Despite Challenges, Somalia Must Hold National Elections in 2021

By mid-2016, Somalia was actively organizing the country's second national parliamentary and presidential elections to be held inside the country for the first time since the 1991 civil war. By December 2020, the four-year term for Somalia's fledging federal institutions are due to expire. Still, prospects of national 'democratic' elections later this year seem distant. 'Democratic' elections in Somalia is different from conventional elections; rather, Somali elections is based on a hybrid electoral model, combining a clan-based political arrangement with a voting mechanism via 'clan representatives' in Federal Parliament. The controversial '4.5 formula' – essentially allocating national parliamentary seats among four "major" clan-families (4) and "minority" clans (.5) – has been the basis for political representation in the fragile nation since 2000. The formula's flawed structure has the been the epicenter of intense debate for years; however, the 4.5 system, as a model of political representation, has allocated Somali 'clans' seats in parliament, and has paved the way for successive elections and transfer of power after national elections in 2004, 2009, 2012 and most recently, in 2016/2017. Despite these limitations, political representation and electoral model in Somalia aims to ensure wide representation and participation, to garner broad-based domestic support and ensure legitimacy in election outcomes.

Somalia has a bicameral Federal Parliament, with 275 legislators in the People's Assembly (Lower House) and 54 Senators in the Upper House. Before parliament's term ends in December, the country must first hold parliamentary elections, followed by a presidential election. This is to ensure continuity of national government, as well as legitimacy of UN-endorsed foreign troops (African Union Mission in Somalia – AMISOM) serving at the request of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). Yet, with the December deadline approaching, there is no electoral model agreement in place with support from the Federal Member States (FMS) and other political stakeholders. In July, the FMS presidents met in Dhusamareb, capital of Galmudug state, and FGS leaders joined the conference during the second phase, with the 2021 electoral model as the number one issue of discussion.

The 2020/21 Electoral Roadmap

Planning for the 2020/2021 Somali federal election was hindered by a number of critical factors. The Federal Parliament started electoral preparations late, when the House Speaker Mohamed Mursal nominated a parliamentary committee to prepare electoral laws, in June 2019. The FGS leaders' seeming unwillingness to engage in broad-based political consultations and consensus-building with FMS leaders was another impediment. Prior to the Dhusamareb Conference, the status quo was defined by heightened political tensions between the FGS and FMS, since the last round of FGS-FMS dialogue collapsed in Puntland capital Garowe, in May 2019.

As the federal institutions' term nears an end, pressure was building for months on the FGS to produce an election plan. Many voices, domestic and international, have openly called for the FGS to engage in national consultations with the FMS administrations, political associations and civil society.[1] As a matter of policy, the FGS leadership has engaged parliamentary leaders of the two Houses, as well as parliamentary committees and the National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC), but has not made similar outreach efforts to widen consultations by engaging with a broader group of political stakeholders, primarily the FMS administrations.

For months, there has been growing concern with politicians voicing uncertainty over the lack of an agreed election plan. Without a plan that clearly defines electoral modalities, the federal institutions risk becoming one-party in a political

dispute with an alliance of FMS administrations and opposition political groups, all of whom are vying for power and influence in Mogadishu.

On May 27, NIEC was scheduled to address the Federal Parliament and present the Commission's electoral recommendations; however, for unclarified reasons, Federal Parliament voted to extend the Commission's presentation by an additional 30 days (to June 27).[2] This frustrated some federal parliamentarians, partly represented by an umbrella group of national political associations, known as the Forum for National Parties (FNP). The FNP is led by former Somali president and presidential candidate, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed.[3]

One MP who addressed parliament, Abdulkadir Ali Osoble, objected to parliament's vote to delay the Commission's presentation and called on parliament to "hold an extraordinary session" on the 2020/2021 elections:[4]

> "…our parliamentary leadership [Speakers] and our [Houses of] Parliament seem to be working towards elections not occurring on time, while making excuses for delayed elections. How long has the draft Political Parties Law sat in the People's Assembly? The blame of delayed elections rests with the two Houses [of Federal Parliament]."

