



## **Between Aspiration and Reality: A Critical Case for the 135 Traditional Elders Model as Somalia's Electoral Safeguard in 2026**

**By Abdinoor Ibrahim Noor**

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### **Abstract**

This article interrogates the severe political crisis that has engulfed Somalia following the February 2026 collapse of electoral negotiations between the Federal Government and the opposition Somali Future Council. The nation confronts a perilous choice between a logistically unachievable one-person-one-vote (OPOV) election and reverting to discredited indirect models that have demonstrably corroded state institutions. Through a forensic analysis of the 51- and 101-delegate electoral college experiments deployed in 2016/17 and 2021/22, this study establishes that their systemic failures—defined by institutional capture, endemic financial corruption, and the wholesale destruction of legislative accountability—render them permanently unfit for purpose. A comparative examination of Italy's post-1945 democratic transition is introduced to demonstrate that fragile states compelled to choose between ideologically unpalatable alternatives and institutionally corrupt incumbents risk entrenching decades of political dysfunction, a trajectory Italy endured across 68 governments in 76 years. Given the manifest impossibility of organizing OPOV within the 2026 timeframe, and Somalia's continued classification as a fragile state under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, this article advances a carefully reasoned argument for a temporary, strategic return to the 2012 selection model, whereby the 135 recognized senior traditional elders resume their role in selecting parliamentarians. This framework is buttressed by two critical institutional innovations: an independent Civil Society Vetting Committee vested with binding authority to disqualify compromised candidates, and a legally enshrined five-year democratic roadmap culminating in universal suffrage. The article concludes that this recalibration constitutes not a democratic retreat but a necessary precondition for rebuilding institutional credibility and achieving an authentic, consensus-driven transition.

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## 1. A Fragile State at a Defining Crossroads

The Somali political landscape has entered a period of acute uncertainty, brought into sharp focus by the collapse of high-stakes electoral negotiations in the capital. In late February 2026, the second round of formal discussions between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the Somali Future Council—an opposition coalition comprising the leaders of Puntland and Jubaland alongside former heads of state and government—concluded at Villa Somalia without producing any meaningful accord (Mogadishu Chronicle, 2026; The Reporter, 2026). With the sitting administration's constitutional mandate drawing toward its May 2026 expiration, this inability to agree on an electoral pathway has effectively extinguished any realistic hope for a negotiated political settlement in the near term. The gravity of the situation prompted the United States Embassy in Mogadishu to issue a formal statement warning that the absence of a compromise risks plunging the nation into a fresh cycle of political instability and security deterioration (U.S. Embassy Mogadishu, 2026).

The chasm between the two sides is both structural and deeply entrenched. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's government has staked its position on the implementation of OPOV, framing it as the natural culmination of constitutional amendments adopted in 2024 and outlining a phased calendar of municipal, parliamentary, and presidential contests (The Reporter, 2026). The opposition, however, regards this agenda as a unilateral executive project imposed without the broad-based political consensus that such a transformative shift requires (Garowe Online, 2026). Suspicions abound within opposition ranks that the OPOV timetable has been deliberately crafted to be undeliverable, thereby providing a justification for an open-ended extension of the current government's hold on power (Mogadishu Chronicle, 2026). The opposition has advanced its own demands: the immediate conduct of leadership elections in the Federal Member States of Hirshabelle, Galmudug, and South West—whose leaders received term extensions after aligning with the presidency—followed by a negotiated indirect electoral process for the federal parliament and presidency, all to be concluded before the May 2026 deadline (Mogadishu Chronicle, 2026). By multiple accounts, the talks teetered on the brink of an outright public collapse, with opposition leaders reportedly preparing to announce the definitive failure of negotiations before a last-minute presidential intervention secured a brief reprieve (Mogadishu Chronicle, 2026).

This deadlock crystallizes the central argument of this article. The nation remains ensnared between the commendable goal of universal suffrage and a political environment poisoned by deep-seated mistrust and the destructive inheritance of discredited electoral experiments. Advancing the OPOV agenda, however principled in its motivation, entails grave risks in the absence of the structural, security, and institutional prerequisites that such a transformative exercise demands (International Crisis Group, 2023; Rift Valley Institute, 2024). Simultaneously, resurrecting the electoral college formulas that defined the past decade would constitute a deliberate act of institutional self-sabotage. The only credible course of action is to reinstate a model with a demonstrated comparative record of producing legitimate outcomes and to equip it with safeguards designed to address its historical vulnerabilities.

