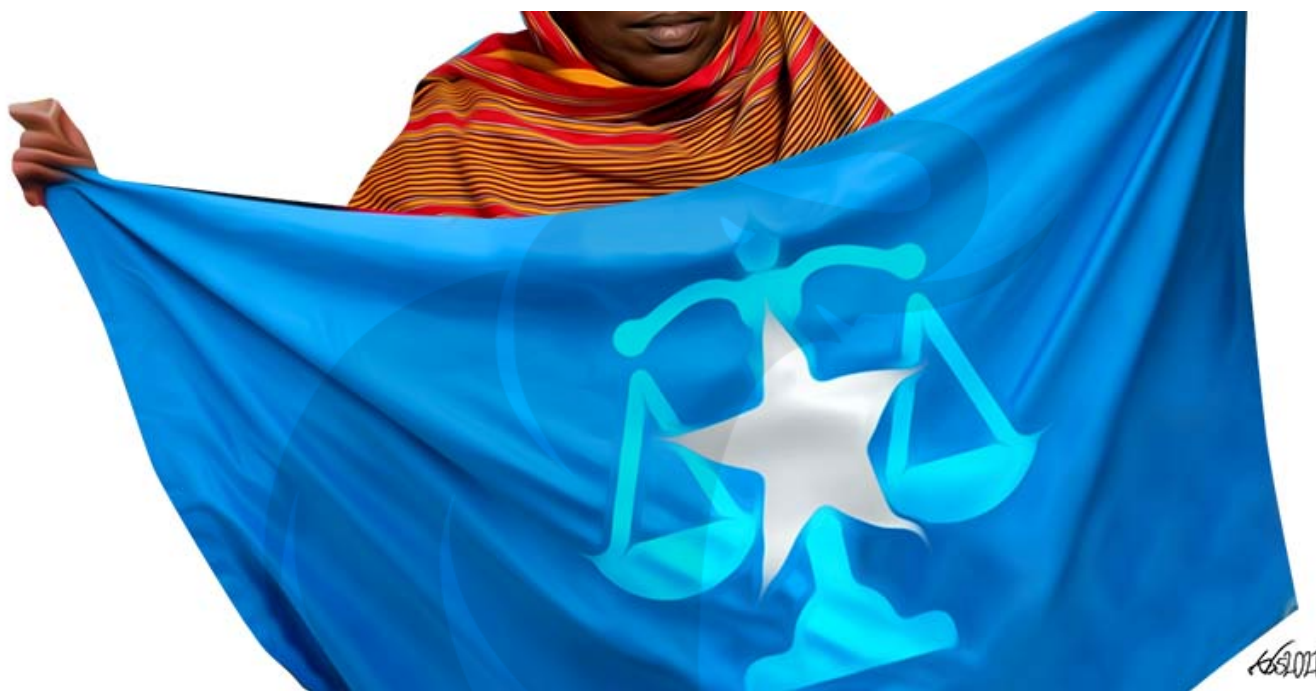




Prebendal Politics and Transition to Democracy in Somalia

By Harun Ibrahim



Government should belong to the people, be for the people and by the people. This is the democratic ideal borne out of man's innate desire for good governance, societal stability, and development. Credible elections are the hub around which the practice of ideal and sustainable democracy revolves.

As such, it is closely tied to the growth and development of democratic political order. To realise this democratic ideal, however, electing people to participate in government should be freely and fairly done to allow for the right choice of the electorates to emerge. The elections process is the only means of guaranteeing the credibility and sanctity of democratic practice. The election becomes a crucial point in the continuum of democratisation and an imperative means of giving voice to the people's will, which is the basis of government authority.

Fundamentally, democratic development involves the practice and sustainability of regular, credible electoral conducts and processes. In fact, one of the cardinal features of democratic practice is the conduct of credible, free and fair elections. Therefore, the cardinal issue in a democratic polity could be viewed as the method of selecting people who govern at any point in time.

Indirect election

Conducting elections in fragile countries like Somalia cannot be an easy task by any yardstick. Conducting free and fair elections in such a polity, that gives the victor free reign to grab resources, is a much more difficult assignment the success of which even angels cannot guarantee. This is in large part because of the insecurity, political infighting amongst the elites, endemic corruption and the threat from Al-Shabaab. The militant group has historically made it difficult to hold elections in Somalia by threatening to attack polling places.

To minimize concerns about Al-Shabaab disrupting elections, Somali political leaders and their international allies have supported a narrow voting process based on a power-sharing formula between clans, rather than a popular vote (universal suffrage is still a distant dream for the country) and adopted the electoral college model. In the model, elders are selected from across the diverse clans and they, in turn, nominate or elect parliamentarians, who in turn elect the president. Initially, one elder from each clan picked one member of parliament (MP), but this has now changed to an electoral college system. In this system, each clan still appoints one member of parliament, but instead of one person deciding, each clan picks 51 of its members to vote for that clan's one representative in the lower house of parliament as happened in 2016/17 indirect election.