Timeline of Major Events for 2020/2021 Somali Federal Elections	
Date	**Event**
July 21, 2019	People's Assembly Speaker Mohamed Mursal nominates Interim Committee to Prepare National Elections Law[5]
November 15, 2019	NIEC Chairperson suggests 2-3 million registered voters for 1P1V elections in Somalia[6]
December 18, 2019	High-level delegation from UN, IGAD and EU visited Puntland state and called for "one-person, one-vote elections, finalization of Federal Constitution, continued progress toward debt relief, and the fight against Al Shabaab"[7]
December 19, 2019	Somalia's international partners call for elections "to be held on time in late 2020/early 2021, without extension of the terms of the Executive or Parliament"[8]
December 28, 2019	People's Assembly (Lower House of Federal Parliament) voted to approve Electoral Law (*171 MPs voted yes; 5 MPs voted no; 2 MPs abstained*)[9]
January 23, 2020	US Ambassador to Somalia calls for timely elections[10]
February 7, 2020	Puntland government shuts down NIEC office in Garowe[11]
February 8, 2020	Upper House of Federal Parliament voted to approve Electoral Law (27 Senators voted yes, 6 Senators voted no)[12]
February 21, 2020	Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo' signed Electoral Bill into law, paving the way for 2021 Somali federal elections
February 28, 2020	UN Security Council called for "one-person, one-vote elections"[13]
March 14, 2020	EU Special Representative to Somalia calls for timely elections[14]
March 22, 2020	UN Special Representative to Somalia welcomed Puntland president's proposed trip to Mogadishu to discussions with FGS leaders[15]
June 10, 2020	Upper House issues declaration calling for FGS-FMS Conference before June 25[16]
June 21, 2020	People's Assembly approves Women's Quota Law (134 MPs voted yes, 7 MPs voted no)[17]
June 23, 2020	People's Assembly approves Northern Seats in Parliament Law (*167 MPs voted yes and 1 MP voted no*)[18]
June 27, 2020	People's Assembly approves Banadir Representation in Upper House Law (*142 MPs voted yes and 4 MPs voted no*)[19]
June 28, 2020	NIEC informs Federal Parliament that it needs 13 months (starting July 2020) to hold 1P1V elections in Somalia (Federal Parliament mandate ends in December 2020)[20]
June 30, 2020	People's Assembly approves Designated Regional Seats Law (*144 MPs voted yes, 4 MPs voted no and 2 MPs abstained*)[21]
July 7, 2020	Upper House issues declaration that it does not recognize four election-related laws approved by the People's Assembly (Lower House)[22]

July 8, 2020	FGS-FMS consultative conference on 2021 federal elections, hosted by Somali President in Mogadishu, was suspended without announcement
July 11, 2020	Dhusamareb Conference attended by five FMS leaders (Galmudug, Puntland, Hirshabelle, Southwest and Jubaland) opens in Galmudug state capital[23]
July 13, 2020	FMS Presidents Conference concludes in Dhusamareb with a 5-point communique[24]
July 13, 2020	Upper House Speaker Abdi Hashi welcomed the Dhusamareb Conference outcome[25]
July 15, 2020	People's Assembly Speaker Mohamed Mursal rejected Dhusamareb Conference outcome[26]
July 23, 2020	FGS-FMS Dhusamareb Conference concludes with 8-point communique[27]

Belated, the FGS has completed some tasks on the path towards elections, including submitting the draft Electoral Law to parliament. The People's Assembly approved the Electoral Law in December 2019, and the Upper House approved the law in February 2020. Upper House Speaker Mohamed Abdi Hashi remarked that the law would then be forwarded to Somali President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmajo', who signed the bill into law on February 21, 2020, at a televised event flanked by national leaders at his sides; namely, Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire, Deputy PM Mahdi Mohamed Guled, People's Assembly Speaker Mohamed Mursal, and Upper House Speaker Abdi Hashi, in a show of national unity and support attended by senior federal leaders.[28]

In his remarks, President Farmajo noted that the Federal Parliament had "amended the law" but that he "accepted it". He specifically spoke to Somali youth with the hope of introducing "one-person, one-vote" (1P1V) electoral system, which gives the youth "the power to vote" and ambitiously declared that Somalia is on a "democratic path to move our nation away from selfish interests, bloodshed and loss of property."[29] During his speech, President Farmajo expressed concern that "some political groups will not be satisfied with the Electoral Law", saying:

> "You, the people of Somalia, can see that the bill had been endorsed by both the Peoples' Assembly and by the Upper House, and I have signed it in this ceremony. It returns the power to you so you can vote for the (political) party you choose and for the person you want."[30]

Many political stakeholders are concerned that adequate preparations for 1P1V elections have not been made. In addition to security, financial and logistical challenges, the FGS-FMS dialogue process has not yet produced an agreed electoral model. Other critical preparations for 1P1V elections have also not been met. NIEC had previously announced plans for "voter registration"; in November 2019, NIEC Chairperson Halima 'Yarey' Ismail Ibrahim said that the election commission planned to start voter registration by March 2020 and register a "minimum...[of] 2 to 3 million Somalis" – out of the country's estimated population of 14 million people.[31] Months later, there has been no effort made towards implementing voter registration, in part because it remains unclear what electoral model the country adopted to guide the 2021 national elections.

