

SOMALIA'S GOVERNANCE-SECURITY NEXUS: POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION AND THE CHALLENGE OF STATE CONSOLIDATION

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Somalia's persistent instability is rooted in the interaction between political fragmentation, weak state institutions and insecurity. Although Al-Shabaab remains the country's principal security threat, the insurgency cannot be addressed independently of the political challenges confronting the Somali state.¹ Since the establishment of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012, disagreements over the distribution of constitutional authority, electoral arrangements, fiscal resources and security responsibilities have continued to strain relations between the Federal Government and Federal Member States (FMS).²

These tensions have become particularly acute in 2026. Somalia completed the review of its Provisional Constitution in March 2026, but the process did not produce political consensus. Constitutional amendments extended the terms of the Federal Parliament and Presidency from four to five years and altered the electoral timetable.³ Opposition groups and several FMS have challenged the process, arguing that the changes were adopted without sufficient political

¹ Aisha Ahmad, Tanya Bandula-Irwin, and Mohamed Ibrahim, "Who Governs? State versus Jihadist Political Order in Somalia," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 16, no. 1 (2022): 68–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2022.2075817>.

² Abdinor Dahir and Ali Yassin Sheikh Ali, "Federalism in Post-Conflict Somalia: A Critical Review of Its Reception and Governance Challenges," *Regional & Federal Studies* 34, no. 1 (2024): 87–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13597566.2021.1998005>.

³ Joseph Siegle and Hany Wahila, "Somalia: Electoral Process Under Construction Amid a Security Crisis," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 2026, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-elections-2026/somalia/>.

agreement. The dispute has consequently transformed constitutional and electoral reform into a broader contest over political authority and the future of Somalia's federal system.

The political dispute has also acquired a security dimension. Federal forces took control of Baidoa in March following escalating tensions with the South West State administration. In August, renewed fighting between federal forces and militias linked to the former South West leadership resulted in dozens of deaths and civilian casualties. The clashes coincided with attacks by Al-Shabaab, demonstrating how political confrontation among Somali actors can create opportunities for armed groups to exploit instability.

Somalia's Federal Political Order

The collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991 resulted in prolonged political fragmentation, armed conflict and the erosion of state institutions. Internationally supported transitional arrangements subsequently sought to reconstruct national institutions, culminating in the establishment of the Federal Government in 2012.⁴ Federalism was adopted partly to accommodate regional interests and prevent a return to the highly centralised political order associated with the Siad Barre period. However, Somalia's federal system has remained incomplete and contested. Questions concerning the division of powers, fiscal resources, security responsibilities and the relationship between Mogadishu and the FMS have remained unresolved.⁵

The difficulty is therefore not federalism itself but the absence of sufficiently clear and accepted rules governing the federal arrangement. Where constitutional responsibilities remain ambiguous, political disagreements can become disputes over institutional legitimacy and authority. The completion of the constitutional review in March 2026 was consequently an important institutional milestone, but it did not resolve these underlying tensions. Instead, disagreements over the constitutional amendments and electoral timetable reinforced divisions between the Federal Government, opposition groups and several FMS.⁶

⁴ World Bank, *Somalia Economic Update: Navigating Shocks, Powering Growth* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2024), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099743301202529798/pdf/IDU-aaf1e9f3-56ca-44d1-8d89-97f312368c88.pdf>.

⁵ World Bank, *Federalism and State Stability Policy Note* (Washington, DC: World Bank), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099500006282221939/pdf/P1775040e575fc036094170aca16ab29e5f.pdf>

⁶ European Union Agency for Asylum, "1. General Description of the Security Situation in Somalia," in *Somalia – Security Situation* (June 2026), <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/somalia-security-situation/1-general-description-security-situation-somalia>.

Political and Security Landscape

The electoral process has become the central political challenge. Somalia's transition towards direct elections has the potential to strengthen political participation and legitimacy. However, disagreements over the electoral model, timing and institutional responsibilities have raised concerns that elections could become a source of renewed conflict. The extension of the presidential and parliamentary terms has further intensified these concerns. Relations between the Federal Government and FMS have consequently deteriorated. Puntland has remained in conflict with Mogadishu over constitutional and political issues, while tensions involving Jubaland and South West State have demonstrated the wider fragility of federal-regional relations.

