

Somalia faces another electoral impasse

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Despite a recent consensus deal on the conduct of national elections, implementation disputes have produced a standoff

Somalia has missed the initial December 1 deadline to launch national elections amid continued disagreements between President Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo' and his political opponents. Opposition leaders are refusing to participate in the polls unless newly constituted electoral committees are reformed to eliminate bias towards Farmajo, among other things.



President Mohamed Abdullahi 'Farmajo' (Jerome Delay/AP/Shutterstock)

What next

Farmajo faces robust pressure from domestic and international actors to make concessions regarding federal election bodies and will likely have little choice but to do so. However, he may resist or seek trade-offs on some of the opposition's subsidiary demands. A deal on election committees could get the electoral process back on track, albeit with delays, but the risk of further disputes over remaining electoral tasks is still high.

Subsidiary Impacts

- The impasse will likely require an extension of the government's mandate when it expires on December 27.
- Delays will erode the legitimacy of Prime Minister Mohammed Hussein Roble's caretaker administration and its scope to take key decisions.
- Decreased assistance from Somalia's partners will result in security gaps during elections.

Analysis

When Somali elites in September agreed on an alternative electoral model that doubled the size of the electoral college and added additional polling venues, there were serious concerns over whether this could be achieved without incurring significant delays (see [SOMALIA: New deal sets the stage for poll battle - September 24, 2020](#)).

As it turns out, Somali leaders have yet even to confront these challenges because they have not surmounted the first task of creating mutually agreeable election committees. This does not bode well for more complicated tasks down the line.

Electoral preparations have stumbled at the first hurdle

A broad constellation of opposition actors -- including 14 presidential candidates and the presidents of Jubaland and Puntland states -- have demanded the reconstitution of the federal election committee and dispute resolution committee, claiming they have been stacked with political aides of the president and prime minister, and intelligence officers loyal to Farmajo.

Jubaland and Puntland have meanwhile refused to establish their state-level electoral committees until these grievances are addressed. Although Hirshabelle, Southwest, and Galmudug states have done so, there is little confidence in the integrity of these bodies, as regional presidents can select up to eight of the eleven members, and all three regional presidents are broadly aligned with Farmajo.

Regional fractures

Somali politics has been rocked by recurrent regional election crises over recent years, featuring accusations of manipulation of electoral commissions and lists of clan electors, vote buying and intimidation. Such issues now appear to be emerging on the national stage (see [SOMALIA: Regional election disputes will fester - February 5, 2020](#)).

When regional elections are not perceived as fair or credible, aggrieved groups have often rejected the results and attempted to hold parallel processes or form rival governments. This, too, is now manifesting at the national level, with Farmajo's critics threatening to hold parallel polls if he does not meet their demands.

Although such manoeuvres are usually employed as a negotiating tactic rather than a genuine attempt to govern, the repercussions are often highly disruptive, compromising the legitimacy of electoral processes and elected officials, polarising politics and frequently sparking violence.

The divisions these episodes have wrought have often gone unhealed and could easily be inflamed again by national electoral contestations.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Jubaland's Gedo region, into which Farmajo in January began deploying federal troops in an effort to isolate regional President Ahmed Madobe, whose re-election Farmajo opposed (see [SOMALIA: Military manoeuvres raise regional risk - March 2, 2020](#)).

Madobe, backed by other opposition leaders, has demanded the withdrawal of these troops before he allows national elections to be held in his state. Beyond the high stakes for national politics, this standoff risks creating crises for Gedo's clans, caught between competing authorities attempting to manipulate how they choose regional electors and parliamentarians.

Electoral security

Plans to increase the number of polling venues compared with the last elections will multiply electoral security challenges at a time when stability is more precarious than ever, with jihadist group al-Shabaab looking resurgent and domestic security capacities ever more fragile.

On December 4, US officials confirmed that President Donald Trump has ordered the withdrawal of the roughly 700 US troops in Somalia by January (see [SOMALIA: US withdrawal poses domestic risks - December 7, 2020](#)).

Those troops had primarily been used to support Somali special forces units known as Danaab, which have become widely recognised as the most effective fighting force in an otherwise dysfunctional military. Although US troops are expected to continue their counterterrorism mission from neighbouring countries, the move could cripple the quality of US support at a crucial moment.

Equally concerning, the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region has already indirectly spilled over into Somalia. Hundreds of Ethiopian troops have been withdrawn from peacekeeping duties in Somalia to fight in Tigray, while reported forced disarmaments of Tigrayan troops have led to at least one incident of violent infighting among Ethiopian troops in Somalia.

Meanwhile, deteriorating relations with Kenya will hamper the productive role Nairobi could play in election security. Somalia on November 29 expelled Kenya's ambassador in Mogadishu over unspecified allegations he was interfering in the electoral process (see [SOMALIA: Election blame game with Kenya carries risks - December 1, 2020](#)).

Farmajo's critics claim the move was an attempt to scapegoat Kenya and divert attention from his own role in the election controversies. However, the result will be to erode relations with a key security partner when others are in no position to scale up security assistance.

It is possible al-Shabaab may not try to exploit this situation, preferring to allow the natural dysfunctions of the electoral process to speak for themselves without overt interference. However, the jihadist group will no doubt be emboldened by the apparent weaknesses in the forces arrayed against them.

Moreover, jihadist violence is not the only security risk facing these elections, which could produce violent protests or disruptions by armed actors aligned with certain political figures, regional

administrations or the federal government itself. The current capacities to contain such risks look dangerously weak.

Outlook

If Somali elites are to address the current grievances over the electoral process, polls must almost certainly be delayed and the government's mandate extended to allow time for new negotiations.

Somalia's international partners have so far been patient in pushing stakeholders back to the negotiating table, but patience is beginning to run out. Although there is likely openness to a brief delay, donor countries and the opposition will want to see Farmajo make serious concessions in return.

Farmajo's opponents may be able to look past the imbalances in the state-level election committees in pro-FGS regional administrations, in part because they expect to nominate their own loyalists to the remaining committees. However, they will almost certainly insist that the federal committees are reconstituted.

Facing robust international and opposition pressure, Farmajo may have little choice but to give ground on this issue, but he may seek trade-offs when it comes to other opposition demands, such as the withdrawal of troops from Gedo or demands for the dismissal of pro-Farmajo national intelligence chief Fahad Yasin.

There is a high risk of further electoral disputes

A deal on the election committees could be enough to get the electoral process back on track, at least for now. However, this remains just an early step in a complex electoral process, which all sides are trying to manipulate for their own gain. The risk of further disputes, especially around the selection of the electoral college and the polls themselves, remains very high. Moreover, those disputes may prove much more difficult to resolve.