Mounting Domestic Pressure

Two groups of political stakeholders have been vocal against the federal government's management of the electoral process. On one hand, some FMS administrations have opposed the Electoral Law as "lacking consultations" – with Puntland state as the most vocal among the FMS administrations. On the other hand, political associations in Mogadishu – most prominently the FNP – has also strongly criticized the electoral process.

In September 2019, the president of Puntland state, Said Abdullahi Deni, warned against "term extension":

> "Somali people have agreed on one key issue: nothing called a 'term extension' can occur in this country. This country is undergoing a political process which has ensured that government institutions are firmly grounded. One thing that Somali people have agreed [amongst themselves] which has been implemented to date, is that [national] elections are held on time."[32]

Puntland state's vocal criticism of the management of federal elections did not stop there. On February 6, 2020, Puntland Ministry of Interior and Federal Affairs closed NIEC office in the state capital Garowe and "banned NIEC from conducting election-related activities in Puntland territories".[33] Speaking in Kismayo, in December 2019, alongside representatives

from the international community, Jubaland state president Ahmed 'Madobe' Mohamed Islam warned that Somalia was "not ready" to hold 1P1V elections in 2020 and accused the FGS of undermining the Jubaland administration.[34] At the conclusion of the FNP meeting in Istanbul in March 2020, the FNP issued a 13-point communique calling for the holding of "an unconditional meeting among political stakeholders of the country: Federal Government, Federal Member States and political associations, to reach an understanding on critical issues related to 2020/2021 elections". Furthermore, the FNP statement accused the FGS of "diverting" resources from anti-terrorism operations and using these resources to "undermine Federal Member States".[35] The statement also warned federal leaders against any electoral delays:

> "In accordance with the Provisional Constitution of the country and the Electoral Law, the [national] elections should be held on time and based on multiparty political system."[36]

Call for Dialogue and Cooperation

Somalia's international partners have been largely calling for broad-based national consultations between the FGS, FMS and "other stakeholders". The central aim is to reinforce the legitimacy of the electoral process through increased participation of state authorities, political associations and civil society. On December 19, 2019, the international partners called for national elections to be "held on time in late 2020/early 2021, without extension of the terms of the Executive or Parliament".[37]

On February 28, 2020, the UN Security Council issued a press statement on elections in Somalia, reiterating its "expectation that one-person-one-vote elections, which are peaceful, transparent, timely, credible and inclusive, allowing as many citizens to vote as possible, which must be held by late 2020 or early 2021, in accordance with the Provisional Federal Constitution of Somalia". The statement warned that "any delay to elections could pose risks" and noted the "importance of full cooperation between the Federal Government of Somalia and the Federal Member States, and expressed its concern that, in the absence of such cooperation, progress will stall on key national priorities".[38] The international community's expectations was clearly set forth, with FGS-FMS dialogue as a basis to move forward national electoral plans. Nearly five months later, Somali federal and state finally leaders convened in Dhusamareb in July 2020; however, the leaders failed to produce an agreed electoral model.[39]

Western diplomats including the US ambassador have supported the Security Council's position by meeting with FGS and FMS leaders, in a bid to forge closer cooperation on national elections.[40] The EU also released similar statements.[41] The above statements from the international community are indicative of the growing urgency among Somalia's international partners to hold timely elections.

