Clan Relations, Political Fragmentation, and Elections Outcomes

Harerta Abraha

Edited by : Mohammed Abdulganiyu & Isabelle Lim

The Massai Shuka from Kenya

Somalia, frequently categorized as a failed state, has faced numerous challenges with power dynamics and clan-based tensions during its difficult transition from authoritarianism to democracy (Stremlau). Since 2016, Somalia's indirect electoral system has been a critical component of its federal democratic framework, designed to navigate the country's complex socio-political landscape (Menkhaus). Unlike direct elections, this system relies on clan elders and regional representatives to select members of parliament, who then elect the president (Wabwireh). Clientelism— clan-based loyalties, are significant features of the political system where clan elders, external actors, and intermediaries can contribute and sway election outcomes. This raises the question of the extent of the impact of these contributing factors upon election outcomes. This paper examines the impact that political fragmentation has had on elections, particularly because of the clan relations that are constantly changing and dynamic. Through evaluating the pre-existing landscape, current clan relations, and election outcomes, this paper intends to examine the extent of these factors' roles in election outcomes.

Somalia's Political Landscape

Despite centralized control and repression, the nation managed to maintain some stability under Siad Barre's authoritarian rule between 1969 and 1991 (Mohamed Farah). However, after Barre's government fell in 1991, Somalia was thrown into a long-lasting civil war, which exacerbated clan rivalries and caused the country to become divided, leaving it in a state of political fragmentation and disrepair (Mohamed Farah). Attempts to restore security and order were hampered by the emergence of the Islamist militant organization Al-Shabaab, which further destabilized the nation (Mohamed Farah). As a result of these difficulties, Somalia became increasingly dependent on foreign assistance from institutions like the United Nations and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) for state-building and peacekeeping missions(Alama et al.). Somalia combated this by making significant progress in creating a federal democratic system that is intended to decentralise authority and consider its heterogeneous clan structure. Despite these initiatives, the administration still faces many obstacles. Somalia's democratic transition is made more difficult by the fact that powerful clan leaders and political elites frequently manipulate

indirect elections, which are held through clan-based delegate systems and have become the main way political decisions are made. Leaders often use their positions to influence national policies and secure advantageous results. Clan identity plays a central role in Somalia's socio-political structure, shaping how power is distributed and exercised. For centuries, clans have provided means for social organization, security, and conflict resolution, especially in the absence of a strong central government. This influence is formalized through the 4.5 power-sharing system, which allocates political representation among the four major clans, with a smaller share reserved for minority groups (Wabwireh). Political inclusivity therefore is guaranteed by this system; however, it also strengthens clan-based politics, rendering it more difficult to ensure merit-based leadership and cultivate a sense of national identity as clan-based identity propagates. Clan dynamics as a result still have an impact on government and impede attempts to establish a democratic, stable state.

Contributions of Clan Relations to Candidate Selection

"It is necessary to understand the clan-based political system, where only a few clan delegates and clan elders decide which candidate wins the parliamentary election" —this statement effectively summarises the relevant events that go into the selection of a candidate for parliament (Bincof). In Somalia's indirect electoral system, parliamentary elections are not determined by the general populace but by a select group of clan elders and delegates, highlighting the deeply entrenched influence of clan dynamics on political outcomes. As Bincof explains, the process of candidate selection for parliamentary seats is largely controlled by these elite actors, who hold significant sway over the political landscape. The 4.5 power-sharing system accredits a representative from each of the clans to select the 275 members of the Lower House, "while federal state assemblies elect the 54 senators of the Upper House," who are then jointly responsible for electing the president (Ahmed). This strategy maintains a system of exclusivity by restricting political competition and filtering voices from outside the dominant clan. While it offers some stability by decreasing the likelihood of violence between the clans, the 4.5 system further reinforces the exclusive selection of candidates (Ahmed) When it came to choosing the candidates and funding their campaigns, the clan leadership was crucial, having a variety of reasons

for wanting to see their candidates elected, including improved access to government resources, employment opportunities, and services(Fadal). According to Fadal, clan sponsorship and selection of candidates is a mechanism of accessing political institutions by redirecting and swaying the outcomes of political procedures to their favour. Therefore, candidates for different positions in the federal government, especially presidential, can rely on the support and endorsement of the clans. However, this also fosters a system in which certain groups are inherently marginalised and not permitted equal say.

