upper Hand", Crisis Group Analyst's Notebook, 9 July 2025.

group that opposed Farmajo in 2021-2022 – although, in this case, they are protesting against Mohamud’s reforms. The opposition is also less united this time, in part due to bad blood created as they competed against each other during that earlier period of protest, although signs are emerging that they are beginning to coalesce. In combination, these sources of opposition are likely to impede the government’s ability to complete the scheduled elections throughout Somalia.

A. Resistance from Federal Member States

The strongest and most organised pushback against the government’s electoral plans comes from the leadership of some of Somalia’s federal member states, particularly Puntland and Jubaland. Puntland has regularly clashed with Mogadishu over the division of power within Somalia’s federal system. It suspended its participation in the NCC in early 2023, complaining that Mogadishu was imposing a centralised vision of governance at the expense of Somalia’s federal roots.²⁹ Puntland’s leadership took particular issue with the constitutional reform proposals emerging from the consultative council, complaining that Mogadishu had dominated their design.³⁰ The boycott, however, prevented Puntland from providing its input into the electoral agreement. Some officials in Mogadishu say this is par for the course: Puntland tends to participate when it gets its way, and torpedo proceedings when it does not.³¹

Jubaland’s opposition to electoral reform escalated in late 2024, after its leadership changed its mind over the issue of control over state elections. The consultative council agreement held that all state elections should be conducted at the same time under a centralised electoral commission, rather than run by the states at different times, as has occurred previously.³²

State leaders initially agreed with the proposal even though it required them to give up formal control over their own polls, likely persuaded by the extra time in office it would entail.³³ Jubaland’s president,

²⁹ “Puntland suspends cooperation with central govt amid fallout”, Garowe Online, 10 January 2023.

³⁰ Puntland suspended relations with Mogadishu during both Farmajo’s and Mohamud’s first terms following complaints about the concentration of power by the central state. The state’s leaders have begun talking about the need for a confederal model, which would place Puntland and the Somali government on equal footing; the status that other Somali member states would hold is unclear. Crisis Group interviews, Garowe, March 2024.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, February 2025.

³² Member states came into existence at different times, so their electoral cycles were not aligned.

³³ Crisis Group interviews, political observers, 2023-2024. The May 2023 NCC agreement called for all state elections to align with those in Hirshabelle, due in November 2024, as it was the last state to hold a poll. This meant that states with elections due before would have their terms extended, so as to ensure that all the

Ahmed Madobe, first accepted the reform, but changed tack later on.³⁴ Once it became clear that the November 2024 deadline for direct state elections would be missed, Madobe broke ranks and stated he would hold indirect elections in the old style instead of waiting for a new system to be established.³⁵ Madobe seemed to have concluded that it would be better to organise his own indirect polls at that point with the goal of securing a full additional five-year term, rather than gain another year in office at the cost of surrendering control over the state's polls to the new national electoral commission. In effect, Madobe exploited the delays in the polls as an excuse to break with Mogadishu, having already received a partial term extension.³⁶

Acting in defiance of the federal government, Madobe oversaw a tightly controlled indirect election and secured another term in office.³⁷ Mogadishu declared the elections “illegal” and began sending federal troops to the Ras Kamboni area bordering Kenya.³⁸ Fearing that Mogadishu was planning to remove him from power, Madobe struck first, with Jubaland's troops attacking federal forces on 11 December 2024.³⁹ The result was disastrous for the federal government: dozens of soldiers died while hundreds fled across the border to Kenya.⁴⁰ The clash gave an unequivocal demonstration of how disputes over Somali elections can quickly turn violent. It also showed the limits of the federal government's power, exposing its inability to implement its electoral plans in the face of regional resistance. By July, the tussle shifted to Jubaland's northern Gedo region, as local sup-

polls could be held at the same time. Most state parliaments also changed the length of their terms from four to five years.

