



SOMALIA'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION CANNOT STOP HALFWAY

Why Direct Parliamentary Elections Without Institutional Neutrality and Self-Denial Risk Another Form of Elite Capture

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Executive Summary

A significant and encouraging change is taking place in Somalia's political debate.

For years, the country remained trapped in a system in which members of Parliament were not elected by citizens but selected through clan allocation, elders, delegates, political brokers, financiers, and negotiated arrangements under the 4.5 formula.

Today, that consensus is weakening. Government officials, former presidents, former prime ministers, opposition coalitions, regional administrations, and other political actors are increasingly accepting that Somali citizens should directly elect their representatives to Parliament. Recent electoral proposals differ substantially in institutional design, but they increasingly converge on one principle: the old system in which a narrow circle of elders, delegates, political brokers, and financiers effectively determines who enters Parliament can no longer provide a sufficient basis for democratic legitimacy.

That is progress.

But it is not enough.

The emerging electoral models share a striking contradiction: citizens may directly elect Parliament, but the president would still be chosen by Parliament rather than directly by the Somali people. A recent comparison of four competing electoral proposals identifies precisely this common feature: all four support direct parliamentary elections while retaining parliamentary election of the president. [1]

This raises a question Somalia can no longer avoid:

What does Somalia gain by democratizing Parliament if the final gateway to Villa Somalia remains concentrated in the hands of a few hundred MPs who may still be exposed to political money, patronage, pressure, bargaining, and elite influence?

Directly elected parliamentarians are unquestionably more legitimate than MPs produced through 4.5 delegate selection. But democratic legitimacy does not make legislators immune from corruption or capture after they take office. International IDEA's comparative research warns that opaque and illicit political finance can distort democratic competition, weaken political equality, and facilitate the capture of public institutions.[2]

The deeper problem is even more serious.

The principal electoral proposals now being advanced are largely coming from current and former political leaders who have already held the highest offices in Somalia.

They include President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, former President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo, former Prime Ministers Abdi Farah Shirdon "Saacid" and Hassan Ali Khaire, and other senior politicians who served during the very period in which Somalia failed to complete its Constitution, failed to establish the Constitutional Court, failed to create a durable electoral system, and repeatedly returned to disputed transitions.

Yet the political conversation is again centered on how quickly these same actors can return to power, remain in power, or compete for power.

Almost no one is asking the most important question:

Who among Somalia's political leaders is prepared to sacrifice personal ambition for the country by accepting a binding self-denying condition?

That is where my [proposal for a two-year, self-denying technocratic transition](#) remains fundamentally distinct.[3]

It does not merely propose another electoral formula.

It addresses the conflict of interest at the heart of Somalia's political transition.

It asks not only:

How should Somalis vote?

It asks:

Who should be trusted to build, administer, and supervise the democratic system - and how do we ensure that those entrusted with that responsibility cannot capture the political outcome for themselves?

The answer cannot be an incumbent seeking another term. It cannot be a former president planning a return. It cannot be a former prime minister positioning himself for the presidency. And it cannot be another political coalition negotiating rules according to the electoral calculations of its own members.

Somalia needs a **neutral bridge** between its failed transitional order and genuine democracy.

That bridge requires a self-denying technocratic authority whose members cannot compete in the elections they prepare; a completed Constitution; an operational Constitutional Court; independent electoral institutions; political-finance safeguards; security neutrality; and a binding sunset date.

Somalia must not stop halfway.

I. The Rejection of 4.5 Is Progress

For decades, Somalia called itself a republic while denying almost its entire adult population the right to directly choose national representatives. Under variations of the 4.5 system, parliamentary seats were distributed through clan allocations and filled through elders, delegates, political intermediaries, and negotiated processes. Citizens remained largely spectators. That arrangement was always supposed to be temporary. Instead, it became permanent.

The 4.5 system weakened citizenship, entrenched clan arithmetic, rewarded political brokerage, facilitated corruption, and created a Parliament whose legitimacy did not arise directly from the

Somali voter. The fact that political actors are now increasingly accepting direct parliamentary elections is therefore significant.

The four electoral models recently compared in Somalia's political debate - the 2018 Electoral Bill, the 2024 Electoral Act, the Somali Future Council (SFC) proposal, and the Somali Unity Council (SUC) model - all support direct election of Parliament in one form or another. [1]

This should be welcomed. The Somali citizen must become a voter, not a spectator. But Somalia must be careful not to mistake partial democratic reform for the completion of democracy.

II. Parliament May Be Democratized While the Presidency Remains Vulnerable to Capture

The emerging models share a common structure:

Citizens elect Parliament. Parliament elects the president.