The developments in Baidoa are particularly significant. Federal forces seized control of the city in March after escalating tensions with the South West administration. In August, opposition forces launched attacks against government positions, leading to intense fighting before federal forces regained control. At least four civilians were killed and 98 wounded. Al-Shabaab also launched attacks around Baidoa during the fighting, highlighting the security consequences of political fragmentation.⁷ Meanwhile, Al-Shabaab remains resilient despite sustained counterinsurgency efforts. Recent assessments indicate that the group has retained or expanded influence in parts of southern Somalia and remains capable of conducting attacks against government and security targets.⁸

The Governance-Security Nexus

Somalia's political and security challenges form a self-reinforcing cycle. Political division weakens cooperation between national and local authorities. Weak coordination reduces the effectiveness of security operations and state administration. Insecurity then diverts resources towards military requirements and limits the government's ability to provide services. Governance gaps subsequently create opportunities for Al-Shabaab to establish alternative systems of taxation, justice and order. Political legitimacy is central to Somalia's security. National institutions cannot effectively exercise authority when major political actors question their legitimacy. Credible elections could strengthen the political foundations of the state, while contested elections could deepen divisions and further weaken institutional authority. The security sector is similarly affected. Counterinsurgency requires coordination between federal and regional security institutions. When federal and regional actors

⁷ Omar Faruk, "Fighting in Southwestern Somalia Kills Dozens of People, Including 4 Civilians," *Associated Press*, August 18, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/b2b2d9024f24fa457b412a7bc475118c>.

⁸ European Union Agency for Asylum, "1.2.2. Al-Shabaab Control Areas, Presence, and Influence," in *Somalia – Security Situation* (June 2026), <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/somalia-security-situation/122-al-shabaab-control-areas-presence-and-influence>.

become engaged in political disputes, security forces can be diverted from operations against Al-Shabaab. The risk becomes particularly serious when military institutions are used to settle political disagreements, as this can weaken their neutrality and legitimacy.

The recent fighting in Baidoa illustrates this dynamic. Political disagreements became militarised while Al-Shabaab exploited the resulting instability. The episode demonstrates that internal political confrontation can directly undermine the broader campaign against insurgency.⁹ The nexus also extends to economic and fiscal capacity. Somalia has made progress in fiscal reform, but its economy remains vulnerable to aid reductions, climate shocks and limited productive capacity. The World Bank projects real GDP growth of 2.8 per cent in 2026 and 3.1 per cent in 2027, while warning that declining external assistance and climate variability pose significant risks.¹⁰ Strengthening domestic revenue mobilisation is therefore not simply an economic objective. Greater fiscal capacity would allow the state to improve service delivery, strengthen institutions and reduce dependence on external assistance. Conversely, insecurity continues to constrain economic activity and increase the cost of governance.

Domestic and International Responses

Somalia has pursued constitutional, electoral, security-sector and fiscal reforms as part of its state-building process, but their success depends on political consensus. The transition towards greater Somali responsibility for national security is particularly significant. The African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) replaced ATMIS as part of the broader transition towards Somali-led security; however, continued Al-Shabaab activity demonstrates that Somali security forces still require substantial institutional, operational and financial support.¹¹

International assistance can strengthen Somalia's security and institutions through training, financing and diplomatic support, but it cannot substitute for a domestic political settlement. Disagreements between the Federal Government and FMS must ultimately be resolved through Somali political processes. Security assistance should therefore support, rather than substitute for, political and institutional consolidation.

⁹ Omar Faruk, "Fighting in Southwestern Somalia Kills Dozens of People, Including 4 Civilians," *Associated Press*, August 18, 2026, <https://apnews.com/article/somalia-baidoa-militia-clash-b2b2d9024f24fa457b412a7bc475118c>.

¹⁰ World Bank, *Somalia Economic Update: Navigating Shocks, Powering Growth* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2026), <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099051126103025519>.

¹¹ Security Council Report, "Somalia," *Monthly Forecast*, June 2026, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2026-06/somalia-43.php>.

Conclusion

Somalia's political instability and security challenges require a comprehensive approach that addresses the interconnected nature of governance, political fragmentation and insecurity. An inclusive political dialogue involving the Federal Government, Federal Member States and opposition actors is essential to build consensus on the constitutional framework, electoral process and division of powers. The transition towards direct elections should proceed through mutually accepted rules and should not further intensify federal-regional tensions. At the same time, political disputes must be prevented from becoming militarised, while stronger federal-regional security coordination, intelligence-sharing and clearly defined security responsibilities are needed to sustain pressure against Al-Shabaab. Military gains must also be followed by effective governance, including functioning local administration, justice, security and basic services in recovered areas.

Fiscal and institutional reforms, particularly stronger domestic revenue mobilisation and service delivery, are equally important for strengthening state legitimacy and reducing dependence on external assistance. Ultimately, Somalia's federal system can provide a framework for managing the country's political and regional diversity, but its sustainability depends on a political settlement over the distribution of power and the rules of political competition. Constitutional, electoral and security-sector reforms must therefore be pursued in a coordinated manner. Lasting stability will depend not only on weakening Al-Shabaab militarily but also on Somalia's ability to translate security gains into legitimate political authority, effective governance and stronger institutions. Breaking the cycle of political fragmentation, weak governance and insecurity will require sustained political compromise, institutional strengthening and Somali ownership of the state-building process.