³⁴ Parliament in July 2024 also removed the two-term limit in its constitution, allowing Madobe to run for a third term. “Madobe Maintains Grip in Power as MPs Abolish Term Limits in Crucial Constitutional Changes”, Goobjoob, 2 July 2024.

³⁵ In October 2024, the NCC added more time to the schedule due to delays in preparing the elections, pushing state polls back to September 2025. This new deadline will not be met.

³⁶ Some observers believe Madobe never intended to hold direct elections, but rather saw Mohamud's plan as useful to gain extra time in office until the moment came to eventually break with the reforms. Crisis Group interviews, political observers, 2024-2025.

³⁷ Madobe filled the state election commission with allies. The commission oversaw the clan-based selection of Jubaland's parliament. Madobe then won in the first round of voting for president, with 55 out of 75 parliamentarians backing him. “Ahmed Madobe Wins Third Term as Jubaland President Amid Constitutional Changes”, Horseed Media, 25 November 2024.

³⁸ The government claimed the troop build-up was for the purposes of taking over AU-held outposts in Lower Juba.

³⁹ The FGS may have expected that Madobe would not attack uniformed troops. Crisis Group interview, Somali MP, Mogadishu, February 2025.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Somali security officials and foreign diplomats, December 2024-March 2025.

porters of both sides clashed repeatedly in a bid to assert dominance.⁴¹ The prospect of increased insecurity along its border alarmed neighbouring Kenya, which is seeking to mediate between the parties.⁴²

The leaders of Puntland and Jubaland have a recent history of mutual antagonism, but are united by joint grievances against the federal government's electoral plans. Though their core concerns are different – Puntland is preoccupied by the constitutional changes while Jubaland is geared toward securing acceptance of its state election – the two have started to coordinate openly. Madobe visited Garowe in June 2025 and announced an alliance with Puntland state President Said Deni, a new chapter in their relationship following earlier frictions.⁴³

One unspoken concern that unites the two leaders is that shifting to direct elections under a national electoral commission would reduce their states' ability to hand pick MPs, which has given them a large amount of influence over the presidential election.⁴⁴ During the 2021-2022 election, both Puntland and Jubaland firmly opposed direct presidential elections.⁴⁵ Many political observers noted that Deni was planning to run for president of Somalia and that changes to the voting system could damage his prospects.⁴⁶ Despite losing in 2022, it is widely expected that Deni will run again, incorporating lessons from his failed bid to boost his chances.⁴⁷ This has intensified the push from Puntland and Jubaland to retain indirect selection for MPs and re-introduce state-level electoral commissions to oversee the vote, thus providing member state leaders with greater control over the choice of the next president.⁴⁸

⁴¹ The Somali government had gained the upper hand at the time of writing and likely aims to conduct district council elections in Gedo. Crisis Group interviews, Gedo residents, August 2025.

⁴² Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Mogadishu, August 2025.

⁴³ "Jubaland President in Puntland for talks with his Counterpart", Garowe Online, 23 June 2025. In 2021-2022, the leaders of both states united against Farmajo. During the presidential elections, however, Madobe did not back Deni's presidential bid. Crisis Group interviews, political observers, Mogadishu, Garowe and Kismayo, 2023-2024.

⁴⁴ In the 2021-22 national parliamentary elections, member state leaders hand-picked MPs by appointing loyalists to state electoral commissions. State commissions then oversaw parliamentary races where spurious candidates resigned just before the vote to guarantee victory for the sole remaining contender. Often the state presidents worked with state commissions to ensure their preferred candidate emerged victorious. This practice was known as *malxiis* or the "best-man" system. Mahmood, "A Welcome Chance for a Reset in Somalia", op. cit.

⁴⁵ "Political Turmoil ahead of Somalia's Elections", Crisis Group Commentary, 1 October 2020.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, political observers and clan elders, 2022-2023.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, government officials and political observers, 2024-2025. Deni has not made an official announcement on whether he intends to run or not.

