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# Strategic Transition and Electoral Governance in Somalia: A Policy Brief for the 2026 Elections

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## STRATEGIC TRANSITION AND ELECTORAL GOVERNANCE IN SOMALIA: A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR THE 2026 ELECTION

**About CES Somalia:** The Center for Social Development (CES) is an independent, non-partisan Somali policy institution headquartered in Garowe. It works to address the underlying causes of poverty, promote peace, governance and socioeconomic development.

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## Executive Summary

- This paper proposes a structured roadmap for managing Somalia’s strategic political transition toward credible, inclusive, and conflict-sensitive electoral governance in 2026. It seeks to bridge political consensus-building, institutional preparedness, legal harmonization, and stakeholder engagement in order to reduce polarization and enhance legitimacy.
- Somalia faces a convergence of constitutional, electoral, and security crises as federal mandates expire in April-May 2026. Without urgent political consensus on an electoral model, state legitimacy risking parallel electoral processes, armed conflict, and Al-Shabaab threats.
- The UN political mission closes in October 2026, removing the sole neutral mediator, while AUSSOM faces funding gaps and potential proxy tensions and competitions.
- Democratic transition is hindered by entrenched competition of that major clans demand constituency-based popular elections, while minority clans insist the 4.5 power-sharing formula be preserved. For decades, the institutions that could have formed the foundation for democratic transition remain either contentious or unestablished.
- The paper proposes two viable models. First, universal elections are possible if pursued via a two-year transitional government led by a consensus Prime Minister tasked with finalizing the constitution, defeating terrorists, and preparing constituency-based polls. Alternatively, an improved indirect model, mandate biometric registration, and empower respective elders to select delegates from their clans without political interference, as this is a precedented and immediately implementable model.
- Immediate action is required. Halt all unilateral constitutional amendments; resume review only with all FMS at the table. Narrow February, 2026 talks strictly to the electoral model; defer all other disputes to a post-election "National Dialogue House" in place of the failed NCC.
- Election implementation committees must to be by a non-political entity or through a mixed approach involving civil society vetting. Somaliland representation requires special arrangements. These measures are essential to prevent the corruption and manipulation that marred the last two electoral cycles.
- Crucially, renew UNTMIS for four years to retain neutral mediation. Depoliticize security forces, secure AUSSOM funding, and suspend controversial troop contributors. Without urgent, internationally-backed negotiation confined to an implementable electoral model, the already fragile Somalia will remain political crises compounded by catastrophic factors of droughts and security.

## Introduction

**Overview:** The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) now faces a convergence of constitutional, security, electoral and institutional crises. As the mandate of the incumbent administration approaches expiration in April and May 2026 (Parliament and Presidency respectively), the absence of a broad political consensus on an electoral model threatens the very foundation of state legitimacy and risks undermining the fragile gains achieved over the past two decades. This policy brief by the Center for Social Development (CES), provides an analysis of the historical precedents, evaluates the risks in the current transition and proposes viable electoral models to inform national political leaders to manage the 2026 transition.

**Historical Foundations:** The evolution of electoral processes in Somalia reflects between the aspiration for democratic universal suffrage and the practical realities of the post-conflict context. Somalia has not held direct elections since 1969, followed by complete state collapse in 1991 after two decades of military rule. The re-establishment of the Third Republic emerged from a reconciliation conference mediated by the international community in 2004 in Kenya, delivered the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and its Charter, through which Somalis agreed to adopt a federal system and a clan-based power-sharing system allocating representation among the four major clans and a coalition of minority clan related lineages (the 4.5 formula). Since then, Somalia has relied on varying forms of indirect elections.

Somalia is a parliamentary republic. The first post-collapse election held inside Somalia took place in Mogadishu, in 2012, when 135 recognized traditional elders nominated the 275 members of the House of the People. Although this model was exclusionary, it was widely regarded as an implementable arrangement that delivered an internationally recognized Federal Government of Somalia (FGS). This was followed by the 2016–2017 electoral cycle, in which the electorate expanded to approximately 14,025 delegates, with 51 voters per parliamentary seat appointed by clan elders. Voting locations increased to six (one per FMS and Mogadishu) and the Upper House representing the FMS, was established.