## **2. Diagnosing Systemic Collapse: How the Electoral Colleges Destroyed Accountability**

A rigorous case for reinstating the 2012 framework demands, as its foundation, a comprehensive diagnosis of the ruinous failures that defined the models introduced to replace it. The indirect election cycles of 2016/17 and 2021/22—employing electoral colleges of 51 and 101 delegates per seat, respectively—were not a progressive refinement of the 2012 process. They represented a fundamental degradation that, under the overwhelming influence of Federal Member State (FMS) presidents and the federal executive, produced what many Somali analysts regard as the least competent and most compromised parliaments in the nation's post-conflict history.

### **2.1 The Deliberate Capture of Electoral Machinery**

The defining pathology of these models was the systematic seizure of the electoral apparatus by political executives at both the state and federal levels. The State-level Indirect Electoral Implementation Teams (SIEITs), nominally tasked with administering the elections, functioned in practice as extensions of FMS presidential offices, which exploited their authority to handpick delegates, pre-determine candidates, and engineer the election of political loyalists (LSE Conflict Research Programme, 2022). Established community elders were routinely sidelined in favor of compliant, lower-ranking figures, and delegate selection processes were frequently conducted behind closed doors in hotels and private residences rather than through open, community-based consultations (Ibrahim, 2026). The consequences of this capture extended far beyond the elections themselves, producing a legislature that was a rubber stamp for the executive and creating a massive vacuum for accountability.

### **2.2 The Architects of Corruption: Federal Member State Presidents as Kingmakers**

While the electoral college system was structurally flawed, the primary architects of its systemic failure were the presidents of the Federal Member States. Far from being neutral administrators, these regional leaders transformed the 2016/17 and 2021/22 electoral cycles into a transactional marketplace, wielding their control over the SIEITs to achieve two strategic objectives: personal enrichment and political self-preservation. Analysis of the process reveals that over 90% of the members of both the House of the People and the Upper House owed their seats directly to the influence of their respective FMS president (Ibrahim, 2026; LSE Conflict Research Programme, 2022).

This influence was exercised through two primary mechanisms. First, many FMS leaders treated the elections as a commercial trading platform, auctioning off parliamentary seats to the highest bidder. Candidates offering substantial financial payments were guaranteed the support of the state-level machinery, which duly manufactured the requisite delegate votes for their victory (The Guardian, 2017). Second, and more strategically, FMS presidents used the selection process to construct a slate of legislators personally loyal to them. These MPs were not chosen for their competence or community standing but for their sworn allegiance to either the FMS president's own future presidential ambitions or their commitment to vote for a specific, pre-arranged presidential candidate at the federal level.

The ultimate goal of this grand political bargain was a quid pro quo: in exchange for delivering a bloc of loyal MPs to secure a favored presidential outcome, the FMS presidents would be guaranteed to remain in their own positions of leadership, shielded from federal interference. This dynamic is precisely what produced the current parliament—a body largely beholden to the executive branch it is meant to oversee, resulting in a legislature that functions as a rubber stamp for the regime. This severe deficit of legislative independence, engineered by the FMS presidents themselves, is the most compelling evidence that the electoral college model is not merely broken but is actively corrosive to the principles of representative governance and must not be continued.

### **2.3 A Transactional Marketplace: The Scale of Financial Corruption**

The financial corruption that pervaded both cycles was extraordinary in its scale and brazenness. Buying the votes of scattered, short-term delegates was vastly easier and cheaper than attempting to compromise a compact body of senior elders whose lifelong standing in their communities was perpetually at risk. Investigative journalism covering the 2016/17 cycle revealed that the price of a single delegate's vote ranged between \$20,000 and \$30,000, while the aggregate expenditure required to capture certain parliamentary seats surpassed \$1.3 million (Maruf, 2017; The Guardian, 2017).