⁴⁸ "Shirka Wadatashiga Dowladaha Puntland iyo Jubaland [Puntland and Jubaland consultation conference]", communiqué, 26 June 2025.

The other three federal member states – Galmudug, Hirshabelle and Southwest – along with the newly formed North Eastern state, are still going along with Mohamud’s reforms.⁴⁹ They are weaker and more dependent on Mogadishu economically and for security. In addition, due to their term extensions, the leaders no longer owe their mandates to their capitals but to Mogadishu, which authorised the latest extensions.⁵⁰ This gives the federal government greater leverage, and it has established working, albeit shallow, political alliances with these member state leaders to pursue its agenda.⁵¹ Little is certain, however, and these remaining pro-Mogadishu member states could yet follow Jubaland’s lead and chart a separate course to retain autonomous control over their state elections.⁵²

B. Mohamud’s Electoral Opponents

The other major source of opposition to the government’s plans comes from the men who plan to run against Mohamud for the presidency, some of whom allied with him to unseat Farmajo during the 2022 elections. As mentioned above, they worry that the new system will benefit the incumbent, giving Mohamud’s administration undue influence over electoral proceedings. Like the member states opposed to the reform, they believe it represents a power grab that centralises control within the executive. They are also concerned that major changes could wind up delaying polls. The top opponents of the reforms previously held senior government positions, including former presidents Sheikh Sharif Ahmed and Farmajo, and former prime minister, Hassan Ali Khaire. Most of these politicians have united around a common platform to protest against the upcoming elections,

⁴⁹ Somalia recognised North Eastern as a new federal member state in July 2025, comprising territory previously within Sool, Sanaag and Togdheere regions. Puntland and Somaliland both lay claim to the area and opposed the change. Mogadishu plans to conduct elections in North Eastern. Within Somalia’s federal system, members of parliament previously representing the area that is now North Eastern were selected in Puntland. The creation of the new state thus reduces the share of federal parliament attributed to Puntland.

⁵⁰ This is a major difference from the situation in 2021, when none of the state leaders had overstayed their original mandates.

⁵¹ These state leaders were also previously Farmajo’s allies. Mohamud, upon returning to office, decided to work with these leaders, in part because he viewed them as malleable and the costs of replacing them to be high. Crisis Group interviews, government officials and political observers, 2022-2025.

⁵² Some observers speculate that Southwest could be the next state to oppose Mogadishu’s plans. The federal security presence in Southwest’s capital Baidoa is limited, so if state leader Abdiiaziz Lafta-Gareen conducted a heavily-controlled indirect election – similar to the one Madobe carried out in Jubaland’s capital Kisimayo – Mogadishu would be hard pressed to stop him. Crisis Group interviews, political observers from Southwest, Mogadishu, February 2025.

launching the Somali Salvation Front (SSF) in May 2025, though some of its members defected in August (see next section).⁵³

The government batted away the opposition initially, but has started to engage with it. It had argued that because opposition leaders do not hold official positions, they have no mandate to weigh in.⁵⁴ Opposition leaders countered that since they will be running in the election, they have a right to provide input on the model that will be used.⁵⁵ The government has also encountered resistance from MPs: when it submitted the proposed changes to parliament in 2024, some parliamentarians urged the government to hold off pending wider consultation.⁵⁶

The opposition has tried to establish an alliance with the member states that are critical of the federal government's plans, but they have struggled to reach a common position (see next section).⁵⁷ Though limited for now, the influence of opposition figures will likely grow as the end of Mohamud's term approaches and political elites start to gather round in support of new candidates to challenge him.

C. Attempts at Compromise

While the government argues with some justification that opposition to its plans stems primarily from political opportunists who resist change, there is still a lack of broad consensus over the ideal electoral model. Without broader agreement, the path to fresh elections could deepen political divisions and potentially spill into violence.