Since early 2000, Somalia has had four indirect national elections and witnessed a peaceful transfer of power from one civilian to another. In 2012, 135 traditional clan elders elected members of parliament, who in turn elected their speakers and the federal president. In 2016, elections were conducted in one location in each federal member state. The 135 traditional clan elders also selected the members of the 275 electoral colleges made up of 51 delegates per seat, constituting the total college of 14,025. On the other hand, the senate (upper house) members were nominated by the federal member state presidents, while the federal member state parliament selected the final members of the upper house.

The ongoing (2020/21) election mirrors the 2016 exercise but has expanded the number of delegates involved in the lower house (electoral college/Electoral College) from 51 to 101 delegates. This expansion raised the number of participants in the lower house election from 14,025 to 27,775—a notable growth in suffrage. Furthermore, the September 2020 agreement increased the number of voting centres per member state from one to two. It also established federal and state election commissions to oversee the polls. However, elections in Somalia have lacked the basic ingredients of democratic elections as most Somalis are not included in the voting. The elections have also been characterised by pervasive corruption and widespread electoral fraud.

It is common knowledge in Somalia that running in an election and winning requires not only political clout but also a lot of money. An aspiring politician needs the help of a well-heeled or well-grounded politician or a money bag to bankroll their political campaign to see success in such an endeavour. This is mainly because taking political office in Somalia has come to be seen primarily as a means of enrichment and of gaining influence, and not as an opportunity to serve the people.

Somali elites and prospective parliamentarians receive campaign funding from both internal and external actors. External actors include neighbouring countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia, Gulf countries and Western allies. On the other hand, internally, the key powerbrokers are the elites who have captured states and regions, and particularly those who had mastered the art of obtaining contracts during the war; they have built business empires in the import/export sectors, construction and rebuilding, clearance and customs and are now playing a critical role in politics.

The cost of democracy

In the electoral college system, the price of votes ranges from US\$5,000 to US\$30,000, with politics at the local and national levels recognised to have become increasingly monetised over time. Some candidates are said to have offered bribes of up to US\$1.3 million to secure votes. Jeffrey Gentlemen [reports](#) that in 2012 former President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud gave several clan elders a US\$5,000 bribe each to influence the choice of their clan's representatives in Parliament.

The 2012 parliamentary and presidential elections that brought Hassan Sheikh to power had little legitimacy, and they were criticised as the most fraudulent in Somalia's history. Hassan Sheikh was elected as President, backed by the Qatari Government with money brought to Mogadishu by Farah Abdulkadir (a former Minister of Justice and Constitutional Affairs), and business and political allies in Mogadishu. The various processes and elections to put together the leadership of the federal member states were also marred by high levels of corruption and intimidation.

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The 2016/17 federal election involved a significant amount of money. Farmaajo's win surprised most observers, and Somali analysts estimate that at least US\$20 million changed hands during the parliamentary elections that culminated in the presidential election. Farmaajo's supporters had hoped that he could be the answer to corruption and extremism in Somalia, but he too succumbed to corruption. He is believed to have influenced elections in the federal member states using money and coercion. During Farmaajo's time in office corruption worsened and security deteriorated.

Between 2017 and 2021, elections were held across the federal member states that optimised the defining features of prebend, the salience of clan identity, and the pervasive use of violence and money. In Puntland, incumbent President Said Abdullahi Dani narrowly won the election after carefully crafting an alliance of two clan-based interests, The Saleban Clans. An estimated [US\\$15 million changed hands](#) in the week before the election, with all candidates using money to buy support.

In Galmudug, FGS employed the Somalia National Army (SNA) and Ethiopian military support to restrict opposition figures and elders access to voting centres. The FGS was able to disarm *Ahla Sunna Wal Jamma* using [financial incentives](#). Eventually, Ahmed Abdi Kaariye, also known as *Qoor*, [won the election](#) with the support of the federal government.

In the Hirshabelle election, the FGS spent more than US\$1.2 million to secure the [election of the Hirshabelle president](#). Former Al-Shabaab leader Mukhtar Robow was the running favourite in the South-West State elections. Robow is from an influential Leysan sub-clan (one of the largest in South-west State) with a loyal clan militia, and he was considered widely popular among the broader population. He reportedly refused a significant financial pay-off not to take part in the election and was duly [arrested by Ethiopian forces](#) acting on behalf of the federal government before the election itself.

The arrest of Mukhtar Robow and the blatant intervention of Ethiopian forces on behalf of the federal government led to a demonstration and a reported 15 deaths. A critical statement by Nicholas Haysom, Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General, in which he raised questions over allegations of abuses by forces loyal to the federal government saw him declared [persona non grata](#).

