



# POLITICS AND SECURITY BULLETIN



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# Briefing: Political Tensions in Somaliland and Their Implications on Security

## 1. Introduction

This bulletin is part of an ongoing bi-monthly update on the latest developments in Somaliland's peace and security, sent out to peace and security stakeholders in the Horn of Africa region. This issue discusses and contextualizes current and emergent peace and security threats, while also attempting to draw roadmaps towards the elimination of these threats through policy action recommendations. These include preventing the rise of radical violent groups through the diffusion of political tensions and addressing underlying clan power dynamics.

Somaliland currently faces a myriad of security concerns not only at a national level but also by virtue of its geographical location in the Horn of Africa region. Some of these challenges are occasioned by the foreseen delays of the upcoming presidential elections, which has increased mistrust and competition within and among the clans and other political actors. According to peace experts and analysts, Somaliland's fragile peace could face urgent threats that could erode the gains made in the last three decades.

The fragility of Somaliland's peace is further compounded by; the disruptions in global supply chains resulting from the ongoing Ukraine-Russia war, the looming food insecurity resulting from climate change and the devastation of Somaliland's main market.

. In addition, changing geopolitics and internal security challenges experienced by some of the more stable economies on the Horn of Africa place Somaliland's peace and security at a higher risk. The longer political groups drag their rivalry, the higher the risk of radical violent groups to fill the governance void and break down the existing national cohesion.

## 2. Context of Recent Elections

Since the 2017 presidential elections, Somaliland has been struggling with peace and security risks associated with political competition and polarization.

Immediately after the 2017 presidential elections, WADDANI party<sup>1</sup> disputed the results in which the candidate of the ruling KULMIYE party, and current president of Somaliland Mr. Muse Bihi Abdi, was declared the winner. WADDANI party declined the invitation to Mr. Bihi's inauguration party, sparking a number of violent protests in Hargeisa and Burao.

In March 2018, WADDANI party released a statement distancing itself from the Somaliland National Electoral Commission (SLNEC) and calling for the president to dissolve the electoral body. This sparked outrage in the KULMIYE camp as the move was perceived to be a ploy to delegitimize the results of the 2017 presidential elections.

<sup>1</sup> The Main opposition party in Somaliland. It controls the largest block of MPs in the parliament and major cities mayors including that of Hargeisa.

The most contentious issue was WADDANI's dissatisfaction with the composition of the seven-member electoral body. Out of the seven members, the incumbent president appoints five members, while the opposition appoints the remaining two.

The WADDANI party perceived this imbalance as designed to give the incumbent president the upper hand.<sup>2</sup> Hence, the two opposing parties proposed the introduction of a nine-member electoral body, with the incumbent president's party and the opposition party appointing three members each, and the other three being drawn from electoral stakeholders. However, the ruling party, KULMIYE, strongly opposed the proposal, which caused delays of the presidential elections in 2019 and 2020.

The negotiations that ensued dragged on for almost two years and were dubbed 'walking in circles'<sup>3</sup> denoting the people's disapproval of the politicians' lack of progress.] The negotiations however culminated in the successful holding of local council and parliamentary elections in 2021. In these elections, the opposition parties secured the mayoral positions in major cities, a majority of representatives in the house of representatives, as well as the new speaker of parliament. However, this did not translate into political reconciliation as another dispute immediately arose; the government of Somaliland drafted a legal bill meant to open up political parties, a move fiercely contested by the opposition who accused the KULMIYE party of creating disruptions to delay scheduled presidential elections and illegally extend their terms.

Amidst the mounting election - induced tensions, opposition leaders called for protests and demonstrations against Mr. Bihi's government, triggered by the government's decision to disband the National Electoral Commission. The demonstrations were organized and led by a 14-member committee formed by members of WADANI and UCID parties. During this period, the government was accused of inciting retaliatory riots against opposition party leaders.

On June 9 2022, the opposition parties organized a surprise peaceful demonstration led by the WADDANI party leaders. In response, the government used disproportionate force against peaceful protesters. During the protests, a high-ranking police officer was caught on video kicking and injuring a female protestor. The video clip went viral on the internet and sparked nationwide anger, as did live bullets fired at WADDANI politicians which injured dozens of people. The public also decried the unlawful arrest of 14 political prisoners who were taken to Mandera maximum security centre located in a remote village between Hargeisa and Berbera.

