



Fragmented Governance in Somalia: Understanding Justice and Security through Galkayo and Kismayo

Nisar Majid, Khalif Abdirahman and Marika Theros



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



Nisar Majid, Khalif Abdirahman and Marika Theros

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, Old College, The University of Edinburgh
South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566

Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005

E-mail: peacerep@ed.ac.uk

PeaceRep.org

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/>

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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.

About the authors:

Dr Nisar Majid is the research director for the PeaceRep Somalia programme at the Conflict & Civiness Research Group at LSE. He has worked in and on the Horn of Africa and the Somali territories for over 20 years, in various applied and research capacities.

Khalif Abdirahman is the PeaceRep Somalia research team's senior field researcher with the Conflict & Civiness Research Group at LSE. Khalif is also a Fellow at the Rift Valley Institute.

Marika Theros is a Policy Fellow with the Conflict & Civiness Research Group at LSE IDEAS. She is also the director of the Civic Engagement Project. She has worked extensively on Afghanistan as co-director of PeaceRep's Afghanistan Research Network. Her research focuses on political mobilization, global-local dynamics of violence and change, peacebuilding and multi-stakeholder dialogues. She previously supported the Conflict Research Programme (Somalia) and has continued her engagement with the Somalia team through PeaceRep.

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Key Findings

- ▶ This policy brief highlights justice and security dynamics in Somalia through a comparative analysis of Kismayo and Galkayo, drawing on the fragmented peace-conflict spaces identified from analysis of the PeaceRep PA-X Local database.
- ▶ A granular understanding of Somalia's fragmented governance landscape in Kismayo and Galkayo can enhance policy and programmatic engagement by shifting the focus from dominant elite-level narratives to local realities. This is particularly important in securitized, "bunkerized" environments such as Somalia.
- ▶ Peacebuilding and justice and security efforts must engage actors at multiple levels, ensuring that international stakeholders do not become entangled in centre-periphery or periphery-periphery political struggles. Facilitating dialogue and exchange among stakeholders across different spaces and levels can foster comparative understandings of justice and security dynamics, leading to more contextually relevant interventions that reflect Somalia's diverse political realities.
- ▶ Localised peace and security experiences ideally should aim to inform national reconciliation processes, but this requires a realistic power- and resource-sharing framework that accounts for localised security dynamics. Peacebuilding efforts should aim to link local mechanisms as building blocks into national reconciliation frameworks where possible, rather than reinforce fragmentation. That said, it is necessary to manage national-level elite dynamics to protect local agreement processes and ensure they can flourish. Political elites should be incentivized to engage with local governance structures to ensure that national visions are rooted in local realities rather than abstract models.
- ▶ Political authority remains in flux across Somalia, requiring continuous negotiation and adaptive policymaking from both local and national actors. While Kismayo and Galkayo exhibit distinct characteristics, their governance structures are shaped by broader political, economic, and security shifts, underscoring the need for flexible and responsive peacebuilding approaches.

Introduction

This briefing paper draws on an analysis of the PeaceRep PA-X Local database, conducted by Christine Bell and Laura Wise of PeaceRep,¹ who argue for the need to reimagine peace processes by mapping and understanding the fragmented peace-conflict spaces identified in the database. They argue that the general failure of national peace processes has contributed to the emergence of new spaces and dynamics of both peace and conflict, particularly at sub-national levels, and that understanding these spaces can better inform policy responses.

This conceptualization of the peace-conflict landscape can be applied to the area of justice and security by focusing on two of the fragments of Somalia's peace/conflict tapestry, Kismayo and Galkayo, both significant urban spaces, each with their own local dynamics, and each set within a broader arena of actors and relationships, including their respective federal member states (FMS), the federal government (FGS), and their regional and transnational positionalities.

This brief is drawn from a longer research paper, which was developed under PeaceRep Somalia, and builds on its predecessor, the Conflict Research Programme (CRP). Kismayo and Galkayo have been loci of interest and research within the two programmes in relation to peace-making, state formation, and justice and security.² Research has included court monitoring as well as interviews and participant observation.

Background

Kismayo, in southern Somalia, is the de facto capital of Jubbaland and its political authority – including justice and security arrangements – is informed by the 'Islamist turn' in Somalia and its geographic location vis-à-vis the militant Islamist group Al-Shabaab. Crucial in this context is that the Jubbaland authority holds a monopoly on violence in this seaport and town. Its economic and security relationships with Kenya and Ethiopia are salient additional factors in its form of political order.

