

RESEARCH PAPER



Mid-term, Corruption and
International Engagement
*xaa iigu jira? (what's in it for me?)*¹

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PeaceRep Somalia research aims to deepen the understanding of the country's fragmented predicament, ten years after the establishment of the Federal government and in light of the continued pervasiveness of conflict and political instability, both domestically and regionally. Our research themes include: sub-national governance through checkpoints; justice and security in Somalia; building on the Galkayo 'local' agreement; emergent conflict and peace dynamics across the Somali regions (Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya). The programme will continue to analyse and engage stakeholders around peacebuilding processes and in relation to events that unfold in real time.

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Executive Summary

Ten years into the establishment of Somalia's Federal arrangement, this memo reflects on both structural constraints and patterns in the country's political predicament, as well as on more immediate issues at the mid-term point in the current election cycle. Four points are highlighted in relation to the former:

- ▶ Firstly, Somalia's political system remains essentially the same under the current regime as it has been under its previous cycles, albeit with some changes in character and emphasis. That is, the logic of a transactional politics, including the use of targeted violence and/or material incentives determines political survival at the expense of longer-term institution building.
- ▶ Secondly, systemic and pervasive corruption is a feature of the Somali environment and one that is enabled by the nature of international engagement; recent attention on the humanitarian sector in this regard is important but is largely fiddling at the margins in comparison to corruption in the security and development areas (particularly through logistics contracting).
- ▶ Thirdly, the tensions between different imperatives in international engagement in Somalia, between security, migration control, humanitarian/development/statebuilding need acknowledging and interrogating as factors influencing effective programming.
- ▶ Fourthly, the deepening political volatility across the Red Sea arena (the Gulf and the Horn of Africa) serves the interests of competing domestic elites who can turn to different patrons for financial or security-related support.

Turning to more immediate issues, at the mid-term point in the current Presidential cycle, the public and international goodwill that accompanied Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud's (HSM) election and initial focus on the offensive against Al Shabaab has been steadily undermined by the offensive's lack of success and a pervasive return of clannism, corruption and nepotism; these characteristics are likely to continue and intensify as all elites turn their attention to controlling and manipulating forthcoming elections.

The offensive against Al Shabaab, a priority for much of the first half of HSM's term, has stalled and been reversed in many areas. Some early restrictions on Al Shabaab financing were reversed after several months, reducing the administration's credibility with the business sector. Territorial gains have been most evident in Hiraan region, but only include territory of the Hawadle clan (east of the Shabelle river), indicating the salience of clan dynamics in the offensive. This has led to further turmoil within Hirshabelle state, including an arms race as clans look to protect themselves in this increasingly militarised environment. The Black Lion offensive, a much talked about regional security initiative, did not materialise and Southwest State and Jubbaland were never seriously engaged in the offensive.

Relations with Ethiopia, the most influential and interventionist actor in Somalia, have been problematic from the outset of HSM's Presidency, reflecting in part the supportive role that Ethiopia had provided to ex-President, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmajo'. This underlying tension has worsened as a result of the January 2024 Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU. These dynamics however reflect wider volatility within the Red Sea arena, which is on the one hand destabilising, especially for Somaliland-Somalia and Somalia-Ethiopia relations, but from which competing elites can and are profiting in order to pursue their own political projects.

The constitutional review process, while necessary, was widely considered as rushed and top-down, with the Upper and Lower Houses of Parliament being 'incentivised' to pass the first four amendments and where Parliament has been progressively co-opted by successive leadership regimes. The fall-out from the flawed constitutional review process has fuelled Puntland President, Said Abdullahi Deni's position, as the leader of the opposition (to HSM), as well as set a precedent for further constitutional amendments at the FMS level where, for example, Jubbaland President, Ahmed Mohamed Islam 'Madobe' is looking to extend his term. Finally, considering these factors, the planned ATMIS drawdown and the learning from comparable contexts requires urgent rethinking on international engagement in Somalia; the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) reporting provides one sobering point of comparison.