The long-delayed parliamentary and presidential election was supposed to offer Somalis universal suffrage. However, given the security and logistical challenges of conducting an election in Somalia, as mentioned previously, Somalis opted for indirect election, and so far, the election of members of the senate has been concluded. It is commendable that the majority of senators have been elected by the FMS state legislature in accordance with the electoral model adopted on 17 September. However, the senate election was marred by foul play where FMS presidents and elites pre-determined the winners of every seat, contrary to the agreements and the national interest. The cases of corruption were widely reported; bribes were given to the state legislatures by aspiring senators and their sponsors, including federal and regional executives.

The election for the lower house has just started. Each of the 275 members of the lower house will be elected by an electoral college of 101 clan elders and civil society, determined through the collaboration of the FMS authorities, clan elders and civil society. Nonetheless, the lack of criteria by which the members of civil society and clan elders will be selected has created great concern among the public. It is widely believed that the federal member state presidents have the upper hand in the process, as they also play a role in determining clan elders and civil society. Corruption and vote buying are widespread in all regions; prospective parliamentarians are buying votes.

Abdi Malik Abdullahi [tweeted](#), “2021 electoral process in Somalia is commercialised and sham.” On her part, Hodan Ali [tweeted](#), “Somali politicians poised to spend 10s of millions of dollars on election rigging/buying while millions face killer drought conditions across the country.” Nadeef shared similar view. He [noted](#), “I have realised that Somali leaders are not trying to fix any of our problems. They are trying to make enough money and get enough power so that problems that affect us don’t reach them.”

Given the foregoing, it is clear that taking political office is perceived more as a means to personal economic advancement. This, no doubt, intensifies the unhealthy rivalry and competition for political office that triggers corruption, election rigging, violent conflicts and even coups. In recent years, those seeking power have included [prominent scholars](#) coming from all corners of the world to seek elective office on the strength of the size of their pocket. Indeed, the Somali political space is a marketplace that does not allow for free and fair elections and diminishes the credibility and legitimacy of the electoral process, hindering the emergence of democracy in Somalia.

External Influence

In both Somalia and the West, these influences are believed to be coming from five or six Middle Eastern and African countries with various interests in Somalia. These countries include Turkey, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Ethiopia, Kenya, Egypt, and Sudan. They have been increasingly involved in providing the political elites with campaign money to secure their specific objectives such as access to oil, port and airport development projects, and other business opportunities. Turkey has financial and infrastructure interests in Somalia, including significant investment in the Mogadishu airport. Qatar is a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and wishes to see its regional influence expand in East Africa. The United Arab Emirates opposes the Muslim Brotherhood, and may therefore be acting to counteract Qatari influence in East Africa.

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The Gulf crisis has made Somalia a proxy ground for strategic rivalries across the wider region. Qatar and Turkey have supported the last two presidents. Under Farmaajo’s presidency, the UAE

supported federal member states and their oppositions, enhancing the bargaining power of federal member state elites in the political marketplace. The UAE is reported to have made payments to parliamentarians and has directed [considerable investment](#) towards Puntland, Somaliland and Galmudug. The UAE has also maintained its corporate interests in port development and strategic infrastructure in Berbera, Bossaso and Hobyo.

On the other hand, maritime disputes between Kenya and Somalia have raised Kenya's involvement profile. FGS has accused Kenya of supporting Jubaland president Ahmed Madobe against the federal government. Ethiopia remains one of the most influential actors in Somalia and since the election of Abiy Ahmed in 2018, the country has taken a much stronger position in supporting the federal government.

Domestic dynamics

Internal actors including clan elders, political entrepreneurs, conglomerates and technocrats are entangled in a web of political clientelism, kickbacks and redistribution, and debt relations. The federal formula has shaped elite political competition around access to external rents in Somalia.

In recent years, those seeking power have included prominent scholars coming from all corners of the world to seek elective office on the strength of the size of their pocket.

These actors use territorial control, access to strategic infrastructure and foreign exchange to protect their ill-gotten assets and to secure new opportunities. These businesses cope with containing cost and risk by stashing wealth abroad and by avoiding growth to circumvent the attention of governance providers and armed actors who may wish to extract or take a stake in an expanding business.

Consequences of state capture by elites and external actors

The consequences of corruption will be far-reaching. Donors will expect to call the shots after an election. This will constitute a cog in the wheel of progress of such a political entity, with outside forces dictating the direction politics and development will take. It may become difficult for the Somali government to act in the interests of the Somali people rather than those of foreign capital since the occupants of political office will owe allegiance to the money bag (the godfather) rather than the state.

It has become increasingly clear that the main incentive for joining politics in Somalia has become prebendal as the issues of democratic ideals and political ideology are relegated to the background. Ideally, ideology serves as a guide to an individual politician and to a political party's development initiatives, policies, programmes and actions. This is because a political leadership that emerges without ideology will lack development focus and discipline and not be subject to the rule of law.

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