

February 2023

Hirshabelle's political settlement

Opportunities for meaningful and
inclusive political processes

Overview: Hirshabelle's volatile political settlement

Hirshabelle has been the site of continued political instability since its hasty formation as a Federal Member State (FMS) in October 2016, combining the two regions of Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle. Throughout the process, key constituencies in Hiiraan argued that the region should be a separate FMS rather than be forced to merge with Middle Shabelle. Issues also arose around representation, with clans in both regions demanding more seats. Despite these challenges, in late 2016 the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) hurriedly formed Hirshabelle state to allow federal elections to go ahead.

This rushed, top-down and exclusionary approach left the state divided and dysfunctional. Not only was the FMS administration incapable of collecting revenues from the two regions, but key constituencies in Hiiraan claimed they no longer recognized Hirshabelle state. Tensions were further aggravated by the election of Ali Abdullahi Hussein 'Guudlaawe' of the Abgal clan to the state presidency in November 2020, with Jowhar, the regional capital of Middle Shabelle, remaining the state capital. This was seen by some, but not all, communities as breaching a previous gentlemen agreement allocating the presidency to the Hawadle clan, who reside mostly in Hiiraan.

These political tensions have overlapped with the regular mobilization of armed forces, especially around the most recent election crisis. In late 2021, Abukar Warsame 'Xuud', a former military general, mobilized a militia on the outskirts of Beledweyne under the banner of the Hiiraan Rescue Council and demanded a separate FMS for Hiiraan. The militia declared that Hirshabelle officials would not be allowed to enter Hiiraan's capital, Beledweyne, delaying President Guudlaawe's inauguration, until 26 February 2022, after the FGS deployed forces there.

These unstable dynamics have rendered the state government dysfunctional, hindering any prospect of development and good governance in Hirshabelle. Such dynamics arise from the absence of a sustainable and inclusive political settlement in the state—that is, a shared understanding of and commitment to the exercise of power, in which political actors share a basic agreement on which institutions hold what power, and how these powers can be peacefully contested. While it is clear that Hirshabelle's political actors remain deeply divided over such questions, the new military campaigns ongoing in the state, once concluded, may create an opportunity to establish stronger political fundamentals. This policy brief, based on extensive empirical research, therefore provides an overview of the contentious issues at play before outlining a possible framework for transforming of the political settlement.

Key contentious issues in Hirshabelle's political settlement

The key contentious issues surrounding Hirshabelle's political settlement, which largely stem from the hasty formation process in 2016 and the subsequent elections in late 2020, include:

- 1 Disagreement over the capital city's location and the presidency's clan allocation:** The location of Hirshabelle's capital city and the clan identity of the state president have taken centre stage in disputes around the state's power-sharing arrangements. The nomination of Buulbarte in the early part of the state formation process was rejected by major stakeholders. Instead, an agreement was brokered by the FGS in October 2016 whereby Jowhar in Middle Shabelle was designated Hirshabelle's capital city, while the Hawadle clan, which predominates in Hiiraan, was given the presidency. In 2020, however, the Abgal clan, which predominately resides in Middle Shebelle, gained the presidency, with the region also maintaining possession of the state capital. This has led to serious grievances in Hiiraan, contributing to the state's dysfunction. Arguably, this is because the two parties had opposing interpretations of the original informal arrangement. Hawadle politicians believed that this arrangement will lead to their control of the presidency in the long-term, while Abgal politicians perceived it as a temporary mechanism for four years, after which the presidency could rotate between other clans.
- 2 Contention around clan representation in institutions:** The criteria for how the 99 seats in the Hirshabelle legislature are to be distributed remain unclear, with some clans dissatisfied by their level of representation. Efforts to include more clans in the cabinet have also resulted in Hirshabelle having the largest FMS executive (82 cabinet members) in Somalia. The leadership of security institutions is also contested among the state's clans. Clan power-sharing also determines appointments in the civil service, provoking further grievances and hindering the recruitment of competent individuals. This further erodes state capacity in Hirshabelle, which is already extremely weak. Efforts to revitalize the political settlement must not only address these grievances in the short term, but explore future pathways to more open contestation and control of institutions, as well as meritocratic recruitment to the civil service and security apparatus.
- 3 The role of al-Shabaab:** Al-Shabaab's ongoing activity in Hirshabelle is a key factor impeding achievement of a political settlement, with the group continuing to hold significant chunks of state territory. The future impact of the group on any political settlement, however, hinges on the outcome of current military campaigns in the state, which have already led to the government re-capturing significant amounts of territory.
- 4 The role of the FGS in political dynamics:** Many of the settlement challenges confronting Hirshabelle have their roots in how the FGS managed the formation process, prioritizing implementation of the 2016–2017 indirect election over a consensus-based process. The FGS's subsequent interference in the 2020 election process was also detrimental to Hirshabelle's political settlement as it shifted the state presidency from one dominant clan to another without consultation or consensus.