Introduction

This memo provides reflections on the current moment in Somalia's political and political economy trajectory, half-way through the current presidential term. It also offers an opportunity to reflect on some of the underlying trends in Somalia's approximately ten-year period as an internationally recognised state. The memo draws upon work undertaken under the LSE Conflict Research Programme (CRP) and its successor, PeaceRep.

As well as providing analysis on the political dynamics taking place in Somalia, the memo draws attention to the utility of the political marketplace as a framework for understanding these dynamics, including through its link with corruption and contracting issues, which have gained considerable attention in the country over the last 12 months, and which capture the interplay of the national with the international.²

a) Farmajo to HSM – Badbaado Qaran

It is useful to frame HSM's period in office in part as a function of and reaction to the end of ex-President Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo's' regime. The initial threat of Farmajo's two-year extension (later rescinded) led to a significant mobilisation of opposition elements in Mogadishu, including by ex-Presidents HSM and Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. The rallying call for this movement was '*Badbaado Qaran*' – National Salvation. The opposition played up the possibility of civil war and frequently evoked the expression 'we are returning to 1991'. In evoking *Badbaado Qaran*, the opposition mobilised their respective clan constituencies including their armed elements, contributing to splits in the Somali National Army (SNA). At the end of Farmajo's term the authors of this memo argued that '*This threat [civil war] is frequently evoked by political entrepreneurs for their own personal agendas, to scare the international community into backing down over conditionalities or favouring their interests*'.³ The clan-based mobilisation – *macawisley* – against Al Shabaab is a continuation of the spirit of *Badbaado Qaran* and has always been highly problematic as it reinforces a militarised clannism of the 1990s, and is markedly antagonistic to a spirit of inclusivity, reconciliation and nationalism.⁴

An additional feature of the HSM administration is its reaction to Ethiopia's previous support for Farmajo; the ex-President's authoritarian turn had been strengthened, politically and militarily, by his alliance with PM Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia and President Isais Afwerki of Eritrea. Although this tripartite alliance had weakened prior to HSM's election, the inability of HSM to overcome this tension and develop at least cordial relations has been evident from the beginning of his term and worsened as a result of the Ethiopia-Somaliland MoU. It continues to play out as opposition leaders at the FMS level look to court Ethiopian support ahead of the sub-national elections.

Another useful comparison between the two Presidential cycles lies in the logistics contracting economy. In a penetrating analysis Claire Elder argues that one of Farmajo's strategies was to break up the logistics contractors/cartels who benefit from the extremely large contracts available through the UN and the security sector, and who he (Farmajo) accused of funding the opposition at the time. These contracts are crucial in lubricating politics and providing funds to the political budgets of political entrepreneurs.⁵ Elder, writing in mid-2022, concluded that,

*'scholars and observers should not be quick to see President Hassan Sheik's return to power in May 2022 as starting a new era of reconciliation. While he may deal more pragmatically towards powerbrokers in order to address urgent security and political concerns (including around federalism), these actions will not build democracy nor eliminate the advanced protection economy that has for decades contributed to state failure. Poor international confidence in the Somali state, a pronounced terrorist threat, and a new era of geoeconomics tied to port development and large infrastructure projects will ensure the centrality of the logistics economy to the country's political turmoil and violence, including virulent decentralization and competitive clannism.'*⁶

The above factors and HSM's criticisms of Farmajo and the direction Somalia was taking under his leadership, we argue, led in part to his dash to demonstrate his differences with the previous regime.

The Offensive against Al Shabaab

The offensive against Al Shabaab (AS), which began in May 2020, was the first priority of the new Government and significant attention has been focused on this initiative to date. Initially there was significant support in the Somali public and in international circles at what appeared to be a major effort to eliminate or degrade the group. The offensive was however opportunistic, taking advantage of heightened tensions between particular clans, notably the Hawadle and AS, in Hiraan region, and lacked an overarching strategy, although this may have developed to some extent later as other actors such as the US and Turkey joined the conflict.⁷

The offensive had three main themes: ideological; financial; military. The ideological element, aimed at countering AS's conservative Islamist leaning, saw little development. On the financial side, some initial successes were made in limiting AS's taxation in Mogadishu including at Mogadishu port. A number of AS-connected accounts were also targeted and frozen. These gains (how significant they were is not clear) were short-lived however and reversed after approximately six months, with AS having resumed its taxation, including reclaiming some lost revenue. This has discredited the government in the eyes of many businesses that cooperated with it, putting themselves in grave danger. Many businesspeople have moved to Nairobi from Mogadishu as a result.⁸

Militarily, there have been both gains and losses and some reconfiguration of territory, as we highlight for the Hawadle populated eastern Hiraan region. Ultimately, the offensive has stalled and has not moved beyond parts of Hirshabelle and Galmudug. The Black Lion offensive, mooted as a regional security alliance, did not materialize; it is not clear why, but contributory factors include a lack of financing (with the UAE considered the most likely financier), the break-out of war in Sudan, distracting Ethiopia and Kenya and the internal turmoil within Ethiopia itself.⁹

One of the problematic aspects of the 'macawisley' project was to separate some of the rank and file of the Somalia National Army (SNA) into clan groups "to encourage" clan militia to fight Al Shabaab. In addition, many of the Somali troops trained in and brought back from Eritrea have largely melted away as they were suspected of being allied to Farmajo; they are reported to have either joined FMS *darwiish* – regional paramilitary forces – or melted into the civilian population.¹⁰ Ironically the government has sent new recruits to Eritrea to go through the same training programme.

This reflects structural features of the Somali security arena, with its array of different patrons and clients.¹¹ The Turkish trained forces have also suffered neglect and deliberate targeting by AS which has caused many of them to perish while many more have left the force. The UAE led training programme was to train, equip and support 10,000 lightly trained soldiers but, to date, their presence can only be felt in Mogadishu, although some have been deployed in Hirshabelle and Galmudug.

The focus of the offensive, on Hirshabelle and Galmudug, two Hawiye dominated regions, has added to the feeling in many parts of the country that HSM's government is Hawiye-centric and that the offensive's intention was only to liberate the Hawiye regions in order to enable investment to take place.¹² While this may or may not be the intention, little has been done to negate this perception.

In east Galmudug, the President's own sub-clan, the Abgal-Wacaysley, refused to join the government instead swearing allegiance to AS, publicly handing over several well-armed 'technicals'. This demonstrated to neighboring clans that the offensive was not serious, and they should not risk losses of money and men. In north Galmudug, the offensive has been more successful, but inter-clan conflict and mistrust quickly negated many of the gains made earlier. In Galkayo, the historical peace agreement, signed in 2017, and subsequent inter-clan agreements, have been threatened by the underlying insecurity and lack of attention to good governance.¹³

The offensive has also led to an arms race between clans, sub-clans and families in areas affected by conflict as the arming of some clans is being exploited by some groups to assert or expand their positions and territory, resulting in further arming in response, and conflict at local levels; land grabs are increasing and local conflicts have multiplied in some areas, including northern and southern areas of Hiraan region.

In a recent assessment, two years after the start of the offensive, where he offers a comparison between AS and the SNA, Paul Williams concludes that *'overall, however, al-Shabaab would be slightly militarily stronger because of its significant advantages across the non-material dimensions related to force employment, cohesion, and psychological operations, as well as the sustainability of its forces.'*¹⁴

The government privately accepts the failures of the offensive but argues (or hopes) that the lifting of the arms embargo will strengthen their hand and/or the ATMIS drawdown will lead to the inheritance of heavier weapons, in an environment where many foreign actors still control much of the security apparatus. This appears to be wishful thinking.

Regional Relations

As indicated above, HSM's relationship with PM Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia has been strained from the outset, reflecting Ethiopia's support for the Farmajo administration. This perhaps explains the limited attempts by HSM to meet Abiy, a strategic miscalculation given the historical importance of Ethiopia to Somalia's affairs. That said, Ethiopia's internal turmoil and erratic leadership will also have affected relations. The unexpected signing of the MoU between Somaliland and Ethiopia in January 2024, which purports to see Ethiopia recognizing the self-declared republic of Somaliland in exchange for access to the sea for itself, has dramatically worsened this relationship. The MoU was made shortly after President Musa Bixi Abdi of Somaliland and HSM had engaged in conciliatory talks, facilitated by President Ismail Omar Guelle of Djibouti. The origins and dynamics around the MoU have been well documented elsewhere.¹⁵

The MoU has however generated significant backlash from many quarters in Somaliland, particularly clan groups to the east and west of the Berbera Corridor, who have felt increasingly marginalized from the benefits of the Corridor and its associated investments for some time. The MoU stoked a growing resentment amongst Somalis more generally (particularly in the diaspora), including by the FGS and AS, where a pan-Somali sentiment remains strong amongst many people and where Ethiopia is easily evoked as an aggressive and interventionist state. HSM has maintained a hardline with Ethiopia as a result, as this plays well with the Somali public. It has arguably made conflict more likely in Sool and Sanaag and may contribute to further instability in the Isaaq heartlands of Somaliland.¹⁶

One of the repercussions of the MoU has been a naval agreement signed between Somalia and Turkey, which has reportedly upset the UAE and further feeds into the problematic and often divisive role of the Gulf actors in Somalia (and the Horn). The UAE appears to be the most disruptive actor in this regard¹⁷, with Turkey, in comparison, not playing into the FGS-FMS tensions that others do. The countries of the Horn, including Somalia, are particularly vulnerable to the wider geopolitical dynamics playing out across the Red Sea arena, as described by Alex de Waal in his essay entitled 'BRICS Plus versus Pax Americana'.¹⁸ In a very recent development illustrating this volatility, the UAE abruptly stopped salary payments to the Somali National Army, which HSM was able to then secure from Qatar.

Unlike with Ethiopia, HSM has seen an improvement in relations with Eritrea, who are taking on more military trainees. Relations with Egypt have also improved. However, these various and shifting relations can be seen as short-term and tactical, with Somalia the subaltern actor but which perpetuate the permanent instability of the political marketplace, where local elites instrumentalise external tensions to pursue their own personal and group-related interests.

One of the newer developments under HSM has seen a significant embracing of East African neighbors and near-neighbors, through its joining of the East African Community (EAC) and marking a shift from the previous antagonistic relations between Somalia and Kenya, under ex-President Farmajo. This is a specific shift initiated by HSM away from the previous and short-lived alliance with Ethiopia and Eritrea, which reflects HSMs personal business background and utilization of the business community which Farmajo did not – and was not interested to - develop. Tanzania's President, Samia Suluhu Hassan, has turned out to be a key ally for Somalia, pushing hard for Somalia's¹⁹ entry into the EAC, reflecting perhaps a greater affinity with Somalis as well as an interest in promoting business connections.

Constitutional Review

Somalia's constitution was due to have been finalised by 2016, but successive governments have failed to pursue this. HSM made this one of his election commitments. The new constitutional review process began with amendments to four out of fourteen chapters initially including measures to strengthen the role of the President, abolish the Prime Minister post (replacing it with a Vice-President) and introducing universal suffrage (OPOV – one-person-one-vote), thereby replacing the clan-based indirect voting system used to date. Political bargaining eventually led to the retention of the Prime Minister's position but authority over their appointment and dismissal to be taken from the Parliament and given to the President.

The amendment process was considered rushed and top-down, involving little consultation with FMS.²⁰ Furthermore, its passing by Federal MPs is associated by many with financial 'incentives' or rewards. In a forthcoming brief we argue that whether or not financial incentives have been provided, successive ruling regimes have learned to co-opt Parliament in different ways, limiting options for MPs to resist new legislation.

The amendments concentrate power in the executive undermining the spirit and meaning of federalism and inclusiveness, around which there has been little progress. They are further perceived as an attempt to centralise power within Hawiye circles and interests.

The support for OPOV can be viewed as providing lip service to a voting system that is unlikely to be implementable and has been discussed at various points over the years with little meaningful progress. It is worth noting that HSM previously opposed the OPOV system, when it was being promoted by ex-President Farmajo, although that effort was arguably a much more last-minute initiative.