Subsequently a voluntary council of traditional, business, and religious leaders began to mediate in an effort to prevent the situation from escalating and urged the general public to avoid violence. This was expected because most disputes in Somaliland are known to be resolved through the intervention of clans. When clan-based mediation failed, the two speakers of the parliament tried to continue the process of mediation but later signalled that they failed to get the consent of the office of the president.

<sup>2</sup> According to elections LAW the seven member commission is to be appointed by the stakeholders with the opposition parties given two slots. In spite of the Guurti nominating two of them, it is believed the presidency maintains a high degree of influence.

<sup>3</sup> ISIR prepared timelines of sequenced events capturing the two years political impasse <https://isirthinktank.com/category/publications/timelines/>

The recent political turmoil and ensuing security incidents and provocations like mass arrests of political leaders and the opposition's threats to engage in violence means that the negotiations led by the traditional elders could become counterproductive as both sides seem to have taken a firm stand against the other.

### **3. Factors Contributing to the Current State of Affairs**

#### **A. Downward Trend of Democratization Vis-a-vis Sustained Electoral Crisis: The Abandonment of the Rule of Law and Accountability**

The most notable contributor to Somaliland's state building was the maintenance of stability through elections and peaceful transfer of power. Term extensions have become the new norm whereby in every election cycle, the country's peace and security are stretched to breaking point as result. Evidently, no election has ever happened without election timelines disputes in the form of extensions through the Guurti. In 2009, Somaliland went into election crises after the UDUB party (then the incumbent president's party) got term extensions on two different occasions.

**Efforts to institutionalize elections and to make it free from political influence failed to progress.**

So far, no one, including the opposition parties, questions the importance of redistributing the near absolute power held by the presidency. A nature of autocracy and back peddling to the past military regime practices can be observed.

✓ **Human rights violations are becoming normal occurrences.** The political stand-off between the ruling and the opposition parties has uncovered the state's vulnerability to a return to the state-sponsored violence. In June 2022, the state reportedly engaged police and non-uniformed security elements to target members of the opposition and critics of the government. It also deployed unproportional force to crackdown 9th June peaceful public protests that were televised, endangering the lives of the main opposition leaders and leading to the detention of many members of the opposition and media personnel. The state and non-state human rights bodies later confirmed that there was rampant torture against the political detainees including beatings by the police to the point where a detainee lost a testicle.

✓ Today, Somaliland has political detainees in its prisons and for the first time since the 1980s, use of torture by the security forces is reported and confirmed by the government's own human rights commission.

✓ The August 11, 2022, protests equally resulted in continued violence that led to the loss of six lives at the hands of security forces. There has been increased arbitrary arrests and detention of opposition party members and traditional leaders before, during and after the demonstrations, driven by political differences.

#### **B. Dysfunctional public institutions: Absence of Accountable and independent institutions**

✓ The root cause of this is the failure to attain “strong formal institutions” to independently serve and hold political leaders to account. Two years ago, a dispute over the qualification of election members appointed by the president arose. The president was accused of appointing members from his ruling KULMIYE party to serve as members of the National Election Commission (NEC). He was also accused of appointing a staff member from his office as the NEC director general. Again, the president pressured all NEC members to resign after they tried to conduct an internal reshuffle back in April.

✓ The court mandated to rule on constitutional disputes started to hear a case filed by members of the parliament aligned with the president’s party. However, the court overstepped its jurisprudence and took on a legislative role, ruling on election-related matters in favour of the president. The court judgment, instead of bridging the dispute, ended up polarizing the situation further.

✓ The House of Guurti, once a promising initiative to bridge the gap between the traditional and modern forms of governance, has been helpful in bridging such gaps, but it has lost its authority owing to their prolonged term extensions since 1996. The house was effective in addressing clan conflicts and political tensions in its first decade of operation. Currently, most of the influential members have since passed away and been replaced by unpopular heirs, and the body’s mandate has already expired but it is still used by the executive as a bargaining chip for extending unelected terms.

#### **4. Latest development:**

✓ Opposition parties staged nationwide protests on August 11, 2022. The opposition parties from all the regions of Somaliland carried out mass demonstrations in six towns. In response, the government deployed maximum security personnel in the streets of major towns in order to disperse the crowds using rubber bullets, teargas and even live bullet ammunition, resulting in the death of seven protestors and injury of dozens of others wounded across the country. During the protests, the government disabled all the internet services across the country in an attempt to cover up its actions.