On May 30, Prime Minister Khaire declared that "holding a timely election is…one of the primary goals which the public has entrusted us with" – in the first direct and clear message that Somalia was on the path to national elections by the end of 2020. However, the Prime Minister did not elaborate on the electoral model, stating that "parliamentary committees and the electoral commission" are responsible for making election preparations.[42] On June 6, President Farmajo opened a joint session of Federal Parliament, where he reiterated the government's commitment to hold timely elections, and encouraged "the Somali people to participate in [federal] elections and to independently vote for their political party of choice, in order to overcome the deadly diseases of clannism, poverty and terrorism".[43]

Dhusamareb Conference: FGS–FMS Consultations

Dhusamareb Conference II was held July 20-23 and attended by FGS and FMS leaders. The conference aimed to restore the constitutional authority of political negotiations between the FGS and the FMS, a move that was expected to frustrate the Lower House of Federal Parliament. In recent months, Lower House MPs began approving key laws necessary for the conduct of multiparty elections, including the Electoral Law and the Political Parties Law. The laws were delayed the last session of parliament, only months before the planned elections. It is noteworthy to emphasize that the conduct of the Lower House to act unilaterally not only alienated the FMS leaders, but also the Upper House. It has become increasingly clear that MP Osoble's words – that MPs were intentionally delaying the process to force a term extension – is slowly becoming a reality. The federal parliament's late approval of electoral laws during the last year of parliament's mandate may be construed as a delay tactic that pushes Somalia further towards term-extension.

From a constitutional perspective, political negotiations on power, resource-sharing and federalization matters are between the two levels of government: the federal-level and the state-level. Given Somalia's delicate political transition, an agreement between the FGS and the FMS should form the core of parliamentary legislations and be guided by it. Moving ahead, without an agreement on the electoral model or disregarding the impact of delayed FGS-FMS consultations, is a risky move that may provoke further political backlash or worsen already damaged relations within federal institutions.

Critique of Proposed Electoral Models

NIEC has not shared with the public any electoral model to be reviewed and debated in the public sphere. This void has been filled by Somali think-tanks and policy institutes recommending options for proposed electoral models for the 2020/2021 national elections. Somali Public Agenda (SPA), a think-tank in Mogadishu, published a proposed electoral entitled, "Between Direct Election and 2016 Indirect Election for Somalia: A Middle Ground Electoral Model." The key takeaways were 4.5 selection basis for Lower House parliamentary seats and same day voter registration that would be conducted jointly by NIEC and FMS, which would occur in 3 districts per each FMS. Lastly, Upper House senators would be elected by State Parliaments and a separate plan for MPs from Somaliland regions.

SPA key amendments to the previous electoral model is the same day voter registration by a new transitional electoral body composed of NIEC and FMS, with emphasis on eliminating the role of clan elders and elections to occur in three districts instead of one. The key question that still remains is: if elders are to be removed from the registration process, how will the proposed joint transitional electoral body select the voters and on what criteria?

In July, Puntland Development and Research Center (PDRC), a think-tank based in the Somali state of Puntland, published a study entitled, "Somalia's Transition Option for 2020-2021 Elections". PDRC proposed an Indirect Elections model, with 101 voters per seat for a total of 27,775 voters nationally, doubling the number of voters from 2016/2017 indirect elections.[44] The study fell short of detailing how the electoral model would be different from the 2016/2017 election. The 2016/2017 electoral process was largely considered an election marred by "huge corruption", according to then-Auditor-General Nur Farah Jimale, who stated that bribes "between $1,000 to $5,000" were paid to voters.[45] The addition of 50 voters is not enough to deter corruption, as candidates will likely attempt to gain majority percentages of the 101 voters PDRC proposes. The model improves upon the previous electoral modality, but does not address some of the grave concerns of the previous electoral process.

In May 2020, the Heritage Institute of Policy Studies (HIPS) issued a policy brief, "Expanded Participation Model: Alternative for Somalia's 2020 One-Person One-Vote Plan". The paper's analysis of the Electoral Law notes that "Somalia would use the first-past-the-post model of the Single Member Plurality system" as basis of federal elections.[46] Citing the electoral law's "deficiencies", the policy paper shares its concern that the Federal Parliament "has for the first time, codified the 4.5 system, which until now had been an unwritten rule, in the law of the land". Other "thorny issues" identified include representation in Federal Parliament for "Somaliland", noting that during the 2016/2017 election, "those MPs were conveniently selected/elected in Mogadishu, which has raised legitimate questions about their real influence in Somaliland and exposed them to the strong-arming of the incumbent President, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud".[47]

The Heritage Institute's proposal, codenamed the "Expanded Participation Model" (EPM), essentially expands on the Indirect Elections model of 2016/2017. In that election, 51 "clan voters" elected each MP of the Lower House, while FMS parliamentarians elected each state's senators to the Upper House. The proposed EPM is primarily characterized by the following principles:

- "1,000 electors" per parliamentary seat;
- "All voters from each FMS will be merged as one voting bloc"

The model anticipates that 1,000 electors per seat in the Lower House (275 legislators) would greatly enhance electoral legitimacy by ensuring that the number of voters is "markedly increased" from "14,025 [voters] four years ago [2016] to 275,000 [voters] in 2020".