This is certainly better than the old system:

Clan elders select delegates. Delegates select MPs. MPs select the president.

But it still leaves the country's most consequential political office one step removed from the citizen.

That is not inherently undemocratic. Many constitutional democracies use parliamentary selection for heads of state. But Somalia must be judged according to its own institutional reality, not against an abstract constitutional model.

The question is whether Somalia should preserve a small presidential electorate when:

- Political finance remains opaque;
- Judicial institutions remain incomplete;
- The Constitutional Court has never been established;
- State resources can be politicized;
- Security institutions remain vulnerable to partisan pressure; and
- Presidential contests have historically been surrounded by intense political and financial bargaining.

A Parliament elected directly by citizens can still be influenced after taking office. That vulnerability is not theoretical: political bargaining, patronage, and pressure have been persistent features of Somalia's federal political system.

An MP can possess democratic legitimacy and still face bribery, inducement, patronage, party pressure, clan pressure, intimidation, or the influence of those controlling state institutions.

The problem is institutional, not personal. A sound democratic system should not depend on assuming that every legislator is incorruptible. It should reduce opportunities for capture.

Somalia must therefore ask a question that its political class appears reluctant to confront:

If Somali citizens are trusted to elect their Parliament, why should the possibility of directly electing their president be excluded from serious constitutional debate?

I do not argue that direct presidential election must automatically be adopted. It raises legitimate questions about executive concentration, federal balance, campaign financing, majoritarianism, security, and the relationship between the president and prime minister.

But the issue must be honestly debated.

The political class should not treat parliamentary selection of the president as an unquestionable default merely because that is the system through which many of its members hope to return to Villa Somalia.

III. A Directly Elected Parliament Must Not Become a More Expensive Presidential Electoral College

Consider the danger.

Millions of Somalis participate in direct elections. Citizens register. Candidates campaign. Voters choose MPs. A new Parliament gains democratic legitimacy.

Then the presidential election begins.

At that moment, the electorate for the highest office shrinks from millions of citizens to a few hundred parliamentarians. Every presidential candidate knows exactly whose support must be obtained. The value of influencing each parliamentary vote becomes enormous.

If political finance remains opaque, parliamentary votes remain exposed to bargaining, state resources can be misused, and anti-corruption enforcement is weak, Somalia may simply transfer the old political marketplace to a more legitimate - and therefore more valuable - Parliament. That would be an improvement over indirect 4.5 selection. But it would not fully escape elite capture.

Somalia could spend years building direct parliamentary elections only for the presidency still to be determined through negotiations among political elites, financiers, clan brokers, incumbent networks, and external interests.

The method of selecting MPs would change. The struggle for executive power could remain fundamentally familiar.

IV. The Political Class Is Avoiding Its Own Record

There is another uncomfortable issue that must be stated clearly: many of the political figures now championing electoral reform are not newcomers. They have governed Somalia. They have served as president or prime minister. They have led administrations, controlled ministries, appointed officials, negotiated with international partners, and exercised national authority.

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has served two presidential terms. Former President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo governed from 2017 until 2022. Former Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon, widely known as Saacid, served under Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's first administration. Former Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire served for more than three years under President Farmaajo.

These leaders had opportunities to advance constitutional completion, strengthen judicial institutions, establish the Constitutional Court, build a durable electoral architecture, and move Somalia away from recurring transitional crises.

The Constitutional Court was not established. The Constitution remained provisional. The country repeatedly returned to disputed electoral processes. And the old indirect system survived.

The historical record matters because some of these same leaders now present themselves as defenders of constitutionalism, direct elections, or democratic reform. As the WardheerNews essay "[The Trap Somalia's Political Class Built](#)" argues, Somalia's incumbent and opposition elites have repeatedly participated in the same political order they later criticize, while failing to complete constitutional and electoral obligations when they themselves held power.[4]

This is not to deny anyone the right to participate in politics, nor to pretend that every administration failed equally or in exactly the same way. Responsibility is cumulative and shared across presidents, prime ministers, parliaments, regional leaders, and international partners.

But accountability requires asking former and current officeholders what they actually completed when they possessed power.

A former president who now proposes a new electoral framework must be asked: Why was this not achieved when you governed?

A former prime minister who now speaks about constitutional order must be asked: What institutional foundations did your government actually complete?

An incumbent who promises direct elections must be asked: Why should the same administration that benefits from controlling the state machinery also control the transition under which it seeks renewed power?

These are not personal attacks. They are the questions any functioning democracy should ask of former and current officeholders.

V. Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's Biometric Approach Does Not Answer the Institutional Question

President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's electoral approach places significant emphasis on direct elections, voter registration, and biometric infrastructure.

