

Somalia's Electoral Impasse:

Prospects and Challenges for Consensual Polls

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(Sadak Mohamed - Anadolu Agency)

The political crisis in Somalia threatens to further divide the security forces and backslide the country's state-building process. With president Farmaajo back-peddalling from the controversial two-year extension, a real chance exists to move the country towards inclusive federal elections.

Prime Minister Roble should show responsible leadership by averting further fighting in the capital, prioritising reconciliation and remaining neutral. Somalia's international partners need to play a leading role in this challenging transition.

Introduction

Somalia's long-running political crisis has entered a new and dangerous phase following the expiry of President Mohamed Abdullah Farmaajo's term in office on 8 February 2021. It was the first time in the modern history of Somalia that a president's mandate expired without an election or a prior agreement. Tensions worsened on February 19 when security forces forcibly disbanded opposition protests led by former presidents and a former prime minister on the basis of Covid-19 control measures. Tension further increased on April 12 after Somalia's lower house of parliament voted to extend the president's term for another two years, claiming it would allow the country prepare for direct elections. The move was rejected by the country's Senate, the opposition, some of the Federal Member States (FMS) and the international community, including the African Union, European Union, United Nations and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development—a regional bloc in the East and the Horn of Africa.

On February 27, the leaders of Galmudug and Hirshabelle states, who were allies of the president, issued a joint statement declaring that they would not support any extension of the president's term. The prime minister followed suit, calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to the 17 September 2020 agreement. A few hours later, President Farmaajo released a video message in which he said he would appear before the parliament to annul the extension and vowed he would return to dialogue on the 17 September deal implementation. As a result, legislators [endorsed](#) the president's request three days later.

The dispute has led to a split in the Somali security forces. On April 12, Mogadishu Police Commander Saadaq Omar Hassan publicly rejected the extension of the president's mandate and ordered his forces to stop the Lower House session, which was supposed to hold a vote on the extension. He was soon dismissed from office and his military ranking removed, leading him to retreat to his home in the west of Mogadishu with his bodyguards. A day later, fighting began between fighters loyal to him and government troops who approached his home in an attempt to arrest him. Two days later, it was reported that around three brigades of the Somali National Army had abandoned their bases in the neighbouring Middle Shabelle region and entered Mogadishu, reportedly opposing the mandate extension. By April 24, fighting broke out between forces loyal to the president and other military units opposing him in the capital Mogadishu. The violence has reportedly resulted in the displacement of [60,000-100,000](#) residents.

The political crisis threatens to further divide the security forces and backslide the country's state-building process by distracting focus from the fight against the Al-Qaeda-aligned Al Shabaab and ISIS/Daesh insurgencies. This Policy Outlook envisages deconstructing the electoral

impasse in Somalia by documenting the challenges and prospects for consensual polls in the country. First, it explains the road to the current stalemate followed by an overview of the 17 September 2020 agreement for indirect elections. The second section deals with scenarios arising from the current dynamics. Finally, possible ways forward are examined.

The road to the current stalemate

President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, also known as Farmaajo, was elected in February 2017 by lawmakers from both chambers of the Somali Parliament. Due to his promise of tackling corruption, ensuring soldiers were properly compensated and fighting the Al Shabaab insurgency, Somalis in the country and abroad widely celebrated his election victory. A former U.S. civil servant who had previously served as prime minister of Somalia, Farmaajo also campaigned that he would act as an elder statesman and would ensure political stability in the country. For many years, [disputes](#) between Somali presidents and prime ministers have resulted in gridlock in government operations and furthered political instability in the country. Four years down the road, residents of Mogadishu who had welcomed Farmaajo's election, were forced to flee from the capital due to violence resulting from his failure to organise a timely election or reach a consensual agreement with his political opponents on the way forward.

The current stalemate started in February 2020 when Farmaajo signed into law a historic bill that envisaged allowing ordinary Somalis to vote in parliamentary elections for the first time in 50 years. Unlike the current indirect system, where clan elders nominate delegates who elect legislators who then elect the president, the new law stipulated that Somalis would vote directly for political parties, with parliamentary seats being allocated per the final results. The legislators then vote for the prime minister, who will come from the dominant party in the parliament, as well as the president. Mr. Farmaajo insisted that this model was applicable, despite considerable evidence of a lack of preparation and the absence of consensus between key political actors. The majority of the political actors, including some Federal Member States, rejected the bill as undoable. In June 2020, the National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC) declared that it cannot organise direct elections by the end of the mandates of the parliament (27 November 2020) and the president (8 February 2021), citing political crisis, insecurity, and the Covid-19 pandemic. In order to implement direct elections, NEIC asked for a 13 month extension and \$70 million to biometrically register approximately 3 million voters, identify 5,000 polling stations and hire election workers. The NEIC plan was imme-

diately denounced by opposition groups and some Federal Member States as an attempt to extend the president's term in office. They argued that security issues, including the fact that Al-Shabaab controls large swaths of the country, recurrent political tensions, an unfinished constitutional review and technical and logistical issues still need to be addressed before an election. The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) once again rebuffed calls that the direct polls were not something that could be implemented, giving a clear indication that the country was heading towards a political crisis.

