

August 2023

Establishing an inclusive and sustainable political settlement in South West State

Opportunities for re-establishing dialogue

Overview

The current political dynamics seen in South West State (SWS) have been shaped by the state collapse of 1991, the civil war, and subsequent fraught efforts to establish a Federal Member State. Initial ‘bottom-up’ efforts by the Rahanweyn Resistance Army to form an autonomous entity ultimately collapsed into infighting, following which al-Shabaab established a significant presence in the area. The state formation process that later began in 2014—heavily driven by the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), Ethiopia and other external factors—failed to establish a legitimate and inclusive political dispensation. The legacy of the civil war has also led to enduring tensions between various groups over military and economic power, especially in Lower Shebelle.

In light of this historical genesis, today’s dynamics can be understood as the absence of a political settlement—the underlying rules of the game agreed among political actors regarding the distribution of, and competition for, power. Instead, successive elite cliques based on a minimal inner circle and narrow set of clan allegiances have been able to rule without consensus by relying on the support of the FGS and Ethiopia. While this has provided a degree of political stability, it ultimately affords little scope for addressing state-building reform or wider underlying issues in the political settlement. On the contrary, it has led to repeated bouts of political violence, with cliques seeking to capture state institutions, most notably around state elections. Such violence erupted in the wake of the controversial December 2018 elections, then again in December 2022 following a dispute surrounding the next elections process. Tensions arising from the latter outbreak have yet to fully subside.

These short-term dynamics of clique formation and competition obscure deeper historical and structural fissures. Competition for control of rents—especially from checkpoints—in a context of limited resources and revenue continues to drive conflict and instability, especially in Lower Shebelle. The disconnect between the state administration and Lower Shebelle poses a twofold challenge to a more inclusive settlement due to, first, tensions between the SWS administration and Lower Shabelle’s military and economic elite, and, second, the marginalization of key groups within the region. Further obstacles to an inclusive settlement in SWS include the marginalization of other minority identity groups and the ongoing presence of al-Shabaab, which controls four districts in the state, as well as wide swathes of its rural areas.

Thus, for long-term state-building and development objectives to be achieved, it is essential that an inclusive, sustainable political settlement in SWS is established, allowing the state’s different groups to peacefully engage in dialogue and compete for power.

Recommendations for re-establishing dialogue

Any approach supporting the emergence of an inclusive political settlement in SWS must tackle both the short-term and longer-term issues outlined above and will require significant leadership from the administration. Towards this end, there needs to be a focus on opening up political space in the state, including dialogue around the current election process. At the same time, the groundwork must be laid for broader discussions on longer-term issues.

The following recommendations are intended for a range of actors, including the SWS administration and other political stakeholders in the state, the FGS, Somalia's external partners, civil society and the wider public.

- **Support political dialogue to address existing political tensions around elections.** Despite the apparently calm political environment following the 5 February 2023 agreement, concerns over the management of and process for the upcoming elections continue to linger among opposition groups. This is particularly the case following the 27 May National Consultative Council (NCC) agreement. The Platform and other partners should therefore seek to stimulate political dialogue between the SWS administration and opposition camps on the timing and conduct of the elections. Given the SWS administration's likely resistance to this, such efforts could include informal and indirect approaches—for example, convening a network of political influencers from different camps to keep channels open, de-escalate tensions as they arise and identify opportunities for dialogue. Another avenue may be to persuade the FGS to re-ignite its leadership of the political process. This could be achieved through senior diplomatic engagement with the FGS, along with programmatic support for another conference in the state on the election process.
- **Establish genuine reconciliation initiatives to address longstanding grievances, with a focus on Lower Shebelle.** Before embarking on any longer-term reforms to the political settlement, it is essential that longstanding grievances stemming from the civil war are addressed. What exactly this looks like should be determined by a consultative process within the state involving political and traditional leaders, as well as communities. The process will need to explore opportunities for transitional justice and redress for past crimes, as well as how best to address the enduring legacy of the civil war, which has led communities to perceive re-occurring dynamics of oppression and exploitation. While this is relevant across SWS, it is particularly important within Lower Shebelle, where there is a pressing need to consider redress for land grabs, as well as political economy and security force imbalances that favour particular groups
- **Revitalize meaningful engagement among key stakeholders with a view to reviewing core power-sharing mechanisms and establishing a more stable bargain.** Assuming the upcoming presidential elections yield a positive outcome, political leaders should establish a platform for key stakeholders to review core power-sharing elements at the state level. If one person, one vote elections are not possible, a number of alternative options are available. For example, vice-presidential positions could be established and allocated to certain groups in order to increase their buy-in to state institutions, with the composition of the state assembly also revisited. Alongside this, certain posts could be rotated between clan groups to increase balance. In addition, moving state institutions to the formal capital of Barawe would improve power-sharing dynamics, as would revisiting the clan allocations of top federal-level positions. Combined, these could serve as interim measures aimed at balancing competition between groups in advance of more democratic elections.
- **Support the growth of inclusive state security forces.** Developing a security force that can represent and protect the citizens of SWS is critical. While existing efforts to grow the state *Darwish* may increase capacity, these should be complemented by efforts supporting a more cosmopolitan, less easily politicized, force. Developing such a force in Lower Shebelle will be especially complicated, requiring extensive dialogue with the region's traditional, political and military leaders. One argument that could help persuade stakeholders is that although effective security forces would reduce the scope for lucrative checkpoints, they will enable significant

agriculture-based economic growth. Ultimately, it will be important to find opportunities to develop genuinely cosmopolitan security forces both in the *Darwish* and Somali National Army.

- **Enable diplomatic engagements that can temper the roles played by Ethiopia and the FGS in SWS's political and security affairs.** The extensive involvement of the FGS and the Ethiopian National Defense Force in SWS's political and security sphere has had a detrimental effect on an already unstable political settlement. While this is difficult to counter, diplomatic engagement with both parties may have some effect. In the case of Ethiopia, the growth of an effective state *Darwish* that can support security, especially along the border with Ethiopia, may help persuade them to play a less heavy-handed role. Regarding the FGS, diplomatic messaging should encourage a free and fair election process, regardless of modality, while also acknowledging the FGS's role in such a process.
- **Encourage dialogue around democratization and support relevant institutional capacities.** Moves towards democratization in SWS will help to overcome the state's existing dynamics of elite competition. Despite the recent May NCC agreement, SWS has—this analysis would argue—neither the political consensus nor technical infrastructure and security needed to conduct elections credibly and peacefully within the agreement's timelines. Instead, multiple rounds of stakeholder dialogue are needed to discuss key policy areas relating to elections, including electoral models, institutional development, financing, security and sequencing. Here, support could be given to a relevant SWS institution, such as the Ministry of Interior, in coordination with the corresponding FGS ministry, to conduct relevant stakeholder consultation and policy development. Over time, this could lead to the achievement of such core milestones as a legislative framework, the growth of political parties and the development of operational capacities.
- **Support the opening of political space in SWS as a key enabler of political processes.** In this regard, support to civil society could focus on two areas: a civil society umbrella that can independently advocate around political processes; and policy institutes that can act as independent hubs for evidence-based policy analysis and convening.

Credits

This policy brief is a product of the Somali Dialogue Platform.

The Somali Dialogue Platform is a programme which supports Somalis to achieve consensus on contentious political issues and is implemented by the Rift Valley Institute. The Somali Dialogue Platform is funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official policies of the UK Government, the Government of Denmark or the US Government. The Platform maintains editorial independence on all its products.

The Rift Valley Institute works in eastern and central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

Copyright © Rift Valley Institute 2023.

This work is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives License (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).