The clan-based framework of Somalia's indirect electoral process by default exacerbates political division and systematically sidelines particular groups. The preeminence of significant clans in distributing parliamentary positions and political power creates structural obstacles for smaller clans, minority communities, and women to engage meaningfully (Fadal). This marginalization is entrenched through the 4.5 power-sharing arrangement, which disproportionately benefits the four dominant clans while placing others in a subordinate position (Ahmed). Consequently, political representation is determined not by equitable participation but by established clan hierarchies, restricting broader democratic

engagement and perpetuating a system where political clout is unevenly allocated. As a result, marginalized communities are excluded from having an equal voice in governance, thereby reinforcing social and political disparities.

Political Fragmentation and its Impact on Election Outcomes

Political fragmentation in Somalia, demonstrated in the strained relationship between the federal government and federal member states, has played a key role in shaping electoral outcomes since the 2016 presidential election. This has been a major source of tension in the contest for control over the electoral process and security apparatus (Kalmoy). Regional states such as Puntland and Jubaland, led by influential people with clan ties like Said Abdullahi Deni and Ahmed Mohamed Islam (better known as Madobe), have consistently repelled centralized governance from Mogadishu, specifically under the administration **of President** Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo (Kalmoy). According to Mohamed Farah, the leaders of Puntland and Jubaland accuse the Somali federal government of undermining their independence by trying to rig elections to centralise power and govern them from Mogadishu, consequently

causing friction between the federal government and the states. Disagreements over election procedures and the makeup of electoral management bodies caused substantial delays during the 2021–2022 electoral crisis, making the political impasse especially noticeable (Rage). Puntland and Jubaland refused to cooperate with Farmaajo's government, accusing it of stacking the Federal Electoral Implementation Team (FEIT) with loyalists to influence parliamentary selections (Mohamed Farah). This fragmentation delayed parliamentary elections by over a year, contributing to a constitutional crisis and heightening fears of political instability.

The influence of federal member states on election outcomes is substantial. By controlling local electoral processes and leveraging clan loyalties, regional leaders can sway the selection of parliamentarians who, in turn, vote for the president. This dynamic was evident in the 2022 presidential election, where alliances formed between regional leaders ultimately contributed to Farmaajo's defeat and the election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (Ahmed). Thus, federal-state fragmentation not only disrupts the electoral timeline but also shifts the balance of power within Somalia's political landscape, with regional leaders emerging as key power brokers in national politics.

Internal Clan-based Fragmentation and Alliances

Clan-based fragmentation significantly influences Somalia's elections by altering political alliances, shaping voting patterns, and reinforcing instability in parliamentary and presidential contests. Internal divisions within major clans, particularly among dominant groups like the Hawiye, Darod, and Rahanweyn, create intense competition for political representation and access to state resources (Gundel). Because sub-clans prioritize their own interests over the larger interests that arise from clan unity, this inter-clan rivalry affects election results and frequently leads to divided parliamentary voting blocs (Rage). A clan's influence and bargaining power may be diminished in important electoral negotiations because of these divisions. Sub-clans trade votes and form temporary alliances to lessen this division and magnify their electoral bargaining power; these actions are frequently motivated by practical rather than ideological factors (Gundel). Often flexible and opportunity-reliant, these coalitions will vary according to the demands of the current election.
For instance, while the Hawiye sub-

clans first split over their support for various candidates in the 2022 presidential election, they later joined forces with other Darod and Rahanweyn sub-clans to form a coalition that helped the election of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud (Ahmed). However, because these alliances are usually renegotiated after power is gained, they are inherently unstable and can result in short-term political gains but long-term governance issues. The transactional nature of these alliances undermines efforts to build stable, cohesive political institutions (Stremlau). By maintaining a cycle of conflicting loyalties and political schemes rather than encouraging lasting political coalitions or national cohesion, clan-based fragmentation adds to a fractured legislative climate(Gundel). As a result, this makes it harder to form effective governments, threatens the federal system, and exacerbates political instability.