The government appears to be attuned to these risks. In June, President Mohamud held a consultative forum with civil society and political association members to discuss the constitutional reform and elections, in addition to starting a dialogue with the Somali Salvation Front members.⁵⁸ One important shift has been the SSF's acceptance

⁵³ This came after opposition figures concluded a four-day conference in Mogadishu. "The Opposition Accuse President Hassan Sheikh of Working to Divide the Somali People", Horseed Media, 31 May 2025. Political observers noted that the unity of this grouping was tenuous at best, given past grievances between certain figures. Farmajo was not present and some members previously remarked they would not welcome him into any alliance because of how he treated them while in office. Crisis Group interview, political observers and opposition member, February and June 2025.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, Mogadishu, October 2024 and February 2025.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group interviews, opposition members, Mogadishu and Nairobi, February 2025. Some of the opposition members are also parliamentary MPs.

⁵⁶ Most opposition MPs subsequently boycotted the proceedings, complaining about procedural irregularities. "Somali Parliament approves the amendments to the Provisional Constitution's chapters 1-4", Somali National News Agency, 30 March 2024.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, opposition figure, February 2025.

⁵⁸ SSF members did not attend the consultative forum, complaining the government showed no indication it was serious about compromise, and rather was just

that Somalia should not blindly re-use the 2021 election system, though its members have stopped short of endorsing Mohamud's election reforms – a position that puts distance between them and the member states that are critical of the reforms.⁵⁹

The government began to make concessions in August. After discussions with a splinter group of politicians who defected from the SSF, the federal authorities announced on 25 August they would walk back some of the more controversial aspects of the constitutional reform package by returning powers to parliament, including the selection of president and its ability to remove the prime minister.⁶⁰ It also agreed that any political organisation securing at least 10 per cent of seats in the federal parliament will become a national political party, thus severing the connection between the results of the district council elections and eligibility to form a political party. Conversations between the government and political organisations are continuing over other technical changes to the electoral system, which officials say will increase competitiveness and trust in the process.⁶¹ All of these agreements, however, remain informal political commitments, and still need to be ratified by parliament.⁶²

The changes signal that the government is more open to concessions on certain reforms than just a few months ago. Some in the opposition see this as a genuine response to sustained political resistance.⁶³ Others see it simply as a way for the government to buy time before it decides eventually to extend its term in office.⁶⁴ For now, the federal authorities continue to insist on direct elections at all levels, while the remaining members of the SSF still oppose the government's plans, though they have done little to develop alternatives.⁶⁵ Moreover,

assuaging the concerns of international partners over the need for inclusive electoral discussions. They changed tack afterwards, however, agreeing to meet with Mohamud directly. Crisis Group interviews, opposition figures, June 2025.

⁵⁹ Opposition politicians are also concerned about the dominant role of member states in the 2021 electoral proceedings. Crisis Group interviews, opposition members, June 2025.

⁶⁰ Khadar Aweys, "Joint Communiqué on Talks Between the Federal Government and Part of the National Salvation Forum", Somali National News Agency (SONNA), 25 August 2025.

⁶¹ This includes reforming the electoral commission and conducting an independent audit of the voter registration rolls. Crisis Group interviews, political association members, Mogadishu, August 2025.

⁶² The electoral commission is also still seeking to update the electoral laws. Crisis Group interview, electoral commission, Mogadishu, August 2025.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, political association members, Mogadishu, August 2025.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, Mogadishu, August 2025.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, government officials and foreign diplomats, Mogadishu, August 2025. Opposition SSF figures say they are developing a proposal that they will make public soon, Crisis Group interview, SSF member, Mogadishu, August 2025.

no real headway has been made to bring in opposing member states, especially Puntland.⁶⁶

District council elections in Mogadishu, which are now scheduled for 30 October, should serve as a litmus test for universal suffrage in Somalia. According to the electoral commission, nearly one million people have registered to vote for the Mogadishu polls and enthusiasm for the contest appears genuine, even if there have been numerous reports of forced voter registration to boost the numbers.⁶⁷ If the government manages to stage a competitive vote, it is likely to push for direct voting for other polls. If the district polls are not held, or the vote goes ahead but is tarnished by major flaws, the opposition will redouble its campaign to stop Somalia from staging direct elections.