Galkayo, on the other hand, is a divided border town in central Somalia, marking the boundary between Puntland and Galmudug FMS, and the different clan and sub-clan identities on either side of the border. Political authority in Galkayo – including justice and security arrangements – is contested. There is no dominant security actor in the town. Each of these two urban centres is influenced to different degrees by 'non-local' forces, including their respective diaspora as well as the federal government in Mogadishu. Furthermore, both Kismayo and Galkayo are important trading hubs, a notable factor in Somalia's process of state formation. These respective histories, identities and factors have shaped processes of state formation as well as justice and security outcomes.

Kismayo town – governance and authority

Kismayo is a seaport and the de facto capital of Jubbaland, Somalia's only FMS that borders Kenya. It also has a border with Ethiopia in its northern Gedo region. Kismayo has a cosmopolitan history, as do many coastal towns in Somalia, a legacy of their incorporation into historical maritime trading arenas as well as the modernising state project of the 1970s and 1980s. However, following the collapse of the state in 1990/91, many people from urban areas throughout Somalia were forced to flee to their clan territories or abroad, to escape violence and instability, changing the town's demography.

Kismayo was an extremely violent and insecure town during the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, contested by different warlord figures. The arrival of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006 marked a significant change in relation to security and the provision of justice, a characteristic of Islamist rule in Somalia (and elsewhere). The current President of Jubbaland, Ahmed Mohamed Islam 'Madobe', was governor of Kismayo under the ICU during its brief rule, and returned again, ousting Al-Shabaab, several years later, following the splintering of the ICU after the Ethiopian incursion.

Jubbaland's emergence as federal member state within Somalia's federal system is understood in part as a regional security project, involving Ethiopia and particularly Kenya, who initially both supported Madobe in the early years of Jubbaland's establishment. It is also described as transborder clan project reflecting the interests of the Ogaden elite in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya.³ Madobe has successfully forged himself as a powerful anti-Al-Shabaab actor, through the command of his Jubbaland forces (re-hatted from their earlier Ras Kamboni clan militia days).

Galkayo town – governance and authority

Galkayo town traverses a political, social and security borderline at the intersection of two FMS, Puntland and Galmudug. As such, it also divides two major clan families, the Darod and the Hawiye, and their constituent and powerful local sub-clans – the Omar Mahmoud and Sa'ad respectively, along with a third Darod sub-clan, the Lelkasse, which is also a significant actor. This borderline is inherited from the Mudug Accord of 1993 which divided the town into its northern and southern portions, following the collapse of the state and civil war in the early 1990s.⁴ Galkayo North became part of the emergent polity of Puntland from the late 1990s, while Galkayo South became part of the much more unreconciled and unstable central areas of south Mudug and Galmudug regions. The Accord acted as a prolonged ceasefire within the town but also represented a semi-permanent break and barrier in social and political relations across this border.

Galkayo North evolved within Puntland as a relatively stable, self-governing locality within its broader polity, with its own local administration and, importantly, benefiting from investment by its clan-identified private sector and the return of its diaspora both physically and through their remittances. The benefits of relative peace were also seen in the presence of the international aid sector, which was disproportionately based in the more peaceful north of the town. The southern portion of the town was much less stable, as there was no equivalent peacebuilding process in areas to the south. As a result, business and political elites from Galkayo South were much more invested in the capital of Mogadishu, where there were better facilities and political and financial opportunities. Galkayo South was therefore relatively neglected as an urban locality.

In all directions, the hinterland around the town encompasses a vast rangeland where pastoral communities from different clans and lineages move their livestock according to seasonal rainfall patterns, which entails moving across administrative and political borders. This inevitably includes moving between the invisible border dividing Puntland and Galmudug. Tensions and conflicts which manifest in rural areas around, for example, resource scarcity, can quickly manifest in the town in the form of revenge killings.⁵

The establishment of an officially recognised government in Mogadishu in 2012 and the creation of federal member states marked both new conflict and then peace and renewal in Galkayo. While Puntland was incorporated into the federal system as a pre-existing polity, Galmudug was formed in 2015 as a new polity (combining the regions of Galgaduud and south Mudug), as part of the state-building project. Tensions around the creation of Galmudug, particularly elite rivalries between Puntland and Galmudug, were felt in Galkayo and culminated in a major outbreak of conflict in 2015 and 2016. This eventually led to the Galkayo 'local' Agreement.⁶

The Galkayo Agreement and the post-agreement peace

The 2017 Galkayo Agreement was developed over two to three years and required sensitivity to both the national and local contexts. Influential decision-makers regarding Galkayo were based not only in the federal capital, Mogadishu, but also in the state capitals of both Puntland (Garowe) and Galmudug (Dhusamareb). A network of peace activists positioned inside formal institutions, such as the government and the UN in particular, as well as elders, women and youth groups, worked behind the scenes to support the peace-making process.⁷

The agreement and its aftermath led to the re-establishment of social relations across this politically significant border area, a major achievement in Somalia's recent political history. However, peace remains fragile and unfinished. The key mediators involved in the process took an activist approach to peacebuilding, which was sufficiently powerful to counter underlying grievances and the transactional, elite-driven politics that dominate Somalia's political relations.⁸

The Galkayo Agreement established a joint police force, which has been able to act across the town's divide, returning stolen goods for example, and which therefore acts to avoid reigniting grievances and revenge killings. A federal security force was also established to control security in the town's market area, which had been a prime location for violence when tensions arose.