- 5 **Lack of state revenue-raising/-sharing capacity:** Revenue collection in Hirshabelle is virtually non-existent, a situation that partly stems from existing divisions between Hiiraan and Middle Shebelle. Revenue collected by local authorities in Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle regions is directly managed by the governors of the two regions, and does not go to the Hirshabelle Ministry of Finance.
- 6 **Poor leadership:** Study participants overwhelmingly concluded that senior state leaders are not committed to dealing with the multifaceted security, power-sharing or economic issues affecting Hirshabelle. The previous two state presidents from Hiiraan failed to address key grievances expressed by disaffected communities. Moreover, when it comes to gaining political power, successive state leaderships have been largely reliant on the support of the FGS in Mogadishu, and have appeared unwilling to address key political settlement questions in the state.
- 7 **Lack of genuine reconciliation:** Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle have witnessed extensive cycles of violent conflicts between and within clans over power and resources. Grievances arising from these conflicts continue to shape the motivations of various actors, limiting their willingness to agree on clear rules of the game for political competition, and provoking zero-sum bargaining. One significant example can be seen in Beledweyne, which is divided between clans in the east and west of the city. A similar division also exists in Jowhar. Conflicts mostly occur in rural areas co-habited by different clans, often with spill-over effects for urban centres.

Transforming the fundamentals of the political settlement

Revitalizing the political settlement in Hirshabelle requires returning to the state formation process and creating space for mutual collaboration between groups—only then can the core power-sharing issues that continue to disrupt state-building efforts be addressed. This could be enabled by the conclusion of the current campaigns against al-Shabaab and the consolidation of peace and stability once the military phase winds down. The following policy recommendations therefore offer a framework for those wishing to establish such a process:

- 1 Begin with genuine reconciliation:** A genuine reconciliation process is central to resolving the challenges currently facing Hirshabelle. If the clans in each region can settle their grievances through Somali traditional means—as has happened in Somaliland and Puntland—then trust may be restored, enabling discussion of the current political settlement's deficiencies in good faith. The current FMS president should assume this responsibility, making it his priority to overcome the divisions that have paralysed state functions. This endeavour should not be limited to a few privileged elders and politicians, who may have skewed or narrow interests, and would likely involve a series of conferences across the state addressing localized and state-level cleavages. The FGS can also play a role by signalling its willingness to support accommodation between parties and refraining from meddling in the state's affairs. It is also essential that women are involved from an early stage in order to disrupt ongoing dynamics of marginalization.
- 2 Review core power-sharing arrangements:** Once a certain level of trust has been established, discussions should return to core power-sharing arrangements, including the presidency, the state legislature, the security apparatus and the state capital, with the aim of reaching consensus on these issues. Such discussions could be brokered by the FGS or FMS leadership, or another third party if neither can attain buy-in, and should include both the political and traditional leaderships of all clans. Power-sharing arrangements should be revisited holistically, beginning with agreement on the state legislature, which could then serve as a blueprint for the cabinet and civil service. In terms of the presidency, a clear agreement needs to be struck on whether it rotates, is open for competition, or is allocated to a single clan. Should the latter option be agreed, then the location of the capital city could be used to rectify the perceived imbalance. If the presidency is rotated or open for competition, however, a more creative solution may be needed, such as changing the state legislature's distribution after each election to offset perceived imbalances, or dividing state institutions between Jowhar and Beledweyne. Genuine reconciliation will greatly increase the scope for agreement by reducing zero-sum bargaining dynamics. Ultimately, any arrangement should also be time-limited, for perhaps two terms, thereby allowing establishment of core state functions before opening up opportunities for political competition.
- 3 Agree on pathways to increase revenue generation and a framework for revenue-sharing:** In the first instance, negotiations around revenue-raising should be directed at ensuring revenue collected under the auspices of the regional governors is captured by the state treasury. Here, ensuring actors in Hiiraan pay tax to the regional

administration will be crucial. Moreover, enabling greater domestic and external revenue sources requires a clear framework for revenue-sharing between different parts of the state. This could be based on a basic formula for sharing revenue between Hirshabelle's two regions, perhaps based on existing population estimates, which could then be expanded to district-level revenue-sharing following a district council formation process. It may also be worthwhile advocating for extra resource allocation from the FGS and external actors as part of wider discussions around fiscal federalism, with the aim of ensuring the FMS has sufficient revenue to deliver basic state functions across the board. Another important consideration for fiscal viability will be reducing the size of parliament and the number of ministries/cabinet positions. Finally, negotiations should identify and agree on infrastructure development that prioritizes mutual interests, such as better road or airport connections.

- 4 **Establish legitimate state-level security forces and address the issue of al-Shabaab:** Agreeing a framework for increased revenue generation and sharing may enable discussions on developing sustainable FMS police and Darwish forces, allowing for consolidation of recent gains in government-controlled territory. Alongside discussion on the leadership of such forces, negotiations should address their clan composition in order to ensure they are regarded as inclusive and legitimate across the state. Agreeing the distribution of forces between Hirshabelle's two regions will also be important, with discussions not necessarily focused on generating new forces—rather, it may be possible to formalize and train existing militia such as the Macawisley, which has recently come to the forefront in Hiiraan. Given that developing sustainable policing capacity will likely take time, it may be necessary to agree a role for federal military and police units in the meantime as well. These units could take on roles that would otherwise have been conducted by formal FMS units, especially regarding the Somali Transition Plan. It would be valuable to begin such discussