

The Consequences of Political Infighting

The rift between the two top officeholders in Somalia, and the subsequent removal of Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon 'Saa'id', has dealt a serious blow to the credibility of the Federal Government of Somalia and disoriented it from the urgent task of statebuilding. Another phase of infighting could lead to the collapse of this government.

For a little over a year, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and Prime Minister Shirdon demonstrated an unusually high degree of harmony. Early on the duo pledged publicly that, as long-time friends, they will commit to a 'rift-free' government for the sake of the nation.

Amid mounting criticism against the government, however, the spirit of cooperation between the two began to fade. The consolidation of inclusive politics has given way to the internal squabbling so characteristic of previous transitional governments. The net result is a disoriented leadership and weakened government lacking domestic cohesion and international confidence.

Conflict between presidents and prime ministers in Somalia is all too familiar. Since 2000, infighting among the executive has grounded the country's slow and fragile process of recovery to a halt on eight occasions. The presidents tend to prevail but at a significant cost to their reputation and capacity to affect progress.

Anatomy of the rift

It was widely understood that the prime minister was under intense pressure from the president to form the leanest cabinet in the history of Somalia. Not long after Shirdon established a 10-member cabinet, however, rumors of an impending reshuffle and expansion surfaced due to poor performance.

The anticipated reshuffle has been repeatedly postponed raising suspicions of a rift among the executive and rendering ministers, uncertain of their positions, ineffective. Certainly the cabinet has proven incapable of rising to the daunting challenges facing the country. President Mohamud's vision, encapsulated in his Six Pillar Policy, is far from being realized.

Numerous crucial deadlines have been missed. Modest security gains have been reversed. Reports of corruption syndicates recapturing state organs reached a climax with the resignation of the Central Bank governor, Yussur Abrar, just seven weeks after taking the position.

As faith in the new government began to dwindle the two principals started to trade blame. The president's camp went on the offense, placing the government's lackluster performance on the shoulders of the prime minister. The prime minister's camp responded by accusing the president's inner circle of frustrating progress with its narrow sectarian agenda.

Executive imbalance has contributed to the woes between the two men. As noted in our April Policy Briefing, the presidency is perceived as usurping responsibilities beyond those stipulated in the Provisional Constitution and at the expense of the prime minister.

The president is required to approve important appointments and all legislations but, according to the Provisional Constitution, the cabinet under the leadership of the prime minister holds the highest executive powers.

Critics accuse the president of over-stepping his duties by assuming many of the

responsibilities reserved for the prime minister. The prime minister, meanwhile, has been mocked in domestic media for unconditional submission to the president. By all accounts, the prime minister's loyalty to the president has been consistent until this episode erupted.

Fundamental flaws

Notwithstanding the unprecedented harmony displayed by President Mohamud and Prime Minister Shirdon in their first year, political infighting was sadly inevitable. The divided executive system—also known as the hybrid system—puts the two principals on an unavoidable collision course.

The Provisional Constitution empowers the president to appoint the prime minister but not to dismiss him. It also grants significant initiation powers to the cabinet, though implementation of all policies requires the approval of the president.

The Provisional Constitution was designed to ensure balance between the main clans of Somalia. A powerful cabinet under a prime minister from one clan and a president from another, it was argued, would limit the authority of each at the expense of the other.

Unfortunately this arrangement has instead proven to perpetuate conflict among the top officeholders, paralyzing state functions, and reigniting communal tensions. The structure of the executive requires urgent reconsideration in the process of reviewing the Provisional Constitution.

Consequences

This latest round of infighting in Somalia's painfully slow process of political development will have various consequences.

Al-Shabaab appears effective at exploiting the security gaps resulting from a disoriented leadership. Mogadishu is noticeably less safe than it was a year ago. Attacks are more frequent, more precise, and more destructive.

Corruption syndicates also benefit from the crisis. Allegations of political brokers buying votes en masse for both camps are rife. If the vote-buying

frenzy of the last election serves as an example, extensive misuse of public funds was likely.