The third electoral cycle 2021–2022 further expanded the electorate to more than 28,000 voters, with 101 voters per seat and eleven voting locations. All three electoral models emerged from political agreements mediated by the international community, reached after periods of intense deadlock, term extensions, and violent conflict. However, the third cycle was regarded as the most irresponsible, corrupt, and disorderly. The extent of corruption and manipulation was evident as only 21 of the 329 seats in the bicameral parliament were contested by more than two candidates.

**The Supremacy of Political Agreements:** the central theme in Somali political history is not only the constitution but also the consistent failure of formal electoral laws to gain universal acceptance. The 2012, 2016, and 2022 transitions of power in the representative bodies were all managed through negotiated political agreements rather than the application of the Provisional Constitution. The electoral laws are often viewed as partisan instruments, whereas political agreements are seen as a mechanism for power-sharing among the leaders (FGS, FMS) and political elites.

**Constitutional Disputes and the Erosion of Trust:** The 2012 Provisional Constitution was intended to be finalized through a negotiated review process. Since then, Somalia’s development partners have invested heavily in supporting the constitution-making process with the goal of its completion. Currently, 15 national agencies are engaged in this effort, yet the process remains far from conclusion. In March 2024, the federal parliament passed amendments to four constitutional chapters, changes introduced the awarding of extreme powers to the Presidency. This move created deep mistrust and ultimately led Puntland and Jubaland to declare an “independent status.” The resulting protracted constitutional crisis now represents arguably the most significant threat to a successful political transition in 2026.

## The Barriers to Democratic Transition

**The Clan Power-sharing Formula:** Allocates representation by clan structure rather than geographic or population. The minority clans in Somalia hold the majority of seats in the federal councils, which has become a source of dysfunction, as the councils are often unable to resolve the contentious issues over power and resource sharing, a competition between the major clans. Simultaneously, minority clans feel underrepresented and disadvantaged within the FMS structures. They insist any future popular vote system must preserve their representation through the 4.5 model. Conversely, major clans argue a constituency-based model must replace the clan formula under popular elections. This irreconcilable debate is a major obstacle to democratic transition, though the 4.5 formula remains the only mechanism that has so far managed inter-clan competition.

**Weak Institutions:** The institutions necessary to establish fundamental infrastructure are either not established, weak in terms of skills, understanding of mandate, or contentious. The civic registration agency has been diverted from its originally designed locally operating model to a centralized system for registering citizens. This is accompanied by the statistics agency remaining distrusted and politicized. Other core institutions, such as independent courts, electoral bodies and political parties also remain highly politicized. Therefore, true negotiations are indispensable to address these core issues, delegating civic registration to local governments, establishing population census methods free from political agendas, genuine political parties, constituency allocations and building trusted judicial structures.

**Security:** Somalia’s security apparatus will not allow democratic elections. The threat is not limited to Al-Shabaab’s recurrent attacks/threats but national security forces themselves can be easily instrumentalized by the incumbent. In addition, powerful clan militias control territories, maintain loyalty to political actors and can be rapidly mobilized during electoral periods, significantly increasing the risk of violence. Any confrontation arising from disputed electoral outcomes would further destabilize the already fragile security environment and ultimately serve the interests of terrorist/extremist groups.

**FGS-FMS Tensions:** The tensions between the FGS and the FMSs, notably Puntland and Jubaland, are not only rooted in the contested constitutional review process but also the methodology of understanding and implementing federalism. The legitimate procedure of the constitution review would have been to negotiate the contentious issues, notably the security architecture, resource

and power-sharing, fiscal federalism, elections and the status of the capital city, Mogadishu. However, the FGS's move to unilaterally amend the constitution was interpreted as a centralizing power and an attempt to dismantle federalism, which prompted the immediate withdrawal of Puntland and Jubaland from the federal debates and negotiation tables. Puntland itself is not blameless regarding constitutional violations. Despite that Puntland's constitution was the only legitimate one in Somalia, President Said Abdullahi Deni intentionally altered it without consulting stakeholders, aiming primarily to shape his re-election agenda.

