

# Achieving Universal Franchise in Somalia: Balancing Reform with Stability

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As I reflect on the events of Tuesday, April 30th, 2024, a profound sense of anticipation and unease settles in. The National Reconciliation Framework was set to be launched at Aden Abdulle International Airport, a location long synonymous with Somalia's indirect elections. On the occasion, Hamza Abdi, Somalia's Prime Minister, took the stage and pledged to end the tradition of clan-based indirect elections and transition to a one-person, one-vote system.



This announcement was notable for its boldness its timing. With ongoing reconciliation efforts, the promise of universal suffrage raises a crucial question: will shifting to a one-person, one-vote system promotes genuine reconciliation, or could it potentially undermine the painstakingly constructed, imperfect but functional clan-based system that has maintained the fragile peace? Former President Mohamed Abdulahi Farmajo also vowed to replace the clan-based system, only to re-embrace it later. Can the current administration succeed where others could not? Will this transition truly advance the reconciliation process or risk jeopardizing it?

This article argues that while a one-person, one-vote system is desirable for Somalia in the long run, it is not currently feasible due to several challenges. These challenges include undermining the delicate balance of the clan system and the lack of trust between the state and society, as well as within the societies themselves. Therefore, the article offers feasible roadmaps for achieving universal suffrage while maintaining stability and increasing citizen involvement in electing representatives at all levels of government.

## The Debate: Immediate Change vs. Incremental Approach

The debate on electoral reform in Somalia revolves around two main perspectives. One perspective argues that Somalia must break free from the rigid clan-based system immediately and transition to a one-person, one-vote system, despite its imperfections.

Conversely, others support a gradual approach, warning that hastening the process could destabilize the country further. They contend that while universal suffrage is a worthy goal, it should not overshadow more pressing priorities such as security and stability. This debate encapsulates the tension between urgency and prudence, raising fundamental questions about the best path forward for Somalia.

### **Personal Experience and the Power of Participation**

Over the past year, I had the honor of working on the USAID-funded People Centered Governance (PCG) project across Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Jubaland, and South West states. The project's goal was to enhance the legitimacy of local governments by building their capacity and improving service delivery. One notable achievement was the community voting process in four districts—Afmadow, Galkayo, Hudur, and Warsheikh. Thousands of first-time voters participated in prioritizing local needs, which reduced clan influence, promoted transparency, and fostered community trust.

The success of the project stemmed from addressing issues like clan politics, elite manipulation, and distrust among stakeholders. By fostering diverse interest groups and emphasizing interdependence, transparency, and trust, the project reduced the influence of vested interests. This inclusive approach, engaging both wealthy and disadvantaged stakeholders, promoted cooperation and compromise toward a common goal. Ultimately, the PCG project underscored the importance of community participation in governance and the potential for holding the state accountable through greater stakeholder involvement.

I am well aware of the distinction between community voting based on need identification and voting for representatives. In the former case, the state does not seek to influence and even supports voting to happen as planned. However, in elections for representatives, the state will use all available resources and means to influence the results. The key takeaway from this scenario is that while the state has the power, increased community involvement makes it more difficult for the state to act with impunity.

### **Balancing Tradition and Modernity**

Universal suffrage is a commendable concept, granting citizens the right to choose their representatives. However, Somalia's contemporary state requires reconciling with its clan system and Islamic principles, both of which emphasize participation, consensus-building, and consultation.

Despite the fact that Somalia lacks the capacity to enforce the rule of law and maintain a monopoly on violence, with areas under Al-Shabaab control and armed clans competing with the government, the state is gradually consolidating power. Without balancing tradition and modernity, the urgent move towards universal suffrage will destabilize the country, as the government lacks the enforcement power to manage the transition effectively.

## **Participation vs. Stability**

For over two decades, Somalia's clan-based formula has played a crucial role in maintaining some stability and inclusivity. The 4.5 clan formula, introduced during the Arte Conference in 2000, was initially meant as a temporary peace and state-building solution, offering a structured yet provisional mechanism for political representation. Despite its flaws, this system has been essential in maintaining relative peace in a nation deeply divided along clan lines, enabling a negotiated balance of power and ensuring each clan has a stake in the political process.

Initially, representation involved only 135 traditional elders, but over the years, participation has expanded significantly, reaching over 28,000 participants during the last indirect election in 2022. This growth reflects the system's ability to adapt and engage a broader segment of the population, even though it falls short of the ideal of one person, one vote.

The proposed shift towards universal suffrage promises greater democratic participation and equality, where every citizen's vote carries equal weight. However, this transition is fraught with risks. The clan-based system, despite its shortcomings, has provided a structured approach to representation that has helped stabilize the country. A sudden move to universal suffrage could disrupt this fragile balance, potentially worsening existing tensions and jeopardizing the progress made in state-building. If not carefully managed, it might provoke resistance from clans as they lose trust in the system. Therefore, a gradual and inclusive approach is essential to ensure that the transition to universal suffrage strengthens rather than destabilizes Somalia.