✓ Soon after the internet blackout was lifted, citizens uploaded videos and images which were widely shared.

The most graphic and concerning image showed a group of young plain-clothes officers armed with handguns driving a Toyota Land Cruiser, leaving behind the body of a young, unarmed teenager in one of the city's residential neighbourhoods. The government also arrested protesting youth in their hundreds and continued targeted arrests of pro-opposition figures even weeks after the street protests ended. The most notable detainee is a widely respected Garhajis clan leader called Suldan Ahmed Adda Gude who was taken to prison without any arrest warrants.

✓ As the country still faces political unrest, there was another security incident on August 24, 2022 in Erigavo where a man in his thirties who was a known critic of the Sanaag region governor was wounded and left for dead by the security staff of the governor. Again, this incident sparked a standoff between groups of angry protesters and the police. It is confirmed that two persons were wounded as a result of the violent demonstrations in Erigavo.

✓ Local Initiatives Exhausted? In the course of the standoff, there were a number of local initiatives intended to break the deadlock and facilitate understanding between the opposition parties and the incumbent president.

The first initiative involved a well-known former minister during the Igal, Rayale and Silanyo administrations, Mr Ali Warancade. The Warancade initiative, though not significant, succeeded in bringing the two opposing forces into a meeting. Back then, the main agenda was to resolve the disagreement around the issue of Marking Somaliland National day ( 18 May celebrations) where the opposition parties decided to hold parallel ceremonies and boycott the main ceremony while the government and its police forces issued letters of warning against holding parallel events. On the night before 18th May, the two sides agreed not to use force but also not to hold any event during the day hence the opposition parties conducted their celebrations during the night. There were reported clashes of opposing groups, in the Kheyria square in the city centre between youths supporting the government and those supporting the opposition parties, where the government of Somaliland installed a statue of Bomber aircrafts ( resembling a Russian made MIG-16). This shows the extent of the polarization in the society. So, while short lived, the Warancade initiative achieved the minimum goal of preventing violent clashes between the opposition parties and the government.

✓ The second attempt to break the deadlock followed the June 9 WADANI/UCID protests where the government cracked down on protesters.

This time, the mediation was led by a 30-member group of traditional elders, mainly self-appointed, and representing all the major clans of Somaliland. In response, the opposition called for a “halt” to their plan. The elders also met with the president who agreed to release political prisoners arrested during the demonstrations. The 30-member group of clan elders, through shuttle diplomacy, finally got the two sides into a face-to-face meeting. However, the outcome fell short of the public’s expectations, as the leaders were unable to agree on an election framework.

✓ The third formal mediation followed the nationwide protests of August 11. This time, the mediation team consisted of six members drawn from the business community. Unlike in the past rounds, the mediation committee from the business community first sought the cooperation of both camps. They also met with different stakeholders including representatives from the newly formed political organizations. On August 25, the business leaders came up with two point recommendations. In trying to address and resolve the question of sequencing of elections, the business leaders called for joint presidential and political parties elections, meaning that both elections could be held at the same time. They also recommended for the parliament to amend gaps within the framework of existing legislations. While the two opposition parties have welcomed the mediation, the ruling party refuted the two-point recommendations and called for the interpretation of the high court.

✓ **Potential Risk of National and Regional Instability:** Clan configurations In view of the current KULMIYE party’s rise to power through clan alliances and the government’s strong link to the clan base, other political parties on started full-scale campaigning to cement clan support and mobilize traditional leaders to negotiate with their counterparts from various clans. The two opposition parties have also protested against Bihi’s proposed plan to hold direct party elections before the scheduled November 13 presidential elections in the public discourse. Although Somaliland holds elections to embrace democracy, it is the clan structure and relationships that shapes the country’s politics.

✓ In recent months, the opposition parties have mobilized clan elders and youth groups, as well as former SNM fighters mainly from the Garhajis sub clan of Issaq across the country. This is in recognition that the ruling KULMIYE alliance is locally labelled the “Jeegaan or the Rainbow” which symbolizes the two clan leaders shaking hands prior to the 2017 elections, which significantly swayed the election results.