## Safeguarding the 2026 Transition Dialogue from Failure

A key threat to the 2026 transition is the potential failure of the scheduled talks scheduled in February 2026, with only three months remaining in the government's term. The talks are at serious risk of deadlock or failure if:

- The FGS continues its unilateral constitutional review and the parliament passes the remaining 5- 9 chapters, including extending the presidential term to five years, which will provoke an immediate crisis. President HSM's expected claim to a retroactive five-year term, alongside an Electoral Commission potential proposal for OPOV municipal and parliamentary elections, would be viewed as a constitutional coup by the Somalia Future Council.
- The secretariat committee organizing the talks consists of individuals loyal to the respective leaders rather than a task force with technical capabilities. Consequently, leaders do not confidently delegate authority over the venue, agenda limited to the 2026 transition, and security protocols.
- The FGS imposes preconditions on the Future Council to broaden the negotiation to include such as the split chapter of the Salvation Forum and FGS aligned FMS, while also introducing security protocols and restrictions that erode the already weak confidence of the Somali Future Council.
- The international community either limits its mediation or applies no pressure on political actors to agree to an inclusive transitional process framework.
- The current droughts are protracted and transitioning to famine, exposing Somalia to two simultaneous disasters of political crises and famine.

## Critical Risks of the 2026 Transition

**Parallel Elections:** If talks fail to produce an electoral agreement, the main risk is parallel parliamentary elections is potential to be held. This could happen if the current FGS moves forward alone with constitutional changes and introduces an OPOV project leaving out key stakeholders. The parliamentary mandate expired on 28 January 2026 and, although technical extensions are possible, the holy month of Ramadan will further shrink the available time. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's ambition to finalize the constitution, to secure a consensus-based electoral model before May 2026 seems uncertain. In addition, Puntland and Jubaland may set up their own state-level electoral committees to begin parallel processes, a move opposition groups would likely support. Such parallel arrangements would terminate the legitimacy of the Federal Government, leading to competing centers of power and potentially multiple claimants to

the presidency. This is not a simple prediction as Somalia already faces external proxies and competitions exacerbated by the Israel- Somaliland relationship.

**The Strategic Benefit to Al-Shabaab:** Al-Shabaab remains the primary beneficiary of political crises in Mogadishu. The group has historically exploited political vacuums to expand its territorial control and influence. While it is true the government has frozen many Al-Shabaab-linked accounts, the group continues to disrupt the relative security of Mogadishu, as the group remains with substantial roots in neighboring regions (the two Shabelles). The key benefit for the terrorist group today would arise if the government diverts all its resources toward political campaigns aimed at defeating opposition groups, and if, in retaliation, those opposition groups in Mogadishu withdraw their clan-affiliated divisions from the National Army to confront the regime. Additionally, there is a widespread perception that Al-Shabaab could gain a new audience for recruitment by exploiting the narrative compounding Somaliland’s relationship with Israel.

**Termination of the UN Mediation Mandate:** The UN Security Council has decided the United Nations Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNTMIS) will cease all operations by October 31, 2026. Historically, the UN political office (currently UNTMIS) has played a vital mediation role by bringing FGS and FMS leaders together in negotiations when dialogue breaks down serving to bring political, elite, patches rather than carrying forward structured solutions addressing the root causes of stalled governance development. Since the formation of the third republic in 2004, no significant political agreement has been reached without mediation from the international community, led by the UN political office. The mission’s closure in the midst of the 2026 constitutional and electoral crises will leave Somalia without a neutral international mediator to manage disputes, possibly, probably, increasing the likelihood that political disagreements could escalate into armed violence.

**The AUSSOM Funding Uncertainty:** The transition from ATMIS to the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) authorized until December 2026 is severely hampered by financial uncertainty. A further complication arises from Egypt’s planned troop contribution, which risks creating tension with key security partners like Ethiopia, who may view Egypt’s involvement as problematic and potentially introduce a proxy dynamic amid Somalia’s ongoing political crises. If the FGS fails to reach consensus with domestic stakeholders, international donors may grow more reluctant to fund a mission perceived as supporting a government lacking broad political unity. Moreover, although many clan militias have been integrated into the national army, some politicians retain significant influence and could mobilize clan-based units for political purposes. To uphold the government’s legitimacy and ensure the immediate security of Mogadishu, AUSSOM must demonstrate both its capability and effective presence.

