

Somalia needs conciliatory not confrontational politics

Key Messages

- Instead of fostering an environment conducive to political stability, the Somali government has wasted time, energy and prestige in pointless squabbling with the regions and other political forces.
- Grand political settlement among all stakeholders is the surest way to political stability and ultimately defeating al-Shabaab.
- The Gulf crisis is having a deleterious impact on Somalia's political stability, pitting federal member states and other political forces against the federal government. The Gulf parties need to spare Somalia from their rivalry, if they are serious about supporting Somalia's already fragile recovery.
- A robust and inclusive constitutional review process can unlock the current crisis, but all sides must seize the moment to confront Somalia's fundamental challenges.

Introduction

On October 14 Mogadishu was rocked by the deadliest explosion in its history, killing more than 400 people and injuring hundreds of others. Reliable figures are hard to come by, but the blast, which flattened the buildings around the clogged Zoppe Junction in the Hodan district, has caused mayhem and material destruction estimated to be in the millions of dollars.

What is becoming crystal clear, however, is that the tragedy could be translated into an opportunity to unite the nation and galvanize the public into collective action against al-Shabaab, which is widely believed to be behind the attack even if it shied away from claiming its ghastly outcome. In fact, the nation has expressed mass outrage at the impunity with which al-Shabaab continues to massacre citizens and wreak havoc. Somalis all around the world have responded by collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars in support of the victims of the attack.

Such an unprecedented outpouring of support can be harnessed if the renewed energy of the public is channelled properly. That will only happen if the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) shifts course from the perceived confrontational approach to a more conciliatory and accommodating strategy with political stakeholders, especially the Federal

Member States (FMS). Over the past few months, progress has been stymied by a series of political crises involving the government and the member states. Although external influences (the Gulf crisis) sparked the most serious of the brewing crises, other problems have been self-inflicted by the government. This is now compounded by a spectacular security challenge, as demonstrated by the devastating attack on October 14.

Taken together, the political crises and the ubiquitous security challenges raise fundamental questions about the leadership of the federal government and its capacity and strategies for political settlement and defeating the al-Shabaab menace. The crises also shed fresh light on the leadership of the member states and their vulnerability to external influence. Above all, the prevailing crises dampen the extraordinary optimism that surrounded the election of President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo in February 2017. The Somali people welcomed his election with an overwhelming elation, viewing him as a different kind of a leader who oozed hope, confidence and renewed nationalism. Although every election brings fresh hope, Farmaajo's victory on that February 8 afternoon was seen as genuinely the best chance for a makeover in a country that desperately needs a positive narrative.

The events of the last few months are far from positive. Yet any astute leader can turn a negative narrative to a positive one — but only if he or she is willing to change course and demonstrate tact. This policy brief offers ways in which the incumbent federal government leaders and their regional stakeholders can do exactly that.

Anatomy of A Crisis

In Somalia, the trajectory of a political crisis is so familiar to keen observers that it follows the script unflinchingly each time. An underdog candidate is elected president with a stunning majority, prompting him to revel in the outcome as a strong sign of an unquestionable popular mandate, notwithstanding that presidential elections have more to do with complex horse trading, backdoor wheeling and dealing and, above all, the mighty dollar. The person with the best ideas or the most capable candidates never win, simply because a few hundred parliamentarians cast a vote informed by intricate factors. Rookie leaders then misread the immediate public support and the fresh international backing as a *carte blanche* to amend the political landscape of the country. Their pick for prime minister is usually whisked through the parliamentary endorsement process with little or no effort. But that is where post-election euphoria truly ends and political brinkmanship begins.

The first real sign of trouble typically emerges during the formation of the Council of Ministers. Like their predecessors, Farmaajo and prime minister Hassan Ali Khairé fell into a familiar trap: they sidelined major political forces, including the member states, during the formation of the Council of Ministers. Despite the overwhelming endorsement of parliament in favor of Khairé's cabinet, the seeds of political discontent appear to have been sown deeply. The discontent only became clear when an opportunity (a mistake by the federal government leaders) presented itself. The government then made series of mistakes in August.

First, more than a dozen civilians were killed by a US air strike in the village Barirre, prompting protests by their kinsmen. Amid the debacle, the government issued at least four conflicting statements regarding the incident. Initially, it sent condolences to the families of the victims, before rescinding its sympathies and stressing that the dead were, in fact, terrorists.

That exposed major cracks in the government's capacity to communicate coherently.

Second, the minister of commerce and industry issued a scathing letter a few days later in which she effectively disbanded the Somali Chamber of Commerce. The minister's order was reversed, and the Chamber of Commerce received an apology from senior members of the government.

Third, the government handed over a senior leader of the ONLF to Ethiopia. Abdikarim Qalbi-Dhagax was a key operative of the rebel group in Somalia. His extraordinary rendition on terrorism charges almost wiped out Farmaajo's once irrefutable nationalist credentials. The president is now seen by many as yet another Somali politician whose nationalist rhetoric ultimately succumbs to Ethiopian dominance.