Brief analysis of the "Expanded Participation Model" identified key concerns that could prevent actualization of the proposed model. In particular, in light of Somalia's weak administrative and security apparatuses, financial limitations,

violent insurgency and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is not feasible for Somalia to organize national elections with 275,000 registered voters nation-wide, in the short time span of less than 6 months. The proposal raises other are serious concerns, from the intractable logistical constraints, election security and voter registration. For example, under that proposal, Southwest state would have 69,000 voters as "one voting bloc". This does not give voters the opportunity to vote based on candidates' views and policy on local, state and national issues. Voters are influenced by "local issues" and would most likely engage with and vote for a parliamentary candidate who can articulate policy solutions for existing local problems, whilst the candidate's views on national issues may come as a secondary priority. Secondly, as the proposal calls for the election to take place in three districts per FMS, it raises concern about how NIEC can register a total of 69,000 voters in only three districts of Southwest state, for example. If that number is to be realized, NIEC would be compelled to seek voters outside of the identified and secured election districts, which may pose additional security risks for voters and election staff, as well as logistical considerations. The above-cited multitude of challenges threatens to derail a successful voter registration initiative based on the quota described in the EPM.

Increasing electors-per-seat from 51 to 1,000 is commendable and closer to a democratic exercise, if the above-cited challenges can be overcome in the short-term. The proposal's recommendation that all voters form "one voting bloc" is also a step in the right direction, as it could contribute to enhancing electoral legitimacy and reducing corruption. Yet, the proposal has potential to be refined to ensure that the risks mentioned above are mitigated, while maintaining broad engagement and preserving anti-corruption measures.

NAI Proposal: 'Broad Legitimacy Model'

NAI proposes the following electoral model for Somali federal elections 2020/2021:

- In 2016/2017 election, the Upper House was established and federal parliamentary seats were allocated to FMS (including 'Somaliland') and Banadir region, which was considered one step forward from 2012 election.
- To augment the election's legitimacy in 2020, the model proposes utilizing the federal parliament's Designated Regional Seats Law (or an amended version) allocating seats based on 18 regions of pre-1991 Somalia, another step forward to bring parliamentary seats closer to Somali communities.
- 251 voters would be registered for each seat of the People's Assembly and all voters in a region (of the 18 regions) would be combined to form a single voting bloc, to elect both federal MPs and Senators allocated to that region.
- The same voting bloc per region would also elect federal Senators from that region.
- Since each seat is at the region-level, parliamentary candidates are required to campaign and to address the region's needs during their political campaigns. Voters would have access to campaign updates and would have the opportunity to elect the most qualified MPs and Senators from their region (regardless of clan affiliation).
- Voting should take place at 2 or more secure districts per region of 18 regions (by comparison, the 2016 federal elections were limited to FMS capitals, thereby limiting voter participation and geographical representation). Potential voters should be living in the region in which the election is taking place at for no less than five years, ensuring that people who are actually regional constituents are voting for the MPs/Senators to represent them.
- 'Somaliland': 'Somaliland' unilaterally declared independence from Somalia in 1991 and does not recognize any representatives in Mogadishu. Thus, electing federal parliamentarians for 'Somaliland' presents a special case for NIEC, as no voting may take place in Somaliland-controlled areas. NAI proposes the establishment of an Electoral College of 4,000 delegates in Mogadishu, to elect each seat allocated to 'Somaliland'.

Region	People's Assembly (Lower House)	Senate (Upper House)	Number of Delegates/Seat	Number of Voters	Vote for MP / Senator	Electoral College for 'Somaliland'
Awdal	17	3	--	--	Yes	
Waqooyi Galbeed	15	3	--	--	Yes	**4,000 Voters**
Togdheer	8	3	--	--	Yes	
Sool	9	2	251	2,259	Yes	
Sanaag	6	3	251	1,506	Yes	
Bari	13	4	251	3,263	Yes	
Nugaal	6	2	251	1,506	Yes	
Mudug	17	3	251	4,267	Yes	
Galgaduud	27	7	251	6,777	Yes	
Middle Jubba	7	3	251	1,757	Yes	