Since the establishment of Galmudug, two separate administrations—one in Galkayo North and one in Galkayo South—have operated in the city, each linked to its respective FMS. Both administrations maintain their own justice systems, including police, judges, and local courts, alongside the customary system. As of early 2023, six years after the signing of the agreement, Khalif Abdirahman, following a research visit to the town, was moved to say:

It is abundantly evident that the residents of Galkayo feel very positive about their future and what they have achieved so far. However, an outsider coming to the city may feel different. The city is still vulnerable to revenge killings, as both authorities are weak in policing and dealing with murder cases effectively. Murderers seek protection from neighbouring clans, and without effective policing and thus justice, the whole clan is targeted by the victim's clan members, causing recurrent clan conflicts and creating an environment of fear and insecurity across the city.⁹

Unfortunately, soon after this visit the security situation dramatically worsened. As highlighted by Abdirahman, a series of revenge killings took place, both across the Galkayo divide and within groups in the Puntland-administered area.

The Justice and Security Contexts – comparing Kismayo and Galkayo

The following section discusses justice and security in relation to three themes: everyday justice, revenge killings, and political space.

Everyday justice and public authority – use of government courts

By everyday justice, we refer to a range of cases including marital disputes, accidents and injuries, smaller land/property disputes, and small-scale business disputes. These are distinguished from murders or killings and larger business and property disputes, which carry a higher social and political weight and can generate or exacerbate conflicts. Settling such everyday cases takes place in different ways, including under traditional authority, privately engaging sheikhs (practicing sharia'a law), or through the government courts.

In the case of Kismayo, some of the privately practicing sheikhs were moved to the government-run courts as part of the reforms made to the legal system there, as they were considered well-versed in the law, and locally credible and sought after. Court observations at the time demonstrated that these courts were well utilised by local residents and judicial outcomes were well received.¹⁰ Few examples of miscarriages of justice were noted, including cases where political and clan identity, as well as power, did not appear to influence court judgments.

In Kismayo, the actions of the town's police force were considered more problematic than the practices within the courts themselves.¹¹ The political and security context in Kismayo, with a dominant security actor, was seen as beneficial for enforcing judicial rulings – a major limitation in other parts of the country, except in areas or cases where Al-Shabaab was involved.¹²

In order to accommodate the plural legal environment, where customary law and sheikhs are consulted privately, the Jubbaland authority created an elders committee with representation from all clans in Kismayo, which works with the government-run courts to manage and register cases. It does the same with the private administration of disputes by sharia'a judges. The legal process concerning everyday justice in Kismayo has a level of functionality and credibility that is uncommon in Somalia.

In Galkayo, the situation is more complex. The courts operate separately on either side of the town's border, within their respective FMS structures and within a more ambiguous political-security context.

On both sides of the town, political – and therefore security – authority is contested between customary (i.e. clan) and government structures, and many clans are heavily armed. In this context, clan hierarchies and clan power are considered the dominant factor in the provision of everyday justice. Court and enforcement processes are strongly influenced by these power hierarchies. These hierarchies are less relevant where equally matched parties are in dispute and therefore where there is an interest to settle to avoid potential escalation. In Galkayo therefore, recourse to the law and the enforcement of justice is heavily mediated by the existing power hierarchies and the absence of a monopoly on violence.

Revenge killings

The provision of a credible justice system is most starkly evident around murder and revenge killings, which can quickly undermine everyday security and escalate into larger conflicts. In Kismayo, there has been little or no practice of inter-clan-based revenge killings under the Jubbaland authority. This reflects the position and character of the authority as the dominant security actor; no tolerance for a potentially destabilising cycle of revenge killings would be permitted. In this case, destabilisation carries a huge risk, given the close proximity of Al-Shabaab. If a murder took place, the Jubbaland authority would quickly identify the culprit and punish them accordingly (typically by execution).

In Galkayo, while the population has benefited enormously from the 2017 Agreement, the risk of revenge killings has remained, and in 2024, it escalated significantly, threatening the underlying peace agreement.¹³ These episodes, including revenge killings between groups within Galkayo North and across the border between the Lelkasse and Sa'ad, proved extremely difficult—if not impossible—for government authorities to address. The authorities openly admitted that these were 'clan issues' and acknowledged they would be significantly outgunned if they attempted to enforce their authority.