**Contested Extensions within Southern FMSs:** The risk of violence is compounded by parallel electoral crises within FMSs allied with the FGS. Galmudug, Hirshabelle, and Southwest State are each operating beyond their constitutional terms, with the FGS permitting them to remain in office until further notice. This means Somalia would face simultaneous election crises at both FGS and FMS levels, creating a political and security vacuum in both tiers of government.

## Potential 2026 Election Models

**Model One: Universal Elections as a Reconciliatory Transition:** Universal elections could serve as a reconciliatory for lasting stability. However, for this model to succeed, national stakeholders must agree to a participatory and inclusive process to complete the necessary legal frameworks. A maximum transition period of two years is required, managed by a new, shared government led by a Prime Minister with the political maturity and capability to accommodate all stakeholders. To enable this, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud must foster a political climate conducive to negotiation. If stakeholders adopt this option, the transition government should be mandated to deliver three outcomes:

- (a) completion of the constitution,
- (b) elimination of terrorist groups, and
- (c) constituency-based elections forming a reconciliatory and transformative agenda.

On the election's component, the government must introduce a transitional roadmap:

- (d) completing the constitution through an agreed procedure;
- (e) reforming and harmonizing electoral and multiparty laws with the constitution;
- (f) conducting municipal elections with party thresholds in at least the urban and secure areas of South-Central regions; and
- (g) recognizing political parties emerging from those election and existing Puntland parties as national parties eligible to compete in harmonized FMS and federal parliamentary elections.

**Model Two: Improved Indirect (2022+) Election:** An alternative is to improve the established indirect election model, both regulatorily and practically. The number of voters per seat could remain at 101 or be expanded to 150+ and voting locations could increase to three or four per FMS. This model is more implementable, it is precedented, can be delivered within a legitimate timeframe and is more likely to gain acceptance from all political stakeholders. However, to produce a legitimate parliament, this cycle must correct the shame of the 2022 elections, which were heavily manipulated by FMS leaders through corruption and the misplacement of legitimate traditional elders with those who nominated ghost voters. The 135 officially recognized traditional elders must be empowered to nominate clan voters through clear regulatory procedures. Voters must then be able to elect their representatives freely and fairly, without undue influence from FMS leaders or elders. Additionally, biometric registration of all voters must be mandated to prevent manipulation and fraud by FMS authorities.

**The Upper House Model:** In the 2016 and 2022 electoral cycles, the Upper House was elected by FMS parliaments, with candidates appointed by FMS presidents through political agreements. In 2022, only 6 of the 54 seats were contested by more than two candidates, all of them in Hirshabelle State. The process functioned as a closed club which FMS leaders-controlled candidacy, denying rights of many citizens to contest.

**A viable option for 2026** is to remove the power of FMS presidents to nominate candidates and instead create a mechanism where the interested candidates to submit applications directly to FMS assemblies.

## Special Arrangement for Somaliland Representatives

In the 2016 and 2022 electoral cycles, the election of representatives for Somaliland clans was systematically manipulated by incumbent officials and political actors based in Mogadishu. The process was compromised not only by electoral fraud but also by the deliberate assembly of voters who did not authentically represent the respective clans who claim heritage across the geography of Somaliland. Such manipulation undermines the legitimacy of Somaliland's parliamentary representation and reinforces secessionist claims that Somaliland communities are disrespected in Mogadishu. To safeguard the integrity and legitimacy of Somaliland representatives, three options are proposed:

**Option A: Verified Voter Vetting System:** In addition to the main election implementation committee, a special Somaliland-focused committee would be established, composed of respected elders, civil society figures, and international observers. This committee would biometrically register all clan delegates and conduct public vetting and verification. Mogadishu-based politicians and FGS incumbents would be limited to campaigning only, with no authority to interfere in the selection or approval of delegate lists.