The scale of the venality prompted international observers to label the entire exercise a "milestone of corruption" (The Guardian, 2017). The 2021/22 cycle perpetuated this pattern; the expansion of the delegate pool to 101 per seat merely widened the number of individuals expecting financial compensation without introducing any countervailing integrity mechanism (LSE Conflict Research Programme, 2022).

### **2.4 The Statistical Evidence of Pre-Determined Outcomes**

The quantitative record of the 2021/22 elections provides irrefutable evidence of systematic manipulation. The data reveals that roughly 94% of parliamentary races involved no more than two contenders, while about one-third were entirely uncontested following the pre-ballot withdrawal of a placeholder candidate—referred to in Somali political parlance as a malxiis (LSE Conflict Research Programme, 2022). Victory margins averaged an extraordinary 86.7% across all seats with available data; 71 candidates captured upward of 96% of the vote, and 36 recorded a flawless 100% (LSE Conflict Research Programme, 2022). These figures do not describe a competitive electoral process; they constitute the statistical fingerprint of outcomes that were arranged well before any vote was cast.

The Electoral Dispute Resolution Committee (EDRC), the body nominally charged with adjudicating complaints, was rendered functionally inoperative by prohibitive filing fees and pervasive political pressure, ultimately dismissing every single complaint brought before it (Ibrahim, 2026; LSE Conflict Research Programme, 2022).

## 2.5 The Illegitimacy of Unilateral Constitutional Amendments

The recent passage and swift ratification of purported constitutional amendments represent a significant and perilous turning point for Somalia, which many observers characterize as a unilateral and unconstitutional maneuver by the executive branch, Villa Somalia. This process has been defined by a deliberate disregard for the established constitutional amendment procedures outlined in the 2012 Provisional Constitution, a foundational document born from the consensus of over 800 delegates representing the full spectrum of Somali society. The current administration's actions risk dismantling this consensus and echo some of the darkest chapters in the nation's history.

The legitimacy of these so-called amendments is fundamentally compromised by a series of profound procedural and political failures. Article 132 of the Provisional Constitution sets a deliberately high and clear threshold for any constitutional change, requiring the approval of a two-thirds supermajority in both the House of the People and the Upper House. However, the parliamentary session that approved these changes was demonstrably inquorate. Reports indicate that only 161 of the required 184 members of the House of the People and just 34 of the 36 required senators were present. This critical shortfall alone renders the vote constitutionally invalid. The process was further tainted by the exclusion of key stakeholders, including the deliberate obstruction of over fifty parliamentarians from the deliberations and the outright boycott by others who deemed the process illegal from its inception.

This legislative maneuver was executed without the input or consent of crucial political stakeholders, most notably the leadership of the Federal Member States (FMS) and the broader Somali public, who were deliberately ignored. Key states such as Puntland and Jubaland, along with a broad coalition of opposition figures and former national leaders, have unequivocally rejected the amendments, viewing them as an illegitimate power grab. This flagrant circumvention of the consultative mechanisms mandated by the constitution, particularly the requirement for a joint parliamentary committee to engage with FMS legislatures, has shattered the fragile trust that underpins Somalia's federal compact.

Furthermore, the very body that ratified these changes, the current bicameral parliament, is operating on borrowed time. With its constitutional mandate set to expire on April 14, 2026, the legislature has, in the eyes of many of its constituents, lost the moral compass and public confidence required to undertake such a monumental task as rewriting the nation's social contract. The attempt to use these illegitimate amendments to retroactively extend their own terms is seen not as a measure for stability, but as a self-serving act that further erodes their credibility.

The entire episode stands in stark contrast to the current president's own popular slogan, “Soomaali heshiis ah, dunidana heshiis la ah” (A Somalia at peace with itself and at peace with the world). This motto, which was central to his election campaign, has been effectively abandoned in practice. Soon after taking office, the president began to behave in a manner contrary to this unifying message, pursuing policies that have actively deepened political fragmentation and created a climate of profound uncertainty. The unilateral imposition of a new constitutional order, against the will of major constituent parts of the nation, is the culmination of this trend, achieving the very opposite of his stated goal. Instead of fostering reconciliation, his actions have exacerbated internal divisions and precipitated a constitutional crisis, undermining the quest for a Somalia at peace with itself.