As a repercussion of these escalations, many innocent bystanders are killed, leading to further escalation of tension, and further killings as new groups are brought into the violence. Vulnerable groups will often leave town temporarily, since victims are targeted based on clan identity rather than their involvement in the incidents.¹⁴

In Galkayo, the situation is further complicated by the weakened authority of clan elders, undermined by the political elite, and the proliferation of inflammatory discourse on digital platforms, which clan elders struggle to control.¹⁵

Political space vs justice and security

Another point of comparison between Kismayo and Galkayo concerns the character of the political space in both towns and its intersection with the provision of justice and security. As noted, the Jubbaland authority in Kismayo performs relatively well in maintaining peace and security, nurturing a credible everyday justice and mitigating against destabilising outbreaks of revenge killings. These are considerable benefits in a region with a recent history of serious violence. However, when it comes to contesting elections and parliamentary seats, the situation is very different, with very limited opportunities to challenge the incumbent president and his close allies.

The quality of this political space is difficult to assess, as serious political challenges have originated from Somalia's political centre in Mogadishu, and are embedded in core-periphery tensions. These tensions often reflect a desire for the centre to dominate the peripheries, typically by installing compliant presidents in the regional/FMS elections through the use of money and/or violence. This dynamic provides a rationale for Madobe to resist such threats by maintaining his own monopoly over political space and violence in Kismayo.

That said, President Madobe also represents a form of Islamist political authority and an authoritarianism also present in Somalia through Al-Shabaab (and its various predecessors, including the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and Al Itihad Al Islamia). Madobe is also a valuable security partner in regional and international security regimes against Al-Shabaab, which further enables and emboldens him in his hold on power.

In contrast, Galkayo has a more open and plural political context, with space to criticise both government and customary authority, although this criticism is primarily directed at the respective regimes to the north and south of Galkayo. A notable observation about the Galkayo Agreement concerned the role of youth and women as peace activists. This activist role of the youth has continued, with some members speaking out critically against the government and elders in relation to the series of revenge killings, calling on political authorities to intervene, partly because some of them were targeted. Also in Galkayo's favour is that it is not at the centre of politics of its respective FMS, and is therefore away from the spotlight of election-related politics.

Conclusions

This brief highlights justice and security dynamics in Somalia through a comparative analysis of Kismayo and Galkayo, applying and extending Bell and Wise's framework that categorizes the fragmented peace-conflict spaces emerging from (failed) national peacemaking frameworks.¹⁶ It considers three types of spaces identified by Bell and Wise – territorially limited transcalar spaces, borderland mediation spaces, and route-of-passage spaces – to better understand the evolution of political and security arrangements in Somalia following the civil war and state collapse in the 1990s, and the ongoing processes of internationally-driven state formation processes since the early 2000s.

This study focuses on two fragments of Somalia's peace/conflict landscape – the towns of Kismayo and Galkayo – which reflect the variegated political orders operating at different scales – urban and sub-national. While both towns exhibit characteristics from all three categories defined by Bell and Wise, Kismayo, under the Jubbaland administration, aligns more closely with a territorially limited transcalar space, where governance and security are consolidated under a dominant authority within a local political settlement that both reflects and shapes the wider Somali peace-conflict landscape. The 'Kismayo bubble' has enabled credible justice provision while also fostering processes of inter-clan reconciliation. However, while its more centralized structure has improved stability, it has also limited civic and political space, reinforcing exclusionary forms of governance.

Conversely, Galkayo functions more as a borderland mediation space, where its dual administration requires ongoing negotiation between its respective federal member states, Puntland and Galmudug, its clan constituents, and the federal government in Mogadishu. Unlike Kismayo, Galkayo lacks a dominant security actor, making justice and security governance fluid and contingent on continuous mediation. The 2017 Galkayo Agreement opened avenues for dialogue and conflict resolution, yet governance in the town remains inherently unstable. Bell and Wise's framework suggests that such spaces require sustained negotiation and adaptation to maintain security and political order.

Despite their distinct political orders, both Kismayo and Galkayo also function within route-of-passage spaces as trade corridors that impact justice and security dynamics in different ways. These arrangements are further shaped by broader national political struggles, regional power shifts, and international interventions. Recognizing these localised variations is essential for designing more effective peace and security interventions that move beyond elite-level political settlements. The study emphasises the importance of tailoring interventions to local realities while ensuring they can contribute to national peacebuilding efforts.

Endnotes

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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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PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform | peacerep@ed.ac.uk

University of Edinburgh, School of Law, Old College,
South Bridge, EH8 9YL

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peacerep@ed.ac.uk | <https://peacerep.org>

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