Lower Jubba	17	2	251	4,267	Yes	
Gedo	19	3	251	4,769	Yes	
Bay	29	4	251	7,279	Yes	
Bakool	14	1	251	3,514	Yes	
Lower Shabelle	26	3	251	6,526	Yes	
Middle Shabelle	20	4	251	5,020	Yes	
Hiiraan	18	4	251	4,518	Yes	
Banadir	7	-	251	1,757	Yes	
Total	**275 MPs**	**54 Senators**	**-**	**63,001 voters**		

Federal Parliamentary Seats Allocated to 18 Regions[48]

This proposal considered the various challenges and potential obstacles that would impede the realization of legitimate, broad-based participation of electoral constituencies, in addition to time constraints, funding limitations, institutional weaknesses, security vulnerabilities, and the weak legal framework for incorporating political associations to partake in the indirect elections. The Broad Legitimacy Model attempts to mitigate some of the current gaps, while maintaining broader representation, limiting corruption and expanding geographical reach. The model proposes holding elections at different districts of each FMS and to form region-based voting blocs. This helps to ensure that parliamentary candidates are compelled to campaign directly to voters at the regional-level, to propose viable policies and plans that impact quality of life for district/regional communities, and to represent the actual concerns of electoral constituencies. This model also limits the possibility of corruption, as the number of voters has grown exponentially, from 14,025 voters in 2016/2017 to 67,001 voters in 2021 election. This indirect election model represents a gradual increase from the 2016/2017 election with realistic and achievable benchmarks, and with a distinct focus requiring parliamentary candidates to actively campaign to voters and to represent the concerns of their electoral constituencies.

Each electoral model comes with its inherent weakness. For this model, the security vulnerabilities and logistical challenges exist to a certain degree. NIEC will have to register 67,001 voters and hold elections in at least 16 districts in five FMS and Banadir region; in each of these regions, there are varying security considerations that need to be accounted for. Given time constraints and other limitations, expanding citizen participation in elections through an indirect elections model is the most feasible option to ensure logical progression towards achieving 1P1V elections in Somalia in the near future, for the first time since 1968 parliamentary elections. Options for electoral models in Somalia, such as proposals by Heritage Institute and NAI, should be debated openly in public spheres and not be limited to federal institutions. Encouraging civic discussion helps to foster political consensus and build broad-based domestic support for a viable electoral model that helps to ensure continuity of government and political stability.

Federalization Trends to Watch For:

❑ **FGS-Somaliland Talks**: *On June 18, 2020, FGS-Somaliland re-started political talks in Djibouti.*

❑ **Upper House representation for Banadir region**: *On June 27, 2020, Lower House of Federal Parliament approved law adding 13 seats to Upper House, to represent Banadir region.*

❑ **Upper House seats for Sool and Sanaag regions**: *On June 29, 2020, Puntland State Parliament issued a declaration that "Banadir, Sool and Sanaag regions have the right to get their representation in the Upper House, in accordance with procedures set forth by the Provisional Federal Constitution of Somalia".*

National Coordination for COVID-19 Response is Vital in Somalia

The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) seems to have transformed many non-political issues into highly political matters, which often put the FGS into confrontation with the Federal Member States (FMS) in Somalia. On July 16, 2020, the FGS Ministry of Health issued a directive claiming that only two labs in Somalia have the authority to issue COVID-19 medical certificate for air travelers. The Ministry's decree comes at a sensitive time in Somali politics, with the FGS under scrutiny for its centralizing policies – from national elections, aid management, civil aviation and COVID-19 response. This approach runs contrary to the federal framework and best interests of the Somali people, who require a united front to coordinate COVID-19 response. The Somali public is already weary of recurrent FGS-FMS disputes. As such, national coordination should be the priority as Somalia attempts to implement a coherent and effective response to the global pandemic.

The novel SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, emerged from the city of Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and has since caused a global pandemic that spread to more than 180 countries. There is heated debate as to the origins of the virus, but most scientists agree it is the product of natural evolution. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that can cause acute respiratory illnesses ranging widely in severity. In general, there are many different strains of the coronavirus and the first known one emerged in 2003, known as the Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic, which also originated from China. A second outbreak of the illness began in Saudi Arabia in 2012, known as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS).[49] The current coronavirus COVID-19 has infected nearly 3 million people worldwide and killed over 260,000 persons and counting.[50]

Due to the spread of COVID-19, the world has come to a standstill. People all over the world have been quarantined in their homes by national governments to stop the spread of the virus. Businesses, conferences, large gatherings, and sports events have all been closed or cancelled around the world. The virus also significantly impacted the global economy. Unemployment has soared all over the world, and stocks fell to a historic low. No matter where, this pandemic is taking its toll on the world's population, public health and economic order. Particularly, in developing nations, the response to the virus has been extremely slow. In those nations, the worst hit members of society are low-wage workers and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). In addition to under-funded public health institutions, many of these countries in the developing world lack the economic, technical and logistical capacities to address major shocks and economic vulnerabilities to their weak economic systems. As such, many citizens in the poor to low-income bracket do not receive any assistance by their governments, straining government budgets and amplifying the pandemic's impact on the social and economic order.