Sensing the dynamite nature of the Qalbi-Dhagax case, the leadership of the federal parliament set up a special parliamentary committee comprised of both sides of the debate. The committee is tasked with investigating the case, including interviewing senior government officials and reporting back to the House of the People. Supporters of the president celebrated the move as 'detouring the crisis' while his detractors contend that the case is a volcano that will inevitably erupt in the near future. The sequence of these events sparked heated national debate, public fury and created image problems for the federal government. These issues were the beginning of much tougher legal, political, diplomatic and security challenges. They include the spill over effect of the Gulf crisis, the internal leadership crisis of some federal member states, the unilateral decision of the federal units to form the Council for Inter-governmental Cooperation (CIC) in Kismaayo and the deteriorating security situation.

Impact of Gulf Crisis

When the Gulf crisis erupted in June, observers in the country knew that it would adversely impact Somalia, which maintains strong diplomatic relations with both sides of the conflict. The blockading nations (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt) have exerted tremendous pressure on the government to sever ties with Qatar.

Even under unbearable duress, the Somali leadership has taken a neutral position that was widely celebrated as courageous and dignified. Gone were the days when a suitcase of petrodollars would dictate the independent foreign policy of Somalia. Or so many thought.

Somalia's neutrality was interpreted by the infuriated Saudi alliance as a pro-Qatar stance. Member state leaders then started to break off relations with the federal government over its refusal to take sides, citing historical ties with the Saudi coalition. Some member state presidents travelled to Abu Dhabi to allegedly collect untold largesse in exchange for their pro-coalition positions – openly defying (and embarrassing) the federal government. Both the government and member states found articles in the ever ambiguous and flexible provisional constitution to back their positions. The government cited Article 54 which, among other things, expressly puts foreign policy under its exclusive domain. The member states cited Article 53, which requires the government to consult with them on consequential matters.

With the absence of a constitutional court to settle the disagreement, the government allegedly began to covertly subdue the member states. The newly installed president of Hirshabelle, Ali Abdullahi Ossoble, was ousted. He claimed that he was a victim of defying the government's pro-Qatar position.

A few weeks later, a group of Galmudug MPs met at a hotel in the interim capital of Adaado and declared that they had sacked president Ahmed Duale Gelle (Haaf), despite the absence of the speaker of the parliament (who told local media he was placed under house arrest by Haaf) or his two deputies. Haaf stated publicly that a coup organized by the federal leadership was afoot in his region. The strongest evidence of that is a letter from the ministry of interior endorsing the decision by the MPs to sack Haaf.

In retaliation, Haaf organized a meeting of MPs who then sacked the vice president and the speaker of parliament of Galmudug (two officials who had previously opposed Haaf's pro-Saudi position). The two officials hail from the same sub-clan as Farmaajo and Khaire, giving the Galmudug contest a tribal undertone. In Baidoa, the interim capital of Southwest state, local MPs are trying to sack President Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden.

As of this writing, the campaigns against him are demonstrable in Baidoa and Mogadishu. In Puntland, the vice president openly criticized President Abdiweli Gaas for his pro-Saudi/UAE/Egypt position—an unprecedented move in the most stable of Somalia's semi-autonomous member states. There are also calls in Garowe, the capital of Puntland, to punish Gaas for his cosiness with the UAE.

The impact of the Gulf crisis on Somalia's internal affairs has illustrated four things. First, it showed the ambiguity of the provisional constitution, which ironically provides legal reasoning for the contradictory positions of the federal and state governments. Without the powers and responsibilities of the federal and state governments being clearly outlined in the constitution, the federal-state rift will likely continue.

Second, parties to the Gulf crisis who were bankrolling rival candidates during the presidential election continue to use their petrodollars to negatively influence Somalia's politics.

Third, the Gulf crisis illustrated the vulnerabilities of Somali leaders to inducement or pressure and the penchant of regional politicians for freelance politicking.

Finally, how the leadership of the federal government handled its clash with the member states shows its unhelpful, confrontational approach towards governance. All these issues combined illustrate the need for political settlement, which is a cornerstone in building state institutions, delivering public services, reviving the economy and improving the security situation.

[National Political Crisis](#)

What started out as a seemingly insular, distant dispute between Arab States is now a fully-fledged national political crisis in Somalia. Allegedly under assault by the federal government, the member states decided to coalesce around a new entity – the Council of Inter-Governmental Cooperation (CIC) following a hurriedly organized meeting in Kismaayo in October, the interim capital of Jubbaland. Under the chairmanship of Gaas, the president of Puntland, the CIC issued a scathing communiqué in which it accused the federal government of a litany of “interferences and destabilization schemes”.

Citing the provisional constitution and their right to form such a council, the regions suspended “cooperation with the FGS on key areas” including the review of the federal provisional constitution until further notice. This council seems to duplicate the duties of the upper house, which according to article 71 of the constitution is representative of the member state’s interests at the federal level.

The government did not respond to the allegations until the release of the Kismaayo communiqué. Farmaajo sent a conciliatory letter, only to be dwarfed by a fiery speech by his prime minister later the same day, apparently pointing to a divided palace over how to handle the member states. Hawkish elements within Farmaajo’s circle may contend that jolting them will yield the desired results—either the overthrow of their wayward presidents (i.e Hirshabelle or Galmudug) or their submission to the diktat of the federal government. However, Farmaajo’s recent invitation to the state presidents to talks in Mogadishu is a commendable effort to de-escalate the situation.