This has drawn alarming historical parallels. Only twice in modern Somali history has a leader single-handedly set aside the nation's constitution. The first was Major General Mohamed Siad Barre, who, after his 1969 coup, nullified the 1960 constitution and centralized all power, effectively declaring himself the law. The second instance is now, with the current administration's abandonment of the 2012 Provisional Constitution. By circumventing the prescribed legal order, the president has positioned himself as the second leader to unilaterally discard a constitution painstakingly crafted by the Somali people, a move that jeopardizes the foundations of the state and its long road to recovery and democratization.

## **2.6 The Imperative of Constitutional Supremacy and National Interest**

The persistent cycle of political crises in Somalia underscores a fundamental challenge that transcends any single administration or political dispute: the systemic failure of the political elite to observe and adhere to the constitution as the supreme law of the land. A constitution, particularly a post-conflict charter like Somalia's 2012 Provisional Constitution, represents a fragile social contract. Its violation by the very actors entrusted with its protection is not merely a legal transgression but a profound betrayal of the public trust, which inevitably plunges the nation into deeper fragmentation and uncertainty. The culture of impunity, where constitutional norms are selectively applied or overtly ignored to secure short-term political advantage, must be brought to an end.

To advance a genuine democratic pathway, Somalia's leadership must collectively abandon the destructive cycle of “blame-game politics.” This practice, where constitutional texts are weaponized to confuse the public and deflect responsibility for governance failures, serves only to perpetuate instability. The focus must pivot from zero-sum political maneuvering to the urgent tasks of national recovery, institutional strengthening, and the realization of a strong, sovereign state. It is a profound miscalculation for any single actor or group to believe that their interests are served by keeping the country in a perpetual security and sovereignty dilemma. Such a state of managed chaos ultimately undermines all, eroding the foundations of the state and leaving it vulnerable to both internal and external threats.

This call for responsible governance is deeply embedded within the ethical and moral traditions of the Somali people. The Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), which states, “Khayru al-nās anfa’uhum lil-nās”—“The best of people are those who are most beneficial to the people”—provides a powerful guiding principle for leadership. This prophetic wisdom establishes public service and the welfare of the populace as the highest measure of a leader’s worth. It implies a solemn duty not only to actively work for the public good but also to refrain from causing injury. As the common interpretation suggests, if a leader cannot help the people, they must, at a minimum, do no harm.

The flagrant violation of the constitution, the deliberate stoking of political division, and the obstruction of national progress are not neutral acts; they are a direct harm inflicted upon the Somali people, delaying their recovery and mortgaging their future. Adherence to the agreed-upon constitutional order is therefore not simply a matter of political choice but a fundamental moral and national obligation for anyone aspiring to lead the mantle of leadership.

### **3. A Deeper Comparative Analysis: The Perils of a Forced Political Binary**

The Somali predicament—ensnared between a premature leap toward a new system and a return to a corrupted old one—finds an instructive and cautionary historical parallel in the experience of Italy after the Second World War. This comparison is not merely academic; it is rooted in direct historical lineage, as Italy’s own colonial administration and subsequent UN trusteeship over Somalia shaped the very institutional DNA of the nascent Somali state (Lewis, 2002). Italy’s post-war trajectory demonstrates with devastating clarity the long-term consequences of a political system built on a foundation of strategic exclusion and tolerated corruption.

#### **3.1 Italy’s Decades of Dysfunction: A Case Study in Tolerated Corruption**

Driven by the Cold War’s geopolitical imperatives, the United States and its allies made a strategic decision to ensure the Italian Communist Party (PCI) was permanently excluded from national power, a policy known as the *conventio ad excludendum* (OpenDemocracy, 2016). This meant channeling vast financial and political support to the Christian Democrats (DC), effectively guaranteeing their dominance for nearly five decades (Ginsborg, 2003). While this strategy successfully kept the communists out of government, it came at a staggering cost: the creation of a political system with no viable opposition and, therefore, no accountability.

Shielded from any real electoral threat, the DC and its smaller coalition partners presided over a sprawling system of state-sponsored corruption known as Tangentopoli (“Bribeville”) (Jamieson, 2000). This arrangement produced a veneer of stability but was, in reality, a state of perpetual dysfunction, cycling through an astonishing 68 governments in the 76 years since the republic’s founding (Euronews, 2022). The entire edifice finally imploded in the early 1990s under the weight of the Mani Pulite (“Clean Hands”) corruption investigations, which decimated the country’s political class (Foot, 2015).