Technology can improve electoral integrity. Biometric registration can help prevent duplicate voting, strengthen identity verification, and build more credible voter rolls.

But technology cannot substitute for constitutional legitimacy.

A biometric system cannot decide:

- whether constitutional amendments are legitimate;
- how federal and state powers should be divided;
- who has authority to manage elections;
- how electoral disputes should be resolved;
- whether an incumbent can control institutions while seeking another mandate;
- whether the Electoral Commission is genuinely independent;
- whether security agencies are politically neutral; or
- whether the rules themselves have national acceptance.

The 2024 Electoral Act is described as the most technologically advanced of the four models currently being debated. But it is also the most institutionally demanding and highly centralized, requiring strong administrative, financial, and technical capacity while giving Federal Member States a limited role.[1]

That is the fundamental danger: a country cannot compensate for unresolved constitutional legitimacy with better machines.

Biometrics can verify a voter. It cannot create political trust. It cannot establish an independent judiciary. It cannot produce federal consensus. It cannot prevent state capture by itself. And it cannot resolve a disputed presidential mandate.

VI. The Former Leaders' Proposals Also Avoid the Central Conflict of Interest

The same problem affects the opposition. The emerging divisions among former presidents, former prime ministers, party leaders, and opposition coalitions reveal that much of the debate remains connected to calculations of political advantage.

Recent reporting described disagreements involving former President Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, former Prime Minister Hassan Ali Khaire, Abdirahman Abdishakur Warsame, former President Farmaajo, and others over opposition strategy and electoral arrangements. The report cautioned that the individuals named had not publicly commented on the alleged exchange, but the broader

dispute illustrates the fragmentation of the opposition and the difficulty of separating electoral design from political competition.[5]

This is precisely the problem: the political contestants are negotiating the rules.

Those who hope to become president are debating how the president will be selected. Those who may benefit from political parties are debating party-based models. Those who possess regional influence debate how much authority Federal Member States should exercise. Those who benefit from centralization favor national control. Those who fear exclusion seek alternative mechanisms.

These calculations are natural. Politicians are political. But because they are political, they should not be expected to serve simultaneously as neutral architects of the entire transitional order.

That is why the missing principle is self-denial.

VII. No One Is Offering the Sacrifice Somalia Requires

This may be the deepest weakness in the present debate.

Everyone appears willing to propose a new electoral model. Almost no major political figure appears willing to say:

I will help build the system, but I will not compete for power under the system I help create.

That is the sacrifice Somalia needs.

Where is the incumbent willing to renounce reelection in order to guarantee a neutral transition?

Where is the former president willing to say that completing the Constitution matters more than returning to Villa Somalia?

Where is the former prime minister prepared to help design democratic institutions while stepping aside from the immediate presidential contest?

Where is the opposition coalition willing to accept that those controlling the transitional process should not be candidates in the outcome?

Without self-denial, neutrality remains a promise. With self-denial, neutrality becomes a structural condition.

The principle is simple:

Those entrusted with extraordinary transitional authority to design, administer, supervise, finance, adjudicate, or secure the next electoral order should not be permitted to compete for the political offices produced by that transition.

That is not punishment. It is protection against conflict of interest.

Somalia's recurring tragedy is that political transitions have been administered by actors with direct interests in their outcomes. The incumbent wants to remain. The opposition wants to replace the incumbent. Regional leaders want to protect their influence. Presidential aspirants want the system most favorable to their ambitions.

The result is predictable: the national interest becomes entangled with personal political calculations.

VIII. Why My Proposal Is Fundamentally Different

My proposal for a two-year technocratic transition does not merely offer another answer to the question:

How should elections be conducted?

It asks the more foundational question:

Who can be trusted to build the democratic system when every major political contestant has an interest in its outcome?

My answer is a self-denying technocratic transition.

Its members should be selected for competence, integrity, national credibility, and professional experience. They should be prohibited from contesting the elections they prepare and should not use temporary office as a pathway to permanent power.

Their mandate should be strictly limited to five national tasks:

1. Complete the constitutional settlement.
2. Establish and operationalize the Constitutional Court.
3. Build credible and permanent electoral institutions.
4. Depoliticize the security sector.
5. Protect public finances, strategic contracts, and national resources during the transition.

The transition should have a binding 24-month sunset. It should not extend itself. It should not perpetuate the incumbent. It should not install the opposition. It should not choose Somalia's next rulers.

Its purpose should be to create a system through which the Somali people can choose them.

That is what makes the proposal distinct.

IX. Somalia Must Build the Court Before the Next Crisis, Not After It

Perhaps the greatest indictment of the last fourteen years is that Somalia still lacks the Constitutional Court envisaged by its constitutional framework.