A few weeks later, Somali political leaders and key stakeholders began efforts to find a workable model and avoid an election impasse. In mid-July, President Farmajo, the leaders of four Federal Member States (FMS) (Puntland, Jubaland, Galmudug and Hirshabelle) and the governor of Banadir Province met in Dhuusamarreeb, the capital of Galmudug state. After 10 days of negotiations, they agreed on an indirect election model, which increased the number of electors for each of the 275 seats of the Lower House of the parliament from 51 to 301 and increases the election sites from one town in each FMS to two.

The second trigger of the current electoral impasse in Somalia was the removal of former Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire. President Farmajo was reportedly unhappy about the indirect electoral modality, feeling that Mr. Khaire betrayed him. On 25 July 2020, Somali deputies removed Khaire via a no-confidence motion, which President Farmajo, who had appointed him as prime minister in February 2017, immediately endorsed. Mr. Khaire's government was accused of failing to organise one man - one vote elections, and establishing a national security force capable of tackling the widespread insecurity. The prime minister also suggested that political consensus among all stakeholders was necessary and that an extension of the presidential mandate was unconstitutional. With few months remaining of the mandate of the government and the parliament and no agreement in sight, the sacking of the prime minister added fuel to the rumours that the President was seeking to extend his term.

However, almost two months down the road, the FGS and FMS leaders met in the capital Mogadishu and signed a landmark electoral breakthrough, known as the 17 September Agreement. Under this deal, the electors of each legislator were reduced from 301 to 101. However, the implementation of the new agreement proved contentious as discussed in the section on the 17 September deal. The third reason, and perhaps the most important, that led to the electoral impasse in Somalia is the expiration of the president's term on 8 February 2021. For the first time in two decades, Somalia experienced the end of the mandate of a sitting administration without an election or a consensual agreement on the electoral process. Consequently, Puntland and Jubaland states and the opposition umbrella

announced that they no longer considered Farmajo as the legitimate president of the country and asked him to resign so that a caretaker government could be established. The President argued that he remains the legitimate leader, referencing a bill endorsed by the parliament in November stipulating that the current government and the parliament will stay until new ones are elected.

On 19 February 2021, the Somali security services forcibly disbanded an opposition protest led by former prime minister Khaire in Mogadishu using live fire. The forces also prevented former presidents Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud from leaving their hotels to join the protest. It has also been reported that the forces [clashed](#) with the two leaders' security guards, resulting in an unknown number of casualties. The government said it had banned demonstrations to curb the spread of Covid-19 and on the grounds of tightening security in the capital. However, the opposition accused the government of violating the freedom of speech enshrined in the constitution and of trying to assassinate opposition leaders, including the former presidents and prime minister.

The collapse of the 'Airport Talks' and the 12 April extension

Somalia's international partners continued to put pressure behind the scenes on Somali political leaders to resume the electoral talks and find common ground. The leaders of Puntland and Jubaland refused to meet Farmajo in the country's presidential palace, claiming they could not entrust their security to the Somali army. As a result, negotiations between the FGS and FMS took place in Mogadishu's high-security international airport compound, which is manned by African Union peacekeeping troops. After almost a month of negotiations, talks collapsed. Some FMS have argued that they no longer trust the president and demanded that 1) he replace army commanders who ordered the 19 February attack on protesters, 2) other stakeholders (i.e. opposition and civil society representatives) be included in the negotiations, and 3) that the international community acts as a guarantor of any agreement. Predictably, President Farmajo rejected the demands arguing that they violated the political sovereignty of the country and his government announced that the talks had collapsed due to foreign intervention. Farmajo accused the leaders of Jubaland and Puntland of taking orders from what he termed Somalia's enemies that seek to destabilise the country. On 12 April, Somalia's Lower House met and granted a two-year extension to both the parliament and the president. Legislators asked the government to implement direct one-person, one-vote elections in 2 years time. A day later, President Farmajo signed the bill, which was published in the official gazette.

As expected, the Jubaland and Puntland FMS and the opposition umbrella vehemently rejected the parliament's move to extend the president's stay in office. The Senate, also known as the Upper House of the Parliament, termed the move unilateral and illegal because the two chambers elected the president and only together could they extend his mandate. The political dispute led to a split in the Somali security forces, which has been undergoing a rebuilding process with training and mentoring from a number of countries including the United States and Turkey. It has been reported that several heavily armed brigades of the Somali National Army who were stationed in the Middle Shabelle and Hiiran regions marched towards Mogadishu a week after the extension. These army units have reportedly opposed the extension of the government mandate and demanded that the president resign. By 25 April, violent clashes between army soldiers loyal to the president and other units aligned to the opposition started in the capital Mogadishu. Forces from the two sides erected roadblocks and took positions in key junctions close to the presidential palace, the arterial Maka Al-Mukarama road and the K-4 junction near the Mogadishu airport, leading to the disruption of economic activities and some displacement.