## **Models of Electoral Systems vs. Clan Balance**

Various electoral systems have been piloted or proposed for Somalia, including Closed-List Proportional Representation, Open-List Proportional Representation, and First-Past-The-Post (FPTP), all within the framework of the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing model. For example, Closed-List Proportional Representation was implemented in Puntland in districts such as Qardho, Eyl, and Ufeyn. This system gave party leaders significant control over candidate selection, reducing individual accountability and limiting voters' influence over their elected representatives.

Conversely, Open-List Proportional Representation has been employed in Somaliland, promoting a more transparent process but facing challenges in ensuring sufficient representation of women candidates, with some elections resulting in zero representation for women. The FPTP system, proposed by the Somali parliament in 2017, has yet to be tested on a national scale. Each system aims to address different electoral challenges but comes with its issues.

As discussed above, transitioning to a one-person, one-vote system requires careful consideration to balance democratic ideals with the need to maintain political stability and clan representation, bridging the existing gap in state and society relations to establish a strengthened citizen-government social contract.

## **Challenges:**

Implementing a one-person, one-vote system in Somalia faces significant hurdles. The following are some of the key challenges:

### **1. The Al Shabab Factor**

The presence of Al-Shabaab and its control over a large swath of the country's regions and districts poses a significant challenge to the implementation of any form of election and, more specifically, the one-person-one-vote electoral approach. The group's violent tactics, including intimidation, threats, and indiscriminate attacks, create a climate of fear that not only compromises the integrity of the electoral process but also makes it impossible to undertake any semblance of election.

Moreover, Al-Shabaab's control over certain territories limits the ability of electoral authorities to register voters, establish polling stations, and conduct voter education campaigns, hindering the realization of inclusive and representative elections. Furthermore, the terrorist group's ideology and propaganda often undermine the principles of democracy and electoral participation.

In addition, by promoting a narrative of opposition to Western-style governance, the group can influence public opinion and discourage citizens from engaging in the electoral process. This, coupled with their capacity to disrupt communication and transportation networks, further impedes the successful implementation of a one-person-one-vote system in areas affected by their activities.

### **1. Regional State Presidents and Political Will**

In Somalia, state presidents manipulate election outcomes through various mechanisms. One key method is their control over regional electoral commissions, which are nominally independent and administer the electoral process within their respective states. By using their commissions, state presidents dictate candidate selections (aligned with their interests), choose clan elders and other influential figures within their states to support specific candidates, and deny potential adversaries access to the electoral process.

Similarly, leveraging their political networks and resources, state presidents often campaign for their preferred candidates, giving them a substantial advantage. This confluence of administrative control and strategic alliances allows state presidents to exert considerable influence over electoral outcomes in their regions.

### **2. Determination of Seats and Lack of Reliable Census Data**

In Somalia, the administrative boundaries of districts have yet to be clearly demarcated, complicating efforts to allocate elected seats based on administrative constituencies. Additionally, district boundaries established before 1991 are often disputed and viewed by certain communities as benefiting specific clans, reflecting past injustices. Federal member states have also created new districts, the legitimacy of which is challenged due to the absence of agreed-upon criteria for their establishment.

Moreover, Somalia lacks a regularly updated population census, making it impractical to base seat distribution on population data. As a result, the 4.5 clan-based seat distribution approach remains the most feasible option in the foreseeable future. However, it is important to note that clans sharing seats do not necessarily reside in geographically contiguous areas.

### **3. Barriers to Political Representation for Women**

Women and marginalized clans face substantial obstacles in Somali elections due to entrenched patriarchal norms, limited resources, and weak political networks. Patriarchal traditions often hinder women's participation in politics, while the clan-based system typically favors male candidates.

Women also struggle with inadequate financial resources and lack the political connections necessary for a successful campaign. Additionally, there is resistance to perceived Western agendas and a lack of cohesion among Somali women's groups, further complicating their efforts to gain representation.

### **4. Finance and Logistics**

Finance and logistics are two of the biggest challenges in any election. Implementing a one-person, one-vote system at all levels in Somalia will undoubtedly be a daunting task. The complexity of managing such an extensive electoral process raises questions about Somalia's ability to cover the election expenses independently. The country's financial constraints and logistical limitations pose significant hurdles.

Additionally, there is concern about whether the international community is effectively gambling on supporting the election without concrete assurances from the government that the process will bring stability rather than cause further destabilization.

### **5. No-go areas**

Implementing a one-person, one-vote system across all of Somalia's territories is a formidable challenge. Significant obstacles include the existence of Somaliland, the disputed regions of Sool, Sanaag, and parts of Cayn, and areas still under Al-Shabaab control, which are no-go areas for elections. Since elections cannot be held in these no-go areas, they must be conducted in the country's capital, Mogadishu, and other regional state capitals based on the clan formula. Balancing universal suffrage with these logistical and security challenges will be essential for any electoral reform.

## **Feasible Steps: A Roadmap for Successful Electoral Reform**

To achieve electoral transition in Somalia while ensuring stability, gradual, deliberative, and innovative incremental steps are necessary. These steps aim to balance the introduction of universal suffrage with the preservation of clan-based structures, acknowledging that the clan-based system will eventually be phased out but not at this moment.