Meanwhile, prominent politicians have been meeting in Abu Dhabi, apparently forming a fresh alliance against the Farmaajo administration. They include former presidents Sheikh Sharif and Hassan Sheikh and former prime minister Omar Sharmarke. It is widely understood that the new political alliance has the backing of the anti-Qatar coalition. Apparently, the coalition is hell-bent on exacting revenge against what they view as the pro-Qatar position of the federal government, zeroing in on alleged links between senior presidential advisors and Qatar.

Security Challenges

Against this backdrop the October 14 truck bomb froze everything in place. For now, the nation is united in mourning the dead, helping the victims and, most importantly, preparing for action.

Yet questions remain about how a truck of that size went through a series of checkpoints into the heart of the city in broad daylight. Experts believe it points to security lapses—in particular an epic failure of intelligence capabilities. Two days before the truck bomb, the army chief of staff resigned under duress as did the minister of defence. The FGS said they resigned on their own, but that didn’t add up. A few days after the blast, a new army chief of staff was appointed.

He is the third since Farmaajo took office eight months ago, pointing to the extremely high turnover rate within the government. That undermines the stability of security institutions and diminishes accountability.

Meanwhile AMISOM is angry about the contents of a leaked letter written by the minister of foreign affairs. Addressed to the US ambassador, the letter portrayed AMISOM as a failing partner incapable of securing the country from “uranium mining by Iran”. The unproven uranium allegation was widely derided as a desperate attempt to alarm the Trump administration into intervening in Somalia (the US president has already authorized more air strikes and other operations).

Following the bombing, Farmaajo visited three neighbouring and AMISOM troop-contributing countries to get support for his efforts to stage a large-scale assault against al-Shabaab. However, security is directly connected with political settlement. Therefore, the current intra-Somali squabbling coupled with the lack of equipment, training and the loosely-coordinated security apparatus means that defeating al-Shabaab will be easier said than done.

Conclusion

Barely eight months into Farmaajo’s administration, the federal government faces an extraordinary and diverse set of challenges. The entire nation is demoralized by the truck bomb. Many are recalculating their physical and financial commitment to Mogadishu, the seat of the federal government.

Member states feel under assault from the federal government and have ceased cooperation in critical areas such as the constitution. Senior politicians are forming a fresh alliance designed to weaken the federal leadership. The Gulf crisis is not ebbing and continues to bog down Farmaajo’s administration. The popularity of government and its leaders sank following the Qalbi-Dhagax debacle.

Despite the challenges, the president may still have the political capital that could translate the October 14 tragedy into an opportunity to unite the nation, if he so chooses. In doing so, he may not only resurrect his erstwhile popularity among Somalis, but he could also prevent the country from losing yet another golden opportunity.

Policy Recommendations

- The president's invitation to member state leaders for talks on October 28 is a wise move. By inviting the embattled Galmudug leader, Farmaajo is signalling that he is not only reversing the government's recognition of Haaf's sacking, but he is also extending an olive branch to the new CIC bloc. There must be a similar rapprochement with other political forces, particularly the senior politicians who met in Abu Dhabi and their teams inside the federal parliament. Ostracizing stakeholders and exclusionary politicking has already wasted much time, energy and resources. Farmaajo needs to turn a new page.
- The constitutional review process is the best place to solve the disputes between the federal government and states over respective powers and responsibilities. This should therefore be expedited and consensus must be made on federal-exclusive, state-exclusive and concurrent powers and responsibilities. The October 28 consultation between the government and member states is a good place to start this discussion.
- Defeating al-Shabaab and securing the country must be a priority. It also needs to be a collective effort. The federal government should seek political settlement with the member states and other political forces in the country. This is a prerequisite for the reorganizing, integrating, rightsizing and preparing of battle-ready forces with sufficient equipment, resources and logistical support.
- Politicians in the regions and at the national level should not undermine Farmaajo's presidency and should certainly not collude with external actors. The country needs continuity, political maturity and to accept that winners of elections have the right to govern.
- Regional leaders should stop their freelance foreign policy escapades as these actions demonstrably weaken the reconstitution of a viable Somali state. Tantalizing foreign trips provide instant gratification and may bring personal gains, but undermining national leaders obstructs the establishment of a credible Somali state.
- Somalia's Arab neighbors, particularly the anti-Qatar coalition, need to understand that Somalis suffered for a quarter of a century. In every human development index – be it literacy, child mortality, livelihoods – Somalia is at the lowest level. The recent carnage in Mogadishu is just the latest example of the high cost of instability. Wanton meddling and inducements to politicians weakens the country's fragile institutions and the ensuing instability only benefits al-Shabaab.



Readers are encouraged to reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holder, the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. For online use, we ask readers to link to the original resource on the HIPS website.

© Heritage Institute for Policy Studies 2014. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-nonCommercial Licence (CC BY-NC 3.0).