Time, energy, and financial resources will be needed to install a new prime minister and cabinet, putting almost all political processes 'on hold' for the forthcoming weeks and months.

Competition among clans will inevitably surge as each vie for their clan's ascendancy to the prime minister's post and key cabinet posts. The ensuing competition deepens inter-communal tensions and promotes a climate of discord and rivalry.

Eroding Confidence

Public support for the government has sunk to its lowest level since being inaugurated in late 2012 as it grows increasingly indistinguishable from its corrupt and ineffective predecessors.

Relations with the regions are fraught with tension. Despite various agreements, relations with Jubaland remain difficult. The Speaker of Parliament's support for the formation of a six-region federal state incorporating the three regions claimed by Jubaland has not helped this.

Puntland continues to abstain from relations with the federal government. Its rhetoric toward the federal government has grown acrimonious. The third round of negotiations with Somaliland have been postponed. Flights between Hargeisa and Mogadishu have been suspended over a row about passports.

The current infighting comes at considerable expense to the political capital the government has managed to accrue among the international community, which subsequently mobilized unprecedented political and financial support in the past year.

Development partners are understandably concerned by the clear lack of unity and purpose among the executive. Combined with the recent resignation of the governor of the Central Bank over allegations directly implicating the Office of the Presidency, trust in the government's commitment to transparency and accountability is waning.

National elections, constitutionally mandated for 2016, are growing increasingly untenable. None of the 11 mandated independent commissions have been established. A clear strategy for the consolidation of federalism does not exist. Key legislations are yet to be written.

Parliament has been complicit in the on-going political crisis. Over 250 parliamentarians cast votes during the motion against the prime minister - the highest since the presidential elections in 2012. Many parliamentarians have been, however, otherwise conspicuous by their absence from Somali politics.

The high turn out for the prime minister's vote of not confidence is sadly just a further indication of widespread vote-buying rather than the civic responsibility of parliamentarians.

With considerably less legitimacy and support, it is difficult to envisage the emergence of capable state institutions ushering Somalia into a new era of inclusive politics in the next three years. The government's daunting challenges appear increasingly insurmountable.

Conclusion

Confidence in the Federal Government of Somalia, at home and abroad, has been badly damaged by the recent political infighting that resulted in the removal of Prime Minister Shirdon. Given that he's widely perceived as a weak leader having surrendered his constitutional obligations to the president, few will mourn his departure.

The president, however, repeatedly promised a new era of rift-free politics. His ambush on a seemingly supportive prime minister leaves him exposed to accusations of the self-serving connivance epitomized by his predecessors.

While the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) and donor support provide a lifeline to the government, the national political climate has, once again, turned toxic. Cooperation and patriotism have been replaced by bickering and sectarian rhetoric.

Still the crisis may offer a second lease of life for the government if managed properly. The president has an opportunity to correct the mistakes of the past year. To win the confidence of the Somali people and the international community the president must now take the following steps:

- I. Urgently appoint a capable, credible, and independent prime minister tasked with refocusing the government's agenda and regaining domestic and international confidence.
- II. Following consultations allow the new prime minister to appoint an equally capable and credible cabinet.
- III. Allow the new prime minister and cabinet to execute their constitutional obligations of serving the country.
- IV. Engage in reconciliation efforts with all communities as Somalia advances towards a multiparty system and democratic elections.

Ultimately, however, the fundamental flaws in the Provisional Constitution must be addressed to avert a similar crisis. The hybrid parliamentary and presidential system is evidently not working for Somalia.

The country must either adopt parliamentary democracy with a popularly elected prime minister, or a popularly elected president with a prime minister maintaining administrative authority and serving at the pleasure of the president.

One of the first tasks for the government, following the appointment of a new prime minister and formation of a new cabinet, is to initiate a meaningful debate about the structure of the executive and the fundamental flaws in the Provisional Constitution.