Farmaajo drops the extension

The violent clashes in the city have forced President to give up the two year extension and to accept dialogue with his political opponents. On 27 April, the leaders of Galmudug and Hirshabelle—two FMS aligned with the president—issued a joint statement, in which they declared that they do not support any extension of the government's mandate and called on Somalia's political leaders to resume dialogue based on the September 17 Agreement. Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble, who was appointed by the President in November last year, endorsed the statement by the two FMS and asked all stakeholders to prepare themselves for immediate elections on the implementation of the 17 September Agreement.

Five hours later, President Farmaajo released a video message, in which he said he would stop pursuing the controversial two-year extension of his presidential term. He further announced that he will appear before the Lower House of Parliament on 1 May to ask legislators to restore the 17 September Agreement between the federal government and the leaders of five FMS and the governor of Mogadishu. During the special session meeting, in which lawmakers unanimously voted to cancel the presidential extension, Mr. Farmaajo told parliamentarians that he would transfer leadership and security of the federal elections to Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble. Consequently, the PM announced that he would soon reach out to the country's divided political leaders and [promised to organise](#) "free, fair and transparent elections in the country, without infringing upon anyone's rights."

In addition to internal pressure, Somalia's international partners have put mounting pressure on president Farmaajo to drop the controversial extension and return to the last year's agreement. Furthermore, some members of the international community have vowed to take action against political leaders who do not accept the path to dialogue and peace. For instance, the [US has said](#) the move to extend the president's stay in office "will compel the United States to reevaluate our bilateral relations with the Federal Government of Somalia, to include diplomatic engagement and assistance, and to consider all available tools, including sanctions and visa restrictions, to respond to efforts to undermine peace and stability." Earlier, the European Union [rejected the term extension](#) and threatened to "consider further concrete measures" if the president does not return to the electoral process based on the implementation of the 17 September Agreement. The African Union also [condemned the term extension](#) efforts and promised to dispatch a special envoy for Somalia to mediate between political stakeholders in order "to reach a mutually acceptable compromise."

The 17 September Agreement

President Farmaajo decision to abandon the extensions, in addition to helping ease immediate tensions, paves the way for Somalia's political actors to return to the electoral negotiations. However, the fundamental dynamics that have hindered the election cycle to date remain unchanged. In particular, these are challenges surrounding the implementation of the 17 September Agreement—an indirect electoral model considered as the most feasible option by both Somalis and their international partners. Under this deal, the electors of each legislator will be 101 with two election locations (towns) in each FMS. It is an extension of the 2016 election model, which had 51 electors and one election location in each FMS. However, the implementation of the new agreement proved contentious. Puntland and Jubaland states as well as opposition groups rejected the Federal Electoral Implementation Team appointed by the federal government as illegal and a violation of the 17 September Agreement. In particular, they cited that the Team was not impartial because the majority of its members were drawn from Farmaajo's office, the intelligence services, as well as diplomatic circles, which they claimed, were all controlled by the president. Another point of disagreement was how to manage the 16 parliamentary seats for Gedo, a region of Jubaland state. Following a 2019 election dispute in Jubaland, Farmaajo deployed the national army to Gedo and captured it from local Jubaland forces. For the 17 September agreement implementation, Jubaland leader Ahmed Madobe demanded that Gedo, which Farmaajo's clan dominates, should be returned to his administration. The federal government refused to comply with that demand. The final obstacle to the implementation of the 17 September Agreement is

who should manage breakaway Somaliland's parliamentary seats since it is not included in the current federal arrangement. Senate Speaker Abdi Hashi Abdullahi who is the highest elected figure from Somaliland rejected the FGS' management of the process and demanded that have a say in the appointment of the State Electoral Implementation Team for the Somaliland parliamentary caucus. Previously, the Somaliland seats were managed by the deputy prime minister who is the highest figure in the executive from Somaliland.

On 16 February 2021, Following five days of discussions in Baidoba city in the Southwest State, a technical committee appointed by both the FGS and the FMS on the election

impasse reached a deal that could potentially solve all the contentious issues in the 17 September Agreement. These are mainly the three controversial issues that complicated the implementation of the last year's agreement, namely the appointments of the Federal Indirect Elections Team, Somaliland elections Team and the Gedo region (see the below table for the proposed solutions to these issues). Therefore, the committee called for a meeting of President Farmaajo and leaders of the FMS to finalise the deal to pave way for the national elections. Many, including in the international community, believe the recommendations of the Baidoba technical committee address the obstacles to the implementation of the agreement.