V. The Risks of a Contested Election

Despite multiple challenges, and a timetable that is increasingly unworkable, the government continues to push ahead with its plans, while the opposition continues to reject the changes.⁶⁸ This approach risks sparking the kind of crisis seen during the 2021-2022 electoral cycle. Unrest is not inevitable, however, and many close observers predict Somalia's political elites will eventually come to agreement.⁶⁹

If the government continues to push ahead without further compromise, it could lead to an armed stand-off in Mogadishu similar to April 2021, when an influx of armed Hawiye clan members entered the city to oppose President Farmajo's electoral plans.⁷⁰ This time, however, clan politics in Mogadishu are different and parallels with past violent confrontations are not automatic. Farmajo, a Marehaan from the Darod clan family, was considered an outsider in Mogadishu, which is primarily inhabited by Hawiye sub-clans. Mohamud, an Abgal from the Hawiye clan family, may benefit from the fact that other Hawiye

⁶⁶ "That file [Puntland-federal government] is not yet open", Crisis Group interview, parliament member, Mogadishu, August 2025. The opposition, including Puntland, is insisting on the complete cancellation of all constitutional amendments, rather than detailing specific complaints as Mogadishu has requested. Crisis Group interviews, opposition members, Mogadishu, August 2025.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, government officials, opposition politicians and Mogadishu residents, August 2025. See also: "Somalia Probes Forced Voter Registration Allegations", Facility for Talo and Leadership, 5 June 2025.

⁶⁸ Several technical steps remain, including completing voter registration and identifying polling sites. Financing for the elections is also unclear. District elections alone may cost around \$30 million – though the government has recently insisted it can cover this cost, after asking donors for support earlier in the year. Crisis Group interview, Somali electoral official and UN official, Mogadishu, August-September 2025.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu and Nairobi, 2025.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu, February 2025.

sub-clans would think twice about challenging him militarily.⁷¹ Still, the government appears nervous that opposition will strengthen as the electoral process moves forward.⁷²

The same security concerns surrounding district elections will also apply to state and nationwide polls. Al-Shabaab controls large swathes of the countryside, and has targeted participants in polls – including candidates, clan elders and electoral college members – as well as conducted attacks during past indirect elections.⁷³ As a result, any universal suffrage election would likely be limited in its reach, while even a contest restricted to areas secured by the government and the AU mission would still put voters at risk of future reprisals from the group.

As noted earlier, an Al-Shabaab offensive which began in February 2025 has placed the government under particular strain, as the militants recaptured many areas the government retook in 2022-2023.⁷⁴ Mogadishu is struggling to respond in large part due to increased political fragmentation, resulting in challenges mobilising an effective fighting force. At the same time, the future of AUSSOM remains uncertain amid a funding crunch. The mission has secured only 15 per cent of its budget for 2025.⁷⁵ Somalia's traditional partners are tightening their purse strings while non-traditional donors, particularly the Gulf states, though increasingly active, are unlikely to step in to make up the shortfall.⁷⁶

In this setting, the federal government's electoral plans risk accelerating Somalia's security challenges and political divisions, particularly between Mogadishu and federal member states. Pressing ahead with an electoral process in which large parts of the country are not involved, either because of abstention or insecurity, will further harden the divisions within the Somali federation. It also will expose the shortcomings of the government, demonstrating the limits of its authority. Given the limited time to organise the polls, any attempt at one person, one vote elections would most likely suffer serious shortfalls in terms of the inclusion of all Somalis, contributing to a highly contested outcome.

