Changing Gulf Dynamics in Somalia’s Upcoming Elections

By Mohamed Dubo and Abdi Tawane

Somalia is preparing to hold a universal suffrage election in 2020/21, the first of its kind after more than two decades of no real elections until 2017, when an indirect election process was conducted that saw “traditional elders” selecting delegates who elected Members of Parliament who also elected the current president, H.E Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed “Farmaajo”.

The National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC) is upbeat that the country will hold peaceful and credible elections in 2020/21 despite the political, constitutional and socio-economic challenges facing the country. The electoral body launched a five-year roadmap in 2018 to help guide the management and administration of the country’s “one-person, one-vote” elections, notwithstanding the pending electoral law, as foreseen by Art. 47 of the Provisional Constitution, which is yet to be passed by the parliament.

More than 50 political parties (mostly based in Mogadishu) have been registered by the electoral body ahead of the next general elections to replace clan-based politics. This is a major step towards a return to democracy and a sign of enthusiasm for multiparty politics in Somalia, which makes the upcoming presidential election campaign more intense than the preceding ones.

Competition being the lifeblood of democracy, key campaign issues, such as improved security;
harnessing national reconciliation; a productive economy; consolidating unity, including successful talks with Somaliland; delivering a non-provisional constitution; successful implementation of federalisation and democratisation political processes; strengthening Somalia’s diplomatic circles at the global stage; and maintaining friendly relations with its neighbours are among the key election issues that may dominate public discussions ahead of the election.

Continued support for the inclusion, representation and participation of women in Somalia’s upcoming electoral processes is one of the key issues that Somalia’s Western allies will be keenly observing to shape their engagement with the future occupants of Villa Somalia.

Traditionally, presidential elections in Somalia magically lacked any predictable effects because of several systematic conditions, including “the election-year-economy”, which strongly influenced outcomes. In recent years, the country’s presidential elections have been characterised by an unprecedented influx of campaign funds from abroad, particularly from the Gulf countries whose leaders appear eager to curry favour in Somalia.

Previously, countries like the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have happily welcomed the parade of Somali politicians shuttling among their capitals on secretive fundraising trips months before the presidential elections.

In 2017, countries such as Turkey and Qatar played major roles that displaced arguably more powerful actors with a longer history of engagement in Somalia. This shift may be viewed from the vantage point of emerging power diplomacy to accrue political capital by Turkey and Qatar.

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Turkey, a powerful political actor in Somalia since 2011 that made Somalia a major focus of its foreign policy and its presence in the country, certainly embodies one of the most interesting, but widely misunderstood, regional geopolitical developments in the past decade.

Somalia’s unwavering support to Saudi Arabia against Turkey during the Khashoggi crisis was viewed as a strategy to extract economic benefits from Saudi Arabia to support Somalia’s struggling economy in exchange for easing pressure on the Kingdom’s crown prince. Turkish engagement with Villa Somalia has since been cautious; it has given a cold shoulder to the political machinations of the presidency.

With the country’s history of a one-term presidency, dramatic shifts in campaign patronage and aegis are plausible. Whether Turkey will back the re-election of the incumbent president remains highly unlikely as Qatar’s favourite candidates won the last two presidential elections.

Following the Qatari blockade led by UAE and Saudi Arabia and Somalia’s subsequent declaration of neutrality in the crisis, tensions have steadily escalated between Somalia and the UAE, which has sought to extend its influence in the country. This simmering situation was much bigger than its trilateral format would suggest because it’s taken on contours of the Gulf Cold War over the past two years. Although the two countries have been traditionally close, Mogadishu’s attempts to remain neutral over the Gulf divisions have not gone down well with Somalia’s traditional Gulf allies.

UAE’s dramatic and significant policy shifts towards the Yemen conflict, Iran and the Sudan crisis might also have a spillover effect on the Gulf ally’s symmetrical policies towards Somalia and could
shape their involvement in Somalia’s upcoming election.

Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, sees Iran to be posing significant national security threat in the region and has, on many occasions, forced some countries, including Somalia, to oppose and sever diplomatic ties with Tehran.

These developments have been as varied as they have been contradictory. While the two kingdoms worked hand in hand in the recent Sudan political crisis – fearing the prospect that political Islam might acede to power in Sudan – simmering divisions between Abu Dhabi and Riyadh on the Yemeni conflict undermine the joint campaign against the Houthis stuck in Yemen’s shifting sands – unable to achieve victory or leave. The Emirates literally withdrew from the coalition’s air campaign against the Houthis, leaving Saudi Arabia behind to handle the “mess”.

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The Saudi Kingdom has maintained relatively friendly relations with the current regime in Somalia in spite of a shortfall of expectations from the Somali government during the Gulf crisis. Somalia exhibited a strong inclination and support towards the Kingdom on many occasions. Again that has not been significant enough to earn the Kingdom’s blessing to champion and warrant regime comeback.

Barely months before the country’s general election, with a bewildering array of candidates expressing interest in the top seat and the seemingly “condensing” of the Gulf crisis with a decrease in antagonistic rhetoric, significant changes in the context and dynamics of the Somali political environment are emerging.

Possibilities for Somalia and UAE to re-engage are coming to light through joint efforts by President Isias Afewerki of Eritrea, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia and other partners who aim to reconcile the former allies. This might mean burying the hatchet and forging a new relationship. Conditions, such as UAE considering to back the reelection of the incumbent, will of course be part of their engagement.

Contemporary traits of many Somali political players have instinctively been Machiavellian; they act as vocal advocates of “special interests” and bitter enemies of the “common interest”. Generally, Machiavellian politicians are likely to serve their own selfish ends rather than what is demonstrably true and sensible in the eyes of the public.

Whether it is purposely strategic or not, all indications signify that the President and his Prime Minister are set to be in different political vehicles in the upcoming elections, each separately endeavouring to appropriate the presidential seat. If this comes to light, it will affirm the fluid and fleeting nature of political alignments or “dispensations” in Somalia. Eventually one or both of the aligning issues/interests loses its salience and ceases to matter as much as it initially did at the outset.

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UAE rapprochement might be Farmaajo’s remaining recourse, although many political commentators believe the relationship was always there but timing was of significance to make it public. Only time will tell whether this re-approach option is a punitive measure to override the advances of his Prime Minister and Qatari influence in Somalia or domestic upheaval and political survival for Farmaajo come 2020/21.

Handling the crux of the country’s internal political disputes between the member states and the federal government might mean ceding ground to opposition groups and “rogue” member states in the interest of national unity and reconciliation. This offers an opportunity to redeem the president’s political mileage and provide him with an opportunity to establish new allies across the political divide. An upstanding relationship with the member states way ahead of the elections is a key ingredient for the incumbent’s re-election and consolidation of strong statesmanship and leadership legacy.