That absence is not a technical deficiency. It is one of the central causes of recurring political crisis.

When a president and opposition disagree about constitutional amendments, who decides? When Parliament's mandate is disputed, who decides? When the Federal Government and Federal Member States disagree over powers, who decides? When electoral rules are challenged, who decides? When a president claims a mandate and opponents say it has expired, who decides?

In a functioning constitutional order, political actors present their arguments before an independent court.

In Somalia, the dispute becomes a political negotiation. If negotiation fails, the international community intervenes. If international mediation fails, security forces and armed groups become relevant.

This is not constitutional government.

Yet those who governed Somalia for years without establishing the Constitutional Court are again rushing toward another electoral contest.

The sequence remains backward:

Election first. Constitution later. President first. Court later. Political victory first.
Institution-building later.

Later never comes.

My proposal reverses that sequence:

Build the institutions first. Then hold the election.

X. The New Consensus Is Better Than 4.5 - but Still Insufficient

I welcome the movement toward direct parliamentary elections. The old 4.5 selection system should not define Somalia's political future. Citizens should choose their representatives.

But Somalia must not accept another false choice between preserving 4.5 and automatically endorsing whatever direct-election formula the political class negotiates.

A democratic system must answer more than one question. Not only: Who votes? But also:

- Who writes the rules?
- Who runs the election?

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- Who controls state resources during the contest?
- Who appoints the institutions?
- Who resolves disputes?
- Who finances the candidates?
- Who selects the president?
- And can those controlling the transition compete in its outcome?

Until those questions are answered, Somalia risks replacing old elite capture with a new, more sophisticated form.

XI. International Partners Must Stop Mediating Only Among Political Elites

Somalia's international partners also face a choice.

For years, external actors have repeatedly helped negotiate compromises among political elites to avert immediate crises. At times, this prevented violence and preserved continuity.

But short-term crisis management can also perpetuate long-term dysfunction when every failure produces another elite bargain rather than institutional correction.

The 2021 crisis is a cautionary example. Somalia's leaders moved toward confrontation over mandate extension before eventually returning to negotiations and another indirect electoral process.[6]

The lesson should not be that elite bargaining always succeeds. The lesson should be that Somalia cannot indefinitely govern through recurring emergency bargains.

International partners should therefore support:

- a self-denying transition compact;
- neutral institutional selection;
- the Constitutional Court;
- public-finance controls;
- political-finance transparency;
- election technology and registration;
- security neutrality;
- civil society oversight; and
- binding transitional benchmarks.

They should support the process. They should not choose Somalia's leaders.

Conclusion: Somalia Must Not Democratize Halfway

The growing rejection of indirect 4.5 parliamentary selection is an important step forward. Somalis should welcome it.

But direct parliamentary elections alone will not complete Somalia's democratic transition.

A directly elected MP can still be influenced. A Parliament can still be captured. A presidential contest can still become a marketplace. An incumbent can still manipulate state resources. Former political leaders can still design systems intended to facilitate their return. And a country without a functioning Constitutional Court can still find itself negotiating every constitutional dispute through political bargaining, foreign mediation, or force.

The deepest weakness in the current proposals is not simply technical. It is moral and institutional.

Those who have already held the highest offices of the state - President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, former President Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo, former Prime Ministers Abdi Farah Shirdon "Saacid" and Hassan Ali Khaire, and others - should be judged not only by what they propose today, but by what they failed to complete when they possessed power.

Somalia still lacks the Constitutional Court. The Constitution remains unfinished. The permanent electoral architecture remains contested. And the political class remains focused on the next contest for power.

What is missing is sacrifice.

What is missing is self-denial.

What is missing is a political leader willing to say:

I will help build the democratic system, but I will not manipulate it, control it, or compete for the power it creates.

That is why my proposal is different.

A two-year, self-denying technocratic transition would not extend the incumbent, empower the opposition, or prepare its own leaders for electoral office.

Its purpose would be to complete the constitutional foundations of the Republic, establish the Constitutional Court, protect the neutrality of state institutions, create credible electoral architecture, and then leave.

Somalia's next democratic order must be built by people who cannot own its political outcome.

The rules must be stronger than the players. The Constitution must be stronger than the president. The Court must be stronger than political bargaining. And citizenship must finally be stronger than clan arithmetic.

Somalia should not spend years democratizing the road to Parliament only to leave the road from Parliament to Villa Somalia vulnerable to the same political marketplace it is trying to escape.

That is the danger of stopping halfway.

And that is why Somalia needs not merely a new electoral model, but a genuinely neutral constitutional transition.

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