Baidoba Technical Committee Recommendations

Issue	Proposed solution
Composition of Federal Election Implementation Team (FEIT) and State level Elections Implementation Teams (SEIT)	A. The names of the election officials either in FEIT or SEIT deemed affiliated with any interested party in the elections to be forwarded to the office of Prime Minister for action within three days after signing of the agreement by the FGS and FMS. B. After verification, the Prime Minister shall submit the names of the affected nominees and ask for their replacement.
Somaliland Election Management Committee	A. PM to revoke the names of four officials and allow the Senate speaker Abdi Hashi Abdullahi to submit their replacement within five days after the signing of this agreement. B. The Senate speaker will name four members of the Somaliland Seat Management Committee (1 member to the FEIT and 3 to the SEIT).
GEDO region	A. The FMS, excluding Jubaland, to send a reconciliation commission to Gedo B. Garbaharey district to have a new administration that will administer the election C. Local community and tribal leaders to suggest names of individuals to the reconciliation to be included in the new administration. Jubaland FMS leader to suggest names of individuals to the reconciliation to be included in the new Garbaharey administration. D. Police drawn from African Union peacekeepers in Somalia to maintain security in the city and at the polling stations.



Somalia's deputy Mohammed Ali (L) casts his vote during the election to elect parliament speaker, in the capital Mogadishu, Somalia on January 11, 2017. (Saadaq Maxamed - Anadolu Agency)

The way forward

The recent violence in Mogadishu has widened the trust deficit between the FGS, the FMS and opposition groups. The parliament's decision to drop the controversial two-year extension is a welcome step towards inclusive elections in the country. The prime minister has now declared that he has taken over organising the elections. However, a lot remains to be done to break the deadlock and move the process forward. To organise consensual polls, PM Roble should start with averting further violence in the capital. The challenge is that none of the rival factions is willing to disarm due to the severe trust deficit between them. Furthermore, external intervention is paramount to back peacebuilding and other election-related efforts. The African Union has already announced the dispatch of a Somalia envoy tasked with helping facilitate negotiations. Both the PM and the AU envoy should move with speed to ensure that fighting does not break out. They should also collaborate with the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), ensure their neutrality, and should clearly mention to all sides that their duty is to ensure consensual elections supported by the African Union-led mediation initiative.

Second, the prime minister should prioritise reconciliation between the political elites, the army and the public. These efforts should focus on confidence-building measures with an aim to resolve the electoral crisis and implementing the 17 September Electoral Framework Agreement, which remains the only workable option to date. The reconciliation efforts will likely result in serious and frank discussions on election-related issues. The Baidoba technical commission recommendations should be utilised so that the elections can be organised as a matter of priority.

Third, the prime minister should ensure that negotiations are expanded and include other Somali stakeholders and civil society members, including political parties, religious leaders, and women and youth representatives. Including these representatives in future discussions on elections could help in establishing an inclusive atmosphere, and move the process beyond the opinions of a small section of the country's political elite. Finally, the international community, including the AU, EU, US, and Turkey, should act as guarantors of the subsequent electoral understanding to avoid a return to a political crisis. Electoral security falls under this theme, as the opposition umbrella and some FMS clearly opposed to plans to control the Somali army by the outgoing president.

Conclusion

Somalia's long-running political crisis has entered a dangerous phase, following the expiry of President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmajo's term in office on 8 February 2021. It was the first time in the modern history of Somalia a president's mandate expired without an election or a prior agreement. Tensions increased on April 12 after Somalia's lower house of parliament voted to extend the president's term for another two years, claiming it would let the country prepare for direct elections.

The crisis led to the fragmentation of the Somali security forces. Violent clashes between army soldiers loyal to the president and other units aligned to the opposition started in the capital Mogadishu. Forces from the two sides erected roadblocks and took positions in key junctions close to the presidential palace, the arterial Maka Al-Mukarama road and the K-4 junction near the Mogadishu airport, leading to the disruption of economic activities and some displacement of the population. The political crisis threatens to further divide the security forces and backslide the country's state-building process by distracting focus from the fight against the Al-Qaeda-aligned Al Shabaab and ISIS/Daesh insurgencies. These groups are reportedly using the opportunity to extend their grip and expand their operations in the country.

With president Farmajo back-peddalling from the controversial two-year extension, a real chance exists to move the country towards inclusive federal elections. Prime Minister Roble should show responsible leadership by averting further fighting in the capital, prioritising reconciliation and remaining neutral. Somalia's international partners need to play a leading role in this challenging transition. The African Union envoy supported by the US, EU and Turkey should back the PM's efforts and persuade actors to negotiate in good faith based on the implementation of the 17 September 2020 agreement.