There is considerable international input into the constitutional review process but, we suggest, there are few amongst the political class that are seriously interested in constitutional or electoral reform, unless it serves their short-term interests.

FGS-FMS Relations

Puntland

Puntland's President, Said Abdullahi Deni, has never recovered from losing the FGS presidential election, feeling he was cheated. He is targeting the next Federal election, and the flawed constitutional review process has provided an opportunity to strongly oppose HSM. President Deni is considered one of the few political leaders with sufficient resources and autonomy (reflecting also Puntland's longstanding political and economic autonomous position in Somalia) to openly oppose HSM. He is strongly motivated to do so and position himself as the main opposition figure to rally around. He is also courting Ethiopia in order to garner support given the tensions between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu. Deni's personal ambitions are the key driver in these dynamics.

President Deni was able to win another five-year term earlier this year by using money to buy off opposition and make promises of positions in the Federal government (to the MPs who voted him in) if/when he becomes Somalia's President. This victory was quite the success for Deni given the rotational norm within the Mijerteen-Mohamoud Saleban, which has informed previous elections. While President Madobe of Jubbaland supported Deni's campaign for the last Federal Presidency, they have since fallen out as Madobe did not back Deni for the Prime Minister's position, as this was not part of their initial agreement. Deni may rejoin the NCC (National Consultative Council) if put under enough pressure by the international community (that pressure is unlikely to be strong enough from within Somalia itself) and if he has assurances that HSM will not control FMS elections or Presidential elections, an unlikely event.

Jubbaland

The competing clan-based powers in Jubbaland are from the Ogaden and the Marehan, where Madobe, the incumbent President, who is Ogaden, has been the only leader since the formation of this FMS. He was able to win the last election, in 2020, due to his control of the election committee and the support of Kenya.²¹ Today, opposition to Madobe is arguably stronger from within the Ogaden clan than from the Marehan, as many Ogaden elites have been disappointed in the lack of political and economic progress within Jubbaland. However, this internal opposition can be weakened if attacks on Madobe, particularly from Marehan elements, serve to rally the Ogaden around the President (as happened under Farmajo, whose actions fed Marehan-Ogaden clan competition and antagonism).²²

Madobe has been noticeably quiet for the last year or two and can be assumed to be carefully watching events unfold (ill health may also have contributed to his relative silence). However, HSM has now provided him with the blueprint to stand again, through a constitutional amendment at the FMS level; the flawed constitutional review at the federal level providing the precedent. An amendment may enable Madobe to be re-elected, for which he could choose two years to align with the Federal elections or five, as Deni has done. Madobe is thought to be providing discrete guidance to the other FMS concerning election processes, which he has successfully manipulated previously.

Hirshabelle

The leadership of Hirshabelle is contested between the Abgal and the Hawadle, although both need the support of other clans to gain votes in an election.²³ As the President of Hirshabelle, Ali Abdullahi Hussein 'Gudlawe', is associated with the Farmajo's regime, HSM is minded to replace him with a more trusted figure in the forthcoming elections; this would be a repeat of exactly the politics that HSM previously accused Farmajo of playing, namely installing compliant FMS leaders.²⁴ The current President of Hirshabelle is however looking to remain in power, as he has been the Johar-based strongman²⁵ for many years and has a considerable militia to back him. It may be difficult to remove Gudlawe through the usual election process however, given the unpopularity of the Hawadle in Hirshabelle. HSM may resort to and have more success through a significant financial pay-off.

Hirshabelle, which was widely considered the most fragile and volatile of the new FMS, has disintegrated further since the beginning of the offensive against AS, eventually leading to Hiraan region claiming autonomy. While the Hawadle came together to fight AS, they have since splintered with the key fracture being the dominance of the Ali Macawayne vis-à-vis other Hawadle sub-clans. The Hawadle have conflicts in the south of Hirshabelle with the Abgal as well as in the north, with other smaller clans in the border areas with Ethiopia. The new head of NISA, Abdullahi Mohamed Ali 'Sanbaloshe', is Hawadle, from the Ali Macawayne, and has been brought in to try and deal with this fractured state. Whether he can or not is much more questionable given the level of fractures within Hirshabelle.