⁷¹ Mohamud's popularity amongst the Abgal is far from assured. Opposition leaders including Sheikh Sharif hail from this clan, while some sub-clans have been unhappy with Mohamud's leadership, including how he has distributed government posts. Crisis Group interviews, political observers and politicians, Mogadishu, February 2025.

⁷² "Somalia's defense minister warns opposition against armed rebellion", *Somali Guardian*, 23 August 2025.

⁷³ Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°165, *Blunting Al-Shabaab's Impact on Somalia's Elections*, 31 December 2020.

⁷⁴ These are primarily in Hirshabelle state.

⁷⁵ "Report of the Secretary General submitted pursuant to operative paragraph 43 of Security Council resolution 2767 (2024)", 7 May 2025.

⁷⁶ For example, despite lobbying from the AU for Gulf actors to contribute to AUSSOM, no significant pledges have materialised.

Even if there is a compromise on electoral plans, such as reverting to an indirect model for the state and parliamentary polls, it could come too late for the organisers to make meaningful improvements aimed at improving the quality of Somalia's methods of picking its leaders. Both the government and opposition have reasons to let the clock run down.⁷⁷ The opposition hopes that as the election deadline approaches and it becomes clear that the government will struggle to implement its plans, its power to shape any changes to the existing system will grow.⁷⁸ The government also appears comfortable with the status quo, given that if it does not implement an election on time, the default option is to prolong its term. It also wants time to demonstrate that universal suffrage is indeed feasible by holding district council elections in Mogadishu.

More broadly, Somalia appears to be reaching a tipping point, one that could prod external backers to reassess their commitment to the federal project that is still highly dependent upon its mainly Western backers. The country is fragmented, Al-Shabaab is resurgent, the future of the AU peacekeeping mission is uncertain, and donor patience is waning. Another contested electoral cycle could thrust the country into a downward spiral that reinforces the notion that billions of dollars of external backing have brought little progress.

Early in Farmajo's term, Somalia's international partners enthusiastically championed universal suffrage, but few are now blindly pressing for one person, one vote polls. Instead, most now support a consultative approach to determine the next electoral model, even if this is indirect.⁷⁹ With several of Somalia's Western partners already looking to cut their development and humanitarian programs worldwide, the failure to come to a timely agreement on an electoral model would likely lead to further disappointment, reductions in their support and even a belief that a new approach – instead of one premised largely on propping up the federal government – is needed.

VI. Preventing a Crisis and Improving the Polls

An electoral crisis that might tip into violence, particularly in Mogadishu and areas contested between the government and member states, remains possible unless all involved take steps to prevent it. The longer the government and opposition take to agree on an elec-

⁷⁷ A UN official told Crisis Group earlier in 2025 that “the time is not ripe for a serious discussion”. Crisis Group interview, UN official, Mogadishu, February 2025.

⁷⁸ In 2020, Puntland and Jubaland boycotted electoral discussions until the Farmajo administration climbed down from universal suffrage months before the polls were due.

⁷⁹ Some partners still support direct elections in order to see change, regardless of their faults. Most, however, are concerned given the political challenges. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Mogadishu and Nairobi, February 2025.

toral system, the greater the risk that either side resorts to violence to sabotage the process. Avoiding this scenario will require compromise. The government will have to make further concessions regarding the voting process, while the opposition – particularly the leaders of member states – should accept it cannot hold reforms hostage, and stand ready to engage constructively rather than shoot down all proposals. Discussions between the government and some critics of its plans have already begun, and these should press ahead with a view to forging agreements on an election schedule and a format that improves upon earlier indirect polls.