### **3.2 Somalia: A Fragile State Under International Scrutiny**

Somalia's current situation presents a chilling echo of Italy's forced binary. This dilemma is compounded by Somalia's official designation as a fragile state, a status that carries significant legal and strategic implications. The country remains under the strictures of Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, a designation reserved for situations deemed a threat to international peace and security.

The most recent UN Security Council Resolution renewing this mandate, Resolution 2809 passed in December 2025, explicitly links the eventual lifting of sanctions and the arms embargo to the Federal Government's ability to assume full security responsibility (United Nations Security Council, 2025). This international legal status is not a mere formality. It is a binding recognition that Somalia's institutions are not yet resilient enough to withstand major shocks, and it strategically requires the government to prioritize foundational state-building over ambitious but potentially destabilizing political experiments (Menkhaus, 2012).

### **3.3 The Imperative of a Sequenced, Realistic Transition**

The academic literature on democratization in post-conflict societies provides a powerful theoretical lens for understanding the dangers of Somalia's current predicament. Scholars like Jack Snyder have compellingly argued that rushing elections in fragile states, before the establishment of robust institutions, often leads to disastrous outcomes (Snyder, 2000). When elections are held in an institutional vacuum, they tend to exacerbate ethnic and clan-based divisions and delegitimize the very democratic process they are meant to inaugurate (Paris, 2004).

For Somalia, the lesson is stark: forcing a binary choice between a logistically impossible OPOV and a return to a proven-to-be-corrupt electoral college system is a recipe for state failure. The only responsible path forward is a sequenced, realistic transition that prioritizes the rebuilding of institutional credibility.

## **4. The Architecture of Paralysis: Blame-Game Politics as a Structural Barrier**

The Somali political impasse is not merely a product of competing electoral visions; it is the surface manifestation of a much deeper pathology: the politics of the blame game. This is a structural feature of Somalia's governance architecture—a rational, if destructive, strategy for elite survival within a political marketplace that rewards deflection and punishes accountability (Jaspars et al., 2023).

### **4.1 The Structural Drivers of Deflection**

The blame game in Somalia is anchored in a set of mutually reinforcing institutional failures. At its core lies the unfinished Provisional Constitution of 2012, which serves as a “perpetual alibi” for political actors, allowing them to reframe governance failures as intractable constitutional disputes (Dahir & Ali, 2024). This constitutional ambiguity fuels comprehensive dysfunction across all three arms of government, where a patronage-based legislature abdicates oversight and the executive centralizes power (Elder, 2022).

Underpinning this entire system is the pathology of the 4.5 clan formula, which has hardened into a rigid system of zero-sum competition, incentivizing a “sabotage syndrome” whereby losing clans and their allied elites actively work to undermine the sitting government to hasten their own return to power (Jaspars et al., 2023).

#### **4.2 The Consequences of a Blame-Based System**

The tangible consequences of this four-decade-long blame game are catastrophic. It has produced a state of near-total institutional paralysis, where the basic functions of governance are routinely sacrificed to political infighting. This, in turn, has led to a comprehensive erosion of public trust, with citizens turning to alternative authorities for justice and basic services (Barnes, 2019). The ultimate result is the catastrophic neglect of the Somali people, as the state’s inability to move beyond the blame game directly translates into a failure to provide security, build infrastructure, or deliver essential services. Breaking this cycle requires a fundamental reordering of the political system to one that rewards accountability.

### **5. The Strategic Case for the 135 Elders Model: A Pragmatic Recalibration**

A return to the 2012 model, in which the 135 recognized senior traditional elders select the 275 members of parliament, is not a retreat from democracy. It is a strategic and pragmatic recalibration designed to avert a constitutional crisis, restore a baseline of institutional integrity to the legislature, and create a stable platform from which to launch a genuine, consensus-driven roadmap toward universal suffrage.