✓ The Garhajis have extensively mobilized resources for the past five years in a bid to win the presidency. They do this through plotting alliances with the clans to gain their support during the upcoming November elections. Their new slogan, “ it’s our turn ”, has now become public and even been echoed by political leaders.

Since it is not discreet anymore and has become popular with the public, and especially those from the Garjahis block and their allies, it can also undermine the relative peace and stability that Somaliland sustained over the past three decades.

✓ In recent months, we have received reports of clans organizing to arm themselves, with the Garhajis particularly taking specific measures that include smuggling weapons into major cities including Hargeisa and Burao. One clan militia commander who was interviewed by a local Somali Speaking TV station while in the mountainous region between Burao and Berbera claimed to have assembled about 800 armed men. This kind of mobilization did not go unnoticed by the various clans and the government of Somaliland who could further escalate the political tensions into armed standoffs. With the presence of high numbers of mainly unemployed youths who are vulnerable to involvement in violence, this presents a real cause for concern.

Additionally, according to local observers we have talked to but who requested to remain anonymous, there are systematic factions within the army who may organize as cells within the armed forces if the situation gets out of hand.

✓ **Renewed Regional Tensions : Could Radical Groups fill the void?**  
The Horn of Africa region,

known for its volatility and susceptibility to radical extremist groups such as Al-Shabaab, faces renewed security threats as a result of broader regional instability in Ethiopia, Sudan and Somalia, all of whom are facing internal power struggles. In addition to the security, economic and political driven instability, the region continues to be challenged by disruptions in global food supply chain, spiked oil prices, and climate change impact, exacerbating already critical humanitarian situations.

✓ There are reports of Al Shabaab and ISIS taking positions in the mountainous regions of Galgala Area and spreading towards the Eastern Sanaag towns. In recent months, the Alshabaab affiliate media reported of the group's involvement in a drought response in three Sanaag Region towns. Meanwhile, the July attack by Alshabaab to the Somali region of Ethiopia marked a new chapter in the insurgent group's tactics. Many analysts believe that their motive was to strengthen and add more weight to some insurgent groups within the Ethiopian hinterland, though intelligence reports confirmed that Alshabab failed to access the area after facing fierce resistance from the Somali regional forces.

✓ As Ethiopia and Sudan are engaged in armed clashes due to border disputes, both countries also face domestic challenges.



The Ethiopian federal government continues to face threats from armed northern based TPLF as well as the OLF-SHENA Armed groups in the Oromia region in addition to the numerous hostilities between other nationalities and ethnicities like the Somali-Afar or the Amhara-benishangul.

✓ Sudan's major security threats could come from disagreements between the civilian professional associations and the ruling army council as they disagree on transition - to - civilian rules. For Somalia, the violent radical group of Alshabaab continues to carry out indiscriminate attacks and other forms of violence against civilians and top government officials. The weakened regional and national governments and the increase in armed groups may allow Alshabaab to effectively execute its targeted attacks more easily. For that reason, the presence of nonstate terrorist actors and the pending political crisis in Somaliland could reinforce instability as it poses immediate threats to the peace and security of the entire region.

## Recommendations

### Time for outside intervention

✓ According to political experts and analysts, the presidential elections may not be held on time, and the sitting president may renew/extend his term through the Guurti. This may lead to the opposition parties rejecting the legitimacy of a unilateral term extension or even calling for national dialogue or clan conferences. Notably, in 2012 and 2017, post-election violence was observed following local council elections and then in after the presidential election.

✓ The lesson learned is that there are low chances for a local led initiative. This time the stakes are high, hence the need for decisive and timely external interventions. The expiring mandate of the president as well as the licenses for political parties in November and December respectively could spark renewed disputes.

✓ The involvement of foreign intervention in Somaliland election related disputes is not new. In fact, this was the case since 2009 where the international community at the time led by the British government developed a six-point agreement leading to the 2010 elections. Similarly, in the lead up to the 2021 joint parliamentary and local council elections, the European Union efforts under the ambassador Nichal Berlanga succeeded in brokering a deal to hold elections and form an electoral body.

✓ IGAD regional member states could be engaged for their experience in defusing tensions. IGAD is better positioned and has mechanisms to use as leverage. It played a crucial role during the Puntland-Somaliland clashes in 2018. The international democratization stakeholders and partners also have leverage since they have been involved in the process all along and could support the regional bodies.