A. Getting Key Players Back to the Table

An important step to alleviate tensions and move closer to an electoral agreement would be for Puntland and Jubaland to return to the National Consultative Council to air their concerns. The government can point to the concessions it has made to date over the constitutional amendments passed by parliament as proof of its readiness to negotiate. It can also put on hold plans to further amend the constitution before the end of its term. Getting to negotiations involving a broad set of Somali interests will likely require bilateral channels with the leaderships of both states to address outstanding issues first, including the legal status of Madobe as president of Jubaland. In return, member states will also need to compromise: Puntland should walk back its demand to cancel all constitutional amendments as a pre-condition for its participation; Jubaland, meanwhile, must agree to discuss the legitimacy of its 2024 state election in order to begin the conversation on electoral reforms.

There are clear incentives for both sides to engage and compromise. The government would assuage mounting domestic and international concern that its plans are impractical and exclude large swathes of the country. For the member states, reconnecting with Mogadishu will bring benefits, for example ensuring they receive their share of international assistance intended for distribution throughout the federal system. There are also political advantages. If Puntland's leader Deni wishes to run for president, the state will have to return to the federation at some point. Madobe, meanwhile, remains isolated without Mogadishu's recognition of his self-organised re-election.

International mediation, or at least shuttle diplomacy, may be necessary at first to break the impasse and get the sides talking. The UN, AU and European Union – which, due to their backing for AUSSOM, all have a clear interest in finding a peaceful way out of the current stalemate – could mount a joint diplomatic effort to bring about these talks. This multilateral approach will also help assuage doubts from both the government and opposition about the impartiality of mediators, and thus have a better chance of ensuring their participation.

Other partners that provide bilateral assistance to Somalia can use their influence over the government and its more intransigent opponents to urge both sides to accept mediation and return to the negotiating table. They could make clear that resolution of the electoral conflict will be essential to ensure funding continues to flow, reinforcing the message with high-level calls directly from their capitals. A coordinated front, including the U.S., UK and European member states, alongside influential states in the wider region, such as Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as neighbouring Djibouti, Ethiopia and Kenya, could craft shared messages and apply pressure on all Somali forces to encourage a compromise, in order to have the best chance of breaking the deadlock. All these foreign states have an interest in Somalia's stability – and thus will want to avoid another electoral crisis.⁸⁰

B. Devising a More Realistic Electoral Plan

Once they are all at the table, the federal government, member states and the opposition can focus on key areas where agreement is needed. It is then imperative that they should come up with a phased electoral plan.

First, the less contentious district elections should continue under the one person, one vote system. Whereas Crisis Group has adopted a cautious stance regarding direct elections in Somalia in the past, primarily due to technical shortcomings in organising the vote and political divides on the issue, the strides taken toward holding district polls could mark a breakthrough in the road to universal suffrage. The polls in Mogadishu are unlikely to be perfect, but they can serve as a test run for those held later in state capitals and other secondary cities where voters have already been registered.⁸¹ Even so, these contests should not be rushed, and particular care should be taken in areas suffering from high political tension or facing security threats. If phased, the authorities could aim to wrap up polls in state capitals and some secondary cities by early 2026, when attention will turn to state and national elections. Districts that are unable to hold elections in that period can do so under the next administration.

Secondly, the federal government should drop its plans to hold a one person, one vote election for state and national parliaments, which would be practically difficult to achieve and politically inflammatory.⁸²

⁸⁰ The role of Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates would be particularly useful to calm the waters, given their increasing influence over the federal government and Puntland respectively.

⁸¹ The status of the Banadir region, where Mogadishu sits, within the Somali federation remains unresolved, including whether it becomes a member state or is awarded a special status. Crisis Group interviews, Mogadishu residents, August 2025.