#### **5.1 The Comparative Legitimacy of the 135 Elders**

The core strength of the 135 elders model lies in the unique nature of their authority. Unlike the ad-hoc, easily corrupted delegates of the 2016 and 2022 cycles, the 135 elders are a permanent, recognized body whose individual and collective legitimacy is tied to their lifelong standing within their communities.

Their authority is not transactional; it is relational and reputational. While not immune to influence, their decisions are subject to a level of communal scrutiny and long-term accountability that is entirely absent in the delegate model. As a result, the 2012 parliament, while flawed, was widely regarded as more credible and independent than its successors (International Crisis Group, 2012).

#### **5.2 The Proposal: An Enhanced 2012 Model with Critical Safeguards**

This article does not advocate for a simple carbon copy of the 2012 process. It proposes an enhanced version fortified with two critical new safeguards:

First, the establishment of an independent Civil Society Integrity Committee. This body, composed of respected Somali professionals, would be granted the legal authority to vet all 275 parliamentary candidates nominated by the elders and disqualify any candidate against whom there is credible evidence of involvement in war crimes, gross human rights violations, or large-scale corruption.

Second, the adoption of a binding Five-Year Democratic Roadmap. The parliament selected through this enhanced model would be tasked with a clear and time-bound mandate: to enact all necessary legislation and create the security conditions necessary to hold a one-person-one-vote election within a 60-month timeframe.

## **6. Operationalizing the Integrity Committee: An Academically Grounded Framework**

Transforming the Civil Society Integrity Committee from a compelling concept into a functional institution requires a clear, practical framework that addresses its appointment process, guarantees of independence, and legal authority. This framework draws directly from established international best practices and comparative models from other post-conflict states.

### **6.1 Appointment: A Multi-Stakeholder, Politically-Insulated Process**

The committee's credibility would depend on an appointment process seen as transparent, meritocratic, and structurally insulated from political elites. The most effective model is a multi-stakeholder selection panel, a mechanism successfully employed in countries like Kenya to appoint electoral commissioners (Constitution of Kenya, 2010). A high constitutional authority would convene a temporary Selection Panel with membership drawn from credible, non-partisan professional and civil society organizations.

This panel would conduct a public, competitive process to identify and nominate candidates for presidential appointment and parliamentary approval. This multi-layered process makes it exceptionally difficult for any single political actor to capture the committee.

### **6.2 Independence: Constitutional and Operational Guarantees**

Once appointed, the committee's independence must be fiercely protected through constitutional and operational guarantees (Constitution of Kenya, 2010; United Nations, 2006). To safeguard its autonomy, members would be appointed for a single, non-renewable six-year term. Their removal could only occur for gross misconduct following an investigation by an independent tribunal. Financially, the committee's budget would be a direct charge on the national Consolidated Fund, insulating it from executive whims. Functionally, members and staff would be granted legal immunity for actions performed in good faith.

### **6.3 Legal Authority: The Power to Enforce Integrity**

The Integrity Committee cannot be a mere advisory body; its decisions must carry the force of law, enshrined in the electoral law governing the transitional period (United Nations, 2006). It would possess the exclusive legal authority to vet all 275 parliamentary candidates and issue a binding disqualification based on a pre-defined and publicly gazetted set of integrity standards. The vetting process would adhere to the principles of administrative due process, and a disqualified candidate would have the right to appeal the decision to a specialized chamber of the Supreme Court.

## **7. Conclusion: A Necessary Recalibration for a Democratic Future**

Somalia stands at a precipice. The path of a premature and logistically impossible OPOV election leads toward a constitutional vacuum and renewed conflict. The path of returning to the discredited electoral college models leads toward deeper corruption and state fragmentation. The only responsible course is a strategic recalibration: a temporary return to the 2012 model of elder-based selection, but this time fortified with the critical safeguard of an independent Civil Society Integrity Committee and a binding, time-bound roadmap to universal suffrage.

This is not a rejection of Somalia's democratic aspirations. It is a recognition of the harsh realities of its current political and security environment. It is an argument for sequencing—for building the foundations of institutional integrity before attempting to construct the entire democratic edifice. By embracing this pragmatic and academically grounded approach, Somalia can avert a looming crisis, restore a measure of legitimacy to its political institutions, and set itself on a realistic path toward a stable and democratic future.

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