Regional Context and COVID-19 Response in Somalia

In East Africa, COVID-19 hit at a time when the region was facing multiple ongoing crises, including humanitarian crises, terrorism, high unemployment, political and economic fallouts, locust swarms, and the adverse effects of climate change. Djibouti and Somalia have the highest infections in the region. The first coronavirus case was confirmed in Somalia on March 16, 2020, and now Somalia is among the most affected countries in East Africa.[51] Somali authorities are struggling to curb the pandemic, and the FGS has come under increasingly public scrutiny for not only a delayed response, but also for their performance after human-to-human transmission first emerged in Mogadishu, the national capital.

The pandemic has also highlighted the devastating humanitarian need for the IDP communities and the lack of urgently needed professional health facilities and medical supplies across the country. The restrictions on travel and social gatherings imposed throughout Somalia's major cities has exacerbated the economic catastrophe on local communities, most of who rely on small business, low-wage jobs, and remittances from Diaspora communities. Within the country, COVID-19 is steadily spreading, and it is unlikely to flatten anytime soon. Many factors help the spread of COVID-19, such as the proximity communities live to one another, especially in densely populated cities like Mogadishu, Hargeisa, and Bossaso; the cultural practices that value social interactions; and the material reality of dilapidated infrastructure leading to poor

hygiene and sanitation. The pandemic could have a second wave after global restrictions are eased. The spread of the virus is overwhelming a fragile healthcare system.

So, what is the Somali government doing about this? Early on, the FGS did not have a single testing kit in the country and most of the testing was done abroad. Nevertheless, Somalia's transport and aviation ministry suspended both international and domestic flights in March. Somali authorities also banned travelers entering from a number of affected countries, including China, Iran, Italy and South Korea.[52] Public transportation, sporting events, schools, import of the stimulant drug khat, and mass gatherings have all been suspended, albeit temporarily. Prominent Muslim clerics have been working hard to dispel the myths and public misconceptions of the pandemic.

The FGS and most FMS appointed COVID-19 prevention task forces to deal with the spread of the pandemic. Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire announced that the FGS allocated $5 million USD to combat the virus in Somalia.[53] He also said the government completed the construction of isolation facilities in Mogadishu, to ensure all persons with suspected COVID-19 cases are quarantined. The United Nations, along with several international aid agencies, set up a "Country Preparedness and Response Plan" to respond to the humanitarian and public health crises the pandemic is causing.[54] For the humanitarian component, these organizations are to provide direct support to the FGS and coordinate efforts to tackle the health emergency and economic impact of the pandemic, and to promote ways to reduce the pandemic's social impact.

COVID-19 Threat to Somalia

COVID-19 is a national threat to public health and the economy of every country in the world. However, for most Somali people, there are many misconceptions of the coronavirus threat. Social media is abuzz with speculation that the virus is a threat to "foreign countries", or an opportunity being exploited by the alleged corrupt practices of Somali authorities to solicit more international aid, and other popular misconceptions. Largely absent is the seriousness of a deadly virus that has crippled the world's biggest economic powerhouses, killing hundreds of thousands of people and sending the most well-off countries into turmoil. Somalia is largely helpless against this pandemic. According to Johns Hopkins Global Health Security Index, Somalia is ranked 194th of 195 countries.[55] The country scored zero in infection control practices and health care access. Although recent public health response has included the shutdown of most social activities, nevertheless, over three decades of violence and poverty has virtually devastated all functioning institutions and prompted the lack of adequate response from public health officials. This situation is exacerbated by hundreds of thousands of displaced populations, many of whom are crowded into makeshift camps, making hygiene and social distancing impossible, and thus allowing the virus to potentially spread at will.