**Option B: Diaspora & Domestic Hybrid Model:** This option leverages technology as the basis for representation of the Somaliland clans, some of the clans may lack sufficient voter populations in Mogadishu. Clan members, whether residing in Somalia or abroad, would be registered through a secure online platform, complemented by physical registration of a designated percentage of voters. This hybrid approach prevents external manipulation, reduces electoral fraud, and minimizes grievances.

**Option C: Designated Secure Election Zoning Model:** This option relocates the electoral college from Mogadishu to neutral and secure locations across the five Federal Member States. Each clan's electoral college would be deployed to a different FMS capital, where voting would be administered under secure and supervised conditions. For exemplary arrangements, Garhajis voters would be deployed to Garowe, and Issa voters to Baidoa.

## The Structure of the Election Implementation Committees

The indirect election cycles of the last two terms were marked by corruption and manipulation; not due to the regulations and procedures but because of the structure of the implementing committees. The Federal Election Implementation Team (FEIT) was mandated to lead the electoral process, while State Election Implementation Teams (SEITs) implemented elections under FEIT's supervision. However, the FEIT compromised its mandate because federal incumbents and some FMS leaders were themselves presidential candidates. In the current cycle, federal and FMS leaders are either candidates or openly supporting candidates. Therefore, to ensure fair elections and deliver a legitimate parliament, the following options propose that the election implementation committee be appointed by impartial actors:

**Option one: FIET and SEIT Structures Elected by FMS Assemblies and Federal Houses:** Under this option, political stakeholders agree only on the criteria for committee membership. A total of 90 members would be elected by:

- (1) the House of the People elects 27 members with federal status, allocated according to the 4.5 formula,
- (2) the Upper House elects 9 members to represent Somaliland clans and 9 members to represent the Banadir community, and
- (3) each of the five FMS assemblies elects 9 members,

These 90 elected members would then form the Federal Indirect Election Team (FEIT), the State Indirect Election Teams (SEITs), and the Dispute Resolution Committee (DRC) through their own internal arrangements.

*Table 1: Allocation of 90 Members for FIET / SEIT/DRC Structures (Option One)*

| Level         | Election Body        | Allocation                          | Members |
|---------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------|---------|
| Federal Level | House of the People  | Federal status members based on 4.5 | 27      |
| Somaliland    | Upper House          | Representing Somaliland             | 9       |
| Banadiri      | Upper House          | Representing Banadir clans          | 9       |
| FMS level     | Puntland Assembly    | Representing Puntland               | 9       |
| FMS level     | Jubaland Assembly    | Representing Jubaland               | 9       |
| FMS level     | Southwest Assembly   | Representing Southwest              | 9       |
| FMS level     | Hirshabelle Assembly | Representing Hirshabelle            | 9       |
| FMS level     | Galmudug Assembly    | Galmudug Assembly                   | 9       |
|               |                      | Total                               | 90      |

**Option 2: Centralized FEIT with Decentralized Secretariat and Complementary Dispute Resolution Structure:** This option proposes:

- (1) a 29-member Federal Election Implementation Team (FEIT) appointed by the federal government based on the 4.5 formula and criteria agreed upon by political stakeholders. All nominated candidates undergo rigorous public vetting to ensure they are neutral, independent, and free from partisan allegiance. Once constituted, this central committee recruits and deploys a professional secretariat to each Federal Member State, chaired by a sitting FEIT member.
  - (2) Complementing this structure is a separate 29-member Dispute Resolution Committee (DRC), appointed by the FMS Presidents. To ensure inclusive representation, Somaliland and Banadir community members of the DRC are appointed by the Speaker of the Upper House.
- Together, these two committees constitute a shared electoral governance framework, balancing federal coordination with FMS ownership, checks and accountabilities across both layers of government.