The following key strategies outline a pathway to reform Somalia's electoral system.

### **1. Start with District Elections**

Implementing universal suffrage should begin in districts that are fully under government control. Larger towns can employ biometric systems for voter registration and verification, ensuring accuracy and minimizing the risk of fraud. In smaller communities, local elections can be organized using a combination of traditional and improvised methods. This gradual approach enables the government to test and refine the process, learning from initial experiences before scaling up to national elections. As a pilot project, start with the election of district commissioners in the Banadir administration. Afterward, consider including one district from each regional state.

### **2. Blend Traditional and Modern Systems**

Somalia's unique socio-political landscape requires a hybrid approach that respects traditional systems while integrating modern electoral practices. This could involve incorporating traditional elders into the electoral process to gain their support and ensure that the community feels represented.

Local innovations, such as community-based monitoring and oversight, can be employed to enhance transparency and fairness. This approach not only builds trust but also leverages existing structures to facilitate a smoother transition.

### **3. Expand Participation While Ensuring Stability**

To expand electoral participation while maintaining stability, candidates should be selected from one clan but elected by multiple clans, including both their own and neighboring clans. This approach contrasts with the traditional system, where candidates are chosen and elected solely by their clan. By allowing candidates to seek support from neighboring clans, their appeal will broaden, encouraging them to address the needs of a wider community.

In areas where instability is a concern, retaining elements of the clan-based formula can help maintain order. However, it is crucial to increase the number of participants and ensure that representatives are accountable to multiple clans. Concurrent elections within a state can help prevent manipulation and fraud by eliminating opportunities for movement between polling stations.

If this strategy proves unfeasible, alternatives include expanding the delegate pool to 1,000 clan members or implementing a hybrid system with 1,000 delegates drawn from both the candidates' and neighboring clans. This hybrid system aims to enhance representation and inclusivity while preserving stability.

### **4. Build Independent Institutions**

Establishing an independent electoral commission is paramount. This commission should involve opposition parties and state representatives from the outset to ensure its impartiality and credibility. Transparent voter registration systems and an impartial judiciary to handle disputes are also essential. These institutions will play a critical role in reducing the risk of electoral fraud and ensuring that the process is perceived as fair by all stakeholders.



## **5. Support Women and Marginalized Clans**

In order to create a more inclusive and representative electoral system, intentional strategies are essential for supporting the political representation of women and marginalized clans. Key strategies include upholding the 30% quota for women, which can be implemented through clan agreements or by allocating dedicated representative seats.

Additionally, providing financial support for women and marginalized candidates, establishing mentorship programs, and creating platforms for them to voice their concerns and participate in decision-making processes are crucial. These measures are necessary to prevent both women and marginalized clans from being sidelined and to ensure their meaningful contribution to the political landscape.

## **6. Manage the influence of the regional presidents**

To counteract the manipulation of election processes by state presidents in Somalia, federal government and relevant stakeholders need to implement a series of strategic measures. This includes promoting dialogue and reconciliation, enhancing civic education, seeking international support, and empowering civil society. Establishing independent and effective electoral commissions with transparency and rigorous oversight is crucial, along with enforcing strict legal penalties to deter electoral interference.

Decentralizing power is also necessary to reduce the influence of state-level authorities and bolster the capacity of electoral commissions. Importantly, state presidents must view these changes not as a threat to their interests but as a path to a more stable and democratic environment. Therefore, a balanced approach that combines incentives (the carrot) with strict accountability measures (the stick) is essential to align their political will with the broader goal of electoral integrity and reform.

## **7. Address Government Perceptions and Build Trust**

To dispel concerns that the government might manipulate the electoral process and to build trust in a one-person, one-vote system in Somalia—where clan loyalty holds significant influence—the government must demonstrate a commitment to transparency, civic education, and inclusivity. This involves strengthening key institutions, such as the Independent Electoral Commission and the judiciary, implementing anti-corruption measures, and utilizing advanced technologies like electronic voting systems and real-time result publication to enhance credibility.

Engaging the public through feedback mechanisms and addressing their concerns is vital. Additionally, involving all stakeholders—including civil society organizations, international observers, media outlets, and opposition parties—in the planning and execution of elections will build trust. Promoting national dialogue, implementing context-specific capacity development initiatives, and ensuring comprehensive training for election officials and voters are crucial. Establishing accountability mechanisms and conducting regular performance audits will further guarantee the integrity of the electoral process.

## Conclusion

While striving for universal suffrage is a vital goal for Somalia, not this ambition must not undermine the country's stability. By adopting a gradual approach, strengthening credible institutions, and ensuring broad participation, Somalia can transition to a one-person, one-vote system while preserving stability. This strategy will help foster a more inclusive and democratic Somalia, ultimately benefiting all its citizens.

To successfully implement these recommendations and address the challenges, collaboration among the Somali government, its citizens, and the international community is essential. With a shared commitment to creating a fair, transparent, and inclusive electoral system, Somalia can make significant progress toward achieving the ideal of one person, one vote.

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