Somalia is in dire need of essential medical equipment to properly fight COVID-19. The threat of continuous violence committed by non-state actors, such as Al Shabaab insurgents, and the US military's airstrikes against them, has not let up amidst the crisis. In addition, political disputes and tensions between the FGS and the Federal Member States is continuous. This further hinders and threatens the steps needed in combat the virus and protect the Somali public. The FGS-FMS political dispute recently spilled into governmental management of COVID-19 response, after the FGS Ministry of Health announced, on July 16, 2020, that only two facilities in Mogadishu operated by the FGS Ministry of Health have the authority to issue COVID-19 medical certificates for international travel.[56] Puntland state, already locked in a long-running political dispute with the FGS, issued a press statement via the state's Ministry of Health announcing that there are state-run testing facilities in Puntland that may issue COVID-19 medical certificate for international travel.[57] Politicizing COVID-19 response, essentially a non-political matter which requires national coordination, was an ill-timed decision by the FGS Ministry of Health, especially during a time of public health crisis.

Moreover, the departure of the international donors and NGOs due to the pandemic has created a financial and humanitarian gap that could not be offset by the FGS or state authorities. The lack of mass testing is another major obstacle in combating the coronavirus, while official figures of infections are much higher than the actual tally. This is because, federal and state authorities are only able to test highly symptomatic people. The entire country has three testing labs: one in Mogadishu, one in the state of Puntland, and one in the self-declared 'republic of Somaliland'.[58] Aside from testing, there is no mechanism put in place that organizes a system of information-sharing and records across the country's health sectors; thus, there is no way of knowing accurately how many people are infected.

Way Forward: National Coordination

The biggest challenge facing the FGS and FMS authorities is the lack of a "National Coordination Plan". So far, the only major activity implemented is the formation of COVID-19 response committees, at federal and state-levels. It has become evident that the FGS is managing the pandemic response in Mogadishu, and each FMS is unilaterally implementing its own response plans. In rare cases of support, the FGS airlifts medical aid to the regions.

The FGS did not introduce new laws and regulations that guide the formation of coordinating bodies, allocate powers and limitations, identify funding sources, and strengthen working relations between federal and state authorities. Introduction of legal instruments would put in place mechanisms for information and technology sharing among committees and formulation of a joint response plan. The regulations would also consider instituting a nationally planned communication strategy for community engagement and public awareness campaigns, and would introduce a national prevention plan to help reduce the infections and the mortality rate of the virus. In addition, the laws would empower information-sharing platforms for nationally coordinated frontline workers and put in place collaboration on risk management. To deal with the COVID-19 threat, Somalia lacks political cohesion and national coordination. Politically, the willingness to support each other is missing, and so is the trust and acceptance of collaboratively tackling the pandemic. Furthermore, the FGS may be using COVID-19 response as an opportunity to extend its term, while the looming elections in Somalia is the biggest threat distracting FGS and FMS authorities from focusing on coronavirus response. To date, there has been no unified response in confronting this unprecedented threat to the public.

Somalia has seen over three decades of civil strife and the Somali people have largely developed an attitude of apathy about the pandemic's threat. These attitudes must be challenged, if the country is to combat the pandemic properly. There needs to be a stronger government response that takes into consideration the entire country and not just the capital, through collaboration between FGS and FMS authorities. There needs to be a mass information campaign to raise public awareness. The health infrastructure of the country must be improved through joint action, and the federal and state governments must purchase efficient healthcare equipment and not only depend on donated ones. Five million dollars is not going to curb this pandemic. Somali authorities need to prioritize support to people who live on hand to mouth and informal workers and provide them with face masks, soap, sanitizers and food rations where possible, to help mitigate the pandemic's impact. Independent media, Islamic clerics and volunteer community workers must be fully engaged, mobilized, supported and adequately equipped, so they can spread awareness and help stop the spread of the virus. The choice should not be between putting food on the table or dying of coronavirus. Citizens should receive from their government a comprehensive strategy that combats the virus, with special consideration for most affected and vulnerable populations. There should also be response plans for states and districts around the country. Somali authorities need to do a better job combating misinformation and stamping out social myths about the virus.

Cooperation between the FGS and FMS is fundamental in this regard. Putting aside political differences, the federal and state-level authorities must better coordinate their partnership with each other and with international organizations to serve Somali citizens and vulnerable populations. Somalia must aggressively continue and double down on negotiating for debt-relief process, as the COVID-19 recovery process could take years and the effect felt even longer. There needs to be consensus among the FGS and FMS leaders, in order to prevent a major health and economic catastrophe.

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