Table 2: Proposed Structure – Centralized FEIT with Complementary DRC (Option 2)

| Committee                                   | Number | Appointing Authority                                  | Allocation   |
|---|--------|---|--|
| Federal Election Implementation Team (FEIT) | 29     | FGS   | Federal status members based on 4.5, subject to public vetting |
| Dispute Resolution Committee (DRC)          | 29     | -FMS Presidents<br>-Upper House (Somaliland, Banadir) | Represent FMS in the election oversight                        |

**Option 3: Mixed Post-Conflict Electoral Commission Model:** The election committee shall comprise 90 members:

- (1) with 50% appointed by the government (FGS, FMS) based on established power-sharing experiences.
- (2) The remaining 50%, the political stakeholders (FGS, FMS, two chapters of the Somalia Salvation Forum) shall agree to nominate an 18-member selection panel on a 4.5 basis from civil society, university associations, bar associations, women’s group, and media actors, verified and sworn in. This panel shall open a public application process to identify experts with no political party affiliation, demonstrated technical competence, and integrity. The panel shall submit the final list to political stakeholders for endorsement and clan balance confirmation, after which the government (FGS, FMS) shall formalize the Election Implementation Committee in a joint meeting.

The Committee shall then constitute the Federal Indirect Election Team (FEIT) and State Indirect Election Teams (SEITs) through its own internal arrangements.

Table 3: Mixed Post-Conflict Electoral Commission Model, Composition of the 90-Member (Option 3)

| Component                                 | Number   | Appointing Authority   | Allocation                                     | Purpose                  |
|---|----------|--|--|--------------------------|
| Government Appointed Members (FGS, FMS)   | 45 (50%) | FGS, FMS   | Based on established power-sharing experiences | Political ownership      |
| Independent Members (via selection panel) | 45 (50%) | Selection panel identified by the political stakeholders (All) | Merit-based, integrity and competence criteria | Neutrality, credibility, |

## Policy Recommendations

- **Establish a National Dialogue House (NDH):** A multi-stakeholder National Dialogue House must be established in replacement of the failed NCC, comprising the FGS, FMS, former Presidents and Prime Ministers, parliamentary leadership, civil society, and international partners to frame an inclusive process for a peaceful transition.
- **Immediately Halt Unilateral Constitutional Amendments:** The FGS must immediately and verifiably halt all unilateral constitutional amendment processes, including parliamentary consideration of the remaining Chapters 5 to 9, as the basis to restore what trust had been built. Any legitimate constitutional conclusion requires the equal and open, uncoerced participation of all FMS, with disputed articles aligned through a negotiated constitutional review process.
- **Establish a Neutral Technical Secretariat:** Create a neutral task force committee to facilitate dialogue on managing the transition period, comprising trusted, impartial professionals selected for expertise and integrity rather than political loyalty, ensuring all stakeholders view the process as legitimate and acceptable.
- **Narrow Talks to Electoral Model and Procedures:** The February 2026 talks must be strictly limited to negotiating an implementable electoral model and its operational framework, with no constitutional or political disputes. All other contentious issues including term limits, security reform, fiscal federalism, power/resource sharing, and the status of the capital city shall be formally deferred to the post-election National Dialogue House (NDH) for inclusive, consensus-based resolution.
- **Neutrally Appointed Election Committees:** All election committees must be fully insulated from executive influence and any political stakeholder contesting the presidency. Members shall be selected by non-partisan actors through a transparent process applying strict criteria, public vetting, and equitable clan representation as the minimum prerequisite for a credible, violence-free transition.
- **Depoliticize Security Forces and Resolve AUSSOM Challenges:** The FGS, with international community's observation, must prohibit the use of security forces and clan militias for political purposes and prevent any conflict that could enable such politicization. It must also secure sustainable funding for AUSSOM and suspend potentially controversial troop contributors to avoid proxy conflicts emerging in Somalia.
- **Renew UNTMIS Mandate for at Least Four Years:** The FGS should review the planned 2026 closure of UNTMIS and retain the UN political mission as the sole neutral mediator on contentious issues, assisting the next government in overcoming disputes through constitutional completion and institutional reforms. During this transition, the international community in Somalia is urged to pressure political stakeholders to agree on managing the transition and to avoid any actions that undermine the legitimacy of the already fragile post-conflict Somalia.

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