Southwest

President Abdiaziz Hassan Mohamed 'Laftagaren' of SWS is in post at the mercy of the Ethiopians, who were involved in enabling his election and whose forces provide security guarantees in Baidoa (through Ethiopia National Defence Forces and Ethiopian forces within ATMIS), and where Ethiopia has long been an important ally of populations in Bay and Bakool.²⁶ Laftagaren reportedly visits Ethiopia on a regular basis, particularly when under pressure from the FGS.

Although the relationship between Laftagareen and HSM is not good, HSM does not have a locally agreed choice that he trusts or who could be an alternative and compliant leader figure. One of the main potential figures could be Senator Hussein Sheikh, who was his former Director General at the State House and the Vice-Chair of HSM's party. However, Hussein Sheikh faces opposition elements from the political leadership of his own clan, the Hadame, who are the dominant group currently within the SWS.

Galmudug

In many ways, incumbent President Ahmed Abdi Karie 'Qoor Qoor' has had a positive impact in Galmudug, centralising tax revenues and gathering undisciplined militia and putting them in the SNA, as well as managing to maintain working relations with both the Presidents of Puntland and of the Federal government, while they oppose each other. While a figure from Farmajo's time, it is not yet clear who the competing candidates will be at election time.²⁷

Corruption, Nepotism and Contracting

This section brings together three areas of corruption to highlight its pervasiveness and the implications for statebuilding that, we suggest, are under-appreciated and resonant of the SIGAR commentary on Afghanistan.²⁸ Firstly, corruption and nepotism have been a major and somewhat blatant characteristic of HSM's Presidency, as was the case during his first term. Secondly, corruption has (re-)emerged as a serious problem within the humanitarian sector in Somalia over the last 12 months, including as reported by our programme.²⁹ Thirdly, we draw upon a recent article in the prominent journal, *African Affairs*, by Claire Elder³⁰ who argues that logistics contracting has been a core element in the undermining of a legitimate, centralised authority in Somalia.³¹ Her article is based on considerable and relatively recent fieldwork and interviews. Contractors we have spoken to report the large amounts of money being offered or paid to gain contracts and the important role played by these contractors in providing political budgets to political figures. A recent report for PeaceRep on Nigeria, provides a relevant comparative perspective for Somalia, in relation to corruption, political processes and the political marketplace, work we intend to extend to Somalia.³²

While the humanitarian sector has been under pressure as a result of corruption issues, other sectors have not seen the same level of public scrutiny, but involve far larger sums of money and, according to well-informed analysts, have far less oversight and accountability. Logistics contracts for example, including those controlled by UNSOS, are associated with strong lobbies in Parliament. Under ex-President, Farmajo, these influences were connected to the opposition and therefore targeted by his regime. Budgets identified by Elder are measurable in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Access to these contracts takes place through complex and opaque relationships between government and business actors, and concern business contractors to support the various logistics services of the international community, particularly security and service related. Haber Gedir and Abgal-related business groups dominate these contracts according to Elder and our sources. In her analysis, Elder concludes that,

'Central to breaking this cycle of logistics dominance and state failure will not be economic development, procurement reform efforts, or the withholding or withdrawing of aid or economic sanctions, but efforts to promote donor and elite accountability and horizontal monitoring.'

In the logistics economy, foreign donors must be held accountable for decades of policy trade-offs and quick wins that have worsened long-term governance outcomes. This will require resolving massive spending in logistics, accompanied by marginal oversight, pervasive tender irregularities, and the instrumentalization of these relationships.

Resolving these dynamics are highly sensitive and problematic and require careful assessment for their potential to cause further instability.