⁸² President Mohamud affirmed on 25 August that the national and state presidents will be selected by their respective parliaments, as has been the case in pre-

Instead, the government and opposition should agree to a new version of the indirect election model that makes it harder for politicians to interfere with the polls. A new system should seek to expand overall participation by increasing the size of the electoral colleges used to select members of parliament.⁸³ Another innovation would be to combine electoral colleges in each location to form a single bloc that selects all MPs representing that constituency.⁸⁴

Reforms should not end there. The government should also offer to overhaul the make-up of the electoral commission, bringing its opponents on board in order to increase trust in the institution across the political spectrum. A new model should also include a special independent court to hear electoral challenges: this institution would improve oversight and instil more confidence in election results. Finally, a new system should introduce an election code of conduct based on the principle of mutual non-interference between the government and member states.⁸⁵

Besides these changes, an electoral framework should build on direct elections at the district level to include a roadmap outlining how Somalia can reach universal suffrage over the next electoral cycles, along with benchmarks it should meet to demonstrate progress. Universal suffrage is an aspiration with broad-based public support in Somalia, especially amongst the country's huge constituency of young people, but political disputes have continuously stalled it. A roadmap does not need to be a detailed document, but it should lay out what electoral designs Somalia would use for forthcoming elections, alongside a realistic assessment of the steps and time required to achieve a popular vote. Successive Somali administrations have attempted to move from narrow indirect selections to widespread universal suffrage in just a few years, but consistently failed to do so. A more methodolo-

vious elections. Khadar Aweys, "Joint Communiqué on Talks Between the Federal Government and Part of the National Salvation Forum", SONNA, 25 August 2025.

⁸³ One suggestion is to increase the electoral colleges from 101 to around 501 electors per parliamentary seat. State parliamentary elections have relied on elders rather than electoral colleges previously, so introducing them at this level could also be a step toward increased participation.

⁸⁴ For example, Hirshabelle has 37 federal members of parliament. The electoral colleges used to select these MPs could combine to vote together for all 37 of its seats, rather than fielding separate and smaller colleges for each seat. The larger number of electors will in principle make the polls harder to manipulate. Some Somali civil society organisations and political associations are floating this as a feasible compromise option. See, for example, "Bridging Divides: Options for Resolving Somalia's FGS-FMS Disputes, Constitutional Review and Elections", Policy Paper, Somali Public Agenda (SPA), Puntland Development and Research Centre (PDRC) and Heinrich Böll Stiftung, August 2025.

⁸⁵ Member states should have the authority to conduct elections in their state without federal interference in return for minimum standards of openness. They should also agree that the federal government will oversee national elections without their interference.

gical approach that makes gradual progress would likely yield better results.

A roadmap would have the additional advantage of locking in Somalia's political elite by setting rules for the next electoral cycles in advance to avoid constant debate and political dispute over what model should be used in the absence of universal suffrage. This approach would help Somalia make progress toward its democratic goals while avoiding debilitating bouts of unrest at every stride.

VII. Conclusion

Elections have been a persistent source of tension in Somalia, and the country is on track for another outbreak of electoral turmoil unless a compromise on the voting system can be reached. The risk is not only a recurrence of violence but also worsening political fragmentation as well as lasting damage to the Somali federal system. The only way to avoid this is to develop an inclusive electoral roadmap – ideally one that remains in place beyond the current polls, and maps a route to universal suffrage that all sides can agree upon. In the meantime, Somalia could take a stride toward that goal by pressing ahead with plans to hold direct elections at the district level.

A great spirit of political compromise will be required from the government and those political rivals of the president and leaders of states that oppose the current electoral reforms. An electoral deal will benefit all sides. It can help the government patch up its ties with members states and political adversaries, enable the opposition to stop the government extending its mandate, and curb the threat of violence. Reaching agreements on electoral reforms sooner rather than later will also ensure there is more time to increase the number of Somali voters who participate, introduce firebreaks that reduce the leeway for manipulation and corruption in the polls, and build public consensus around change. While there are signs that the positions of some political figures are softening, much remains to be done. To ward off the risk of unrest and stop any further erosion of the credibility of Somalia's federal state, compromise will be vital.

Nairobi/Brussels, 24 September 2025

Appendix A: About the International Crisis Group

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Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

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