The establishment of parallel electoral institutions within Somalia's Federal Member States (FMS), where regional administrations frequently operate independently of the federal government, exacerbates this fragmentation (Ahmed). The inclination of each Federal Member State to modify its electoral processes to benefit powerful local clans' results in a decentralized and capricious election system. Electoral commissions typically operate outside of federal authority in certain areas; for instance, Jubaland and Puntland allowed local elites to sway vote counting, voter eligibility, and candidate selection (Somali Public Agenda 2024). By prioritising localised clan interests over national unity, these parallel systems influence election results, frequently electing candidates who support local power structures rather than wider state interests. The federal government's failure to implement consistent electoral standards throughout different areas weakens its authority and contributes to disjointed election results (Gundel). Without centralized oversight, elections become a series of regional contests driven by clan rivalries, with little regard for national interests or democratic ideals.

The characteristics inherent in the nature of these alliances compromise the stability of cohesive political institutions. The existing system, instead of building strong political alliances or fostering national unity, focuses on envy-afflicted petty politics whose ubiquity guarantees disintegration of the parliamentary system. This in turn makes it difficult for effective governments to be established, saps the strength of the

federal system, and causes political instability as alliances tend to fall apart when elections are over because of the rivalry of the sub-clans. This lack of standardization affects the electoral process's credibility, as conflicts about vote manipulation, minority clan exclusion, and elected representative validity commonly occur. As a result, legislative seats are sometimes filled by individuals whose primary allegiance is to their clan or regional power brokers, rather than the federal government or the Somali electorate. This entrenches a cycle of weak, unstable governments that struggle to implement cohesive policies, exacerbating political fragmentation and prolonging Somalia's broader governance crisis.

Structural Limitations and Reforms

Somalia's indirect electoral system, deeply influenced by clan dynamics, has had a mixed impact on the country's political stability and governance. The 4.5 power-sharing formula, which allocates political power among Somalia's major clans, ensures no group is excluded from the political process (Ahmed). By integrating all major clans in the system, it develops a feeling of shared government, decreasing the likelihood of violent conflict. This strategy has, in many ways, avoided the exclusionary politics in other African countries where one group's dominance resulted in conflict and instability. Clan politics has played a significant role in maintaining relative stability through elections and government formation.

Moreover, while the indirect election system appears to be a compromise, it is a practical answer given Somalia's history of violence and state breakdown. Direct elections in a country still recovering from years of civil conflict could jeopardize the fragile peace that has been built. The role of clan elders as vote facilitators ensures that all groups are represented, resulting in a stabilizing effect that decreases the probability of bloodshed. This progressive strategy, which moves away from clan-based agreements and toward more democratic procedures, allows for the gradual establishment of institutions and governance structures, potentially leading to more inclusive and transparent elections in the future. Furthermore, clan-based division has often benefited the federal system rather than undermined it. The establishment of competing election systems in Puntland and Jubaland, two Federal Member States of Somalia, illustrates the adaptability of the federal system and the importance

of regional autonomy (Yimenu). To accommodate local preferences and guarantee representation, some regions have been permitted to design their own voting procedures while still taking part in national governance (Yimenu). This decentralization, which takes power away from a central authority, not only gives local people political representation but also significantly aids in maintaining peace. Additionally, foreign assistance is essential to Somalia's slow political development. Despite acknowledging the difficulties presented by clan-based politics, the UN and African Union have backed Somalia's election process because they believe these structures essential to preserving peace in the near future (Alama et al.).

Somalia's Democratic Future

Clan dynamics and political division have had significant influences in Somalia's indirect elections since 2016, affecting the outcomes of elections and the broader political environment. The 4.5 power-sharing arrangement, aimed at promoting inclusivity, has paradoxically bolstered clan-centric competition, hindering the development of national political structures (Gundel). While it has temporarily bolstered stability by averting outright conflict, it has simultaneously solidified clientelism and weakened governance frameworks. Political fragmentation, especially the conflicts between the federal government and federal member states, has further complicated the electoral landscape. Regional leaders are able to exploit clan affiliations to strengthen their hold on power, undermining national unity. Postponements of elections, disagreements regarding ongoing and future electoral processes, and the impact of local power brokers have all produced a divided and unstable political framework.

Moreover, internal strife within clans results in fluctuating alliances that compromise long-term political stability, creating a scenario where governance relies on transactional politics rather than institutional growth. Despite these obstacles, Somalia has avoided widespread electoral violence, and its indirect election framework has allowed for political engagement in a fragile context. Nevertheless, without significant reforms to diminish the sway of clan-based politics and improve electoral transparency, Somalia's democratic development will remain limited. Looking ahead, tackling political fragmentation and nurturing national political institutions will be essential for establishing a more stable and representative electoral framework.

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