It is a similar story in security contracting, where private security companies (PMSCs) and local and diasporic elites exploit financial opportunities in the high-risk environment in Somalia.³³ Norman describes a system where inflated perceptions of risk and manageable insecurity are perpetuated for financial and reputational gain. Several Somali MPs have reportedly been involved with local security companies that benefit from partnerships with international PMSCs. In one instance, the Somali Minister for Internal Security was a shareholder in an influential international PMSC, posing a clear conflict of interest in the context of rebuilding Somali state security. PMSCs' dependence on 'local partners', often influential Somali diaspora with connections to the government, to navigate Mogadishu's security landscape, creates a system where contracts and access are potentially based on personal relationships and political influence rather than merit or transparent bidding processes.³⁴ This also exacerbates the issue of widespread 'moonlighting,' where individuals simultaneously work for private security firms and public security forces.

The absence of effective regulatory oversight to assess security risks allows political-security entrepreneurs to inflate risk perceptions, creating a need for their services. Cumulatively, these practices undermine the Somali state's efforts to rebuild its security institutions and point to a broader system of corruption within and around Mogadishu's green zone, where financial interests and exploitation of a volatile security environment intertwine within the dynamics of the political marketplace.

The growing influence of security professionals and security firms in humanitarian aid work, as we raise in our previous PeaceRep report on the humanitarian sector (in Somalia and Afghanistan), also raises questions around the prioritisation of commercial interests over humanitarian ones and may contribute to an environment more susceptible to corruption.³⁵ In effect, under the rubric of security, many of the actors and interests of the international system have been co-opted into the logic and structures of Somalia's political marketplace.

Multilateral Relations

A recent political development in Somalia is a letter from Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmed Moallim Fiqi, requesting UNSOM to withdraw from Somalia. There are different interpretations as to the rationale for this development. On the one hand, the UNSOM office was established to support the emergent federal government, particularly in relation to the security threat of Al Shabaab, but also more broadly as a mechanism to support a statebuilding programme. While the UN is considered by many as at a low point in its credibility within Somalia (and elsewhere), the government cannot reasonably claim this support is no longer required, whether in relation to public support, internal coherence, territorial control or institutional capacity, to justify removing UNSOM. A prominent political figure, Fahad Yassin, has publicly questioned this move by the Government, suggesting it should reverse this position, where he points out an UNSOM presence acts as a balance against election fixing and term extension by the incumbents. We would support that sentiment (acknowledging that Yassin may also be motivated by self-interest). When it comes to elections within the Federal system, the Somali public have no mechanism for influencing the process or outcome and therefore the international community, through the UN (for all its current limitations), can play an important role in terms of monitoring and calling out abuses of power and process. A further rationale for the push on UNSOM, suggested to the authors, is to increase the budget of UNSOS which already has a very large budget with limited accountability.

Conclusions

There is considerable disquiet in both Somali and international circles as to the political and security trajectory that has evolved in Somalia over the last two to three years, which can easily be extended to the life of the federal government as a whole. The all too predictable relief at the end of one election cycle and elevated hope for the next has become almost comical, were it not that the repercussions were so serious. Now ten years into the life cycle of the federal arrangement, some of the underlying dynamics and structural constraints have become more evident, including an ongoing political turbulence that takes place through election cycles in which money and/or violence determines electoral outcomes and that may see some change in the character of political leadership but little meaningful change to its underlying features.

Particularly worrying is the way that international engagement can and does contribute to instability and a logic of transactional politics, revealing the tensions that exist between different imperatives, be they security, migration control, humanitarian, development and/or statebuilding. We point to this through the lens of corruption, where scrutiny of the humanitarian sector has revealed many problematic dynamics, including for example, a business model that exists around displacement. While donors from the humanitarian sector appear to acknowledge these issues, including that they are recurrent, and have not been sufficiently addressed in spite of being documented over time, development and security sectors account for a much more significant share of international resources to Somalia, and where accountability and oversight remain problematic.

An alternative perspective on Somalia's political trajectory is that the Federal system and election processes have resulted in changes of leadership and no major outbreaks of conflict or civil war. One only has to look to Sudan and Ethiopia to see far worse outcomes. The relatively successful containment of Al Shabaab and migration to Somalia (and the region) might also be considered positive outcomes in some circles. However, this perspective carries many risks as unaccountable and self-serving political elites lose further credibility and Al Shabaab remains patiently waiting.

Endnotes

¹ This phrase is an everyday expression, particularly used in Mogadishu, reflecting a common question and underlying expectation.

² See: <https://peacerep.org/publication/time-for-change-the-normalization-of-corruption-and-diversion-in-the-humanitarian-sector/>

³ See: <https://africanarguments.org/2021/04/a-two-year-presidential-extension-in-somalia/>

⁴ The authors have been briefing to this effect at various points in 2023; see also: <https://peacerep.org/2024/03/21/checkpoint-dynamics-and-the-offensive-against-al-shabaab/>

⁵ Informal discussions with contractors.

⁶ See: <https://academic.oup.com/afraf/article/121/484/395/6634268>

⁷ A lack of strategy may partly be explained by circumstances, as HSM came into office just as serious fighting broke out between the Hawadle and AS, which the government felt they had to take advantage of, offering little time to develop a strategy.

⁸ The exodus of the business community and other notables began at the beginning of the offensive, however, it accelerated when it was clear that the offensive was failing on all fronts, and those who sided with the government by refusing to pay AS taxes realised they could not stay in the capital.

⁹ See: <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/operation-black-lion-challenges-that-lay-ahead-of-somalias-second-phase-of-the-offensive/>

¹⁰ Many are reported to have joined the conflict in Las Anod.

¹¹ The security arena and its characteristics are discussed in: <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110878/>

¹² The Johar Off-Stream Programme (JOSP) is one such example, a major riverine infrastructure project, in its early stages, supported by major international donors.

¹³ <https://peacerep.org/2023/10/03/galkaio-town-spate-of-revenge-killings/>

¹⁴ See: <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-somali-national-army-versus-al-shabaab-a-net-assessment/>

¹⁵ See: <https://africanarguments.org/2024/01/trade-conflict-and-fragmentation-the-horns-crisis-of-sovereignty/> ; <https://africanarguments.org/2024/02/ethiopias-quest-for-sea-access-and-the-question-of-somali-sovereignty/> ;

¹⁶ See: Steputat and Norman (forthcoming) who explore how investments in logistics and infrastructure can contribute to conflict and violence when not accompanied by sufficient social and political considerations.

¹⁷ See: <https://africanarguments.org/2024/02/how-the-uae-kept-the-sudan-war-raging/>; <https://www.pressreader.com/usa/the-guardian-usa/20240525/281887303429562>

¹⁸ <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/publication/brics-plus-versus-pax-americana-in-the-red-sea-arena/>

¹⁹ As a muslim from the Indian ocean coast.

²⁰ Khalif, A. (2024) 'Somalia constitution review generates heated debate among leaders.' The East African, 21 March. (www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/constitutional-review-generates-heat-and-light-in-somalia-4563966)

²¹ See: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/jubbaland-project-transborder-ogadeen.pdf>

²² See the LSE-CRP Synthesis Paper on Somalia: <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110878/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ While not a major political figure in Mogadishu, he has a significant militia in Johar where his influence is strong.

²⁶ Ethiopian support to the Rahanweyn Resistance Army (RRA) helped to liberate Bay and Bakool regions from the occupying forces of Aided.

²⁷ Mahad Salad, ex head of NISA is frequently mentioned but it is unclear whether he has the support of HSM.

²⁸ See: <https://www.sigar.mil/interactive-reports/corruption-in-conflict/index.html>

²⁹ See: <https://peacerep.org/publication/time-for-change-the-normalization-of-corruption-and-diversion-in-the-humanitarian-sector/>

³⁰ Elder was a regular contributor to the LSE CRP.

³¹ See: <https://academic.oup.com/afraf/article/121/484/395/6634268>

³² See: <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Understanding-Systemic-Corruption-The-Political-Role-of-Corruption-in-Weakly-Institutionalized-Political-Systems-DIGITAL.pdf>

³³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/09670106231158890>

³⁴ <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Norman-private-military-mogadishu-final.pdf>

³⁵ https://pure.diiis.dk/ws/files/17998653/security_professionals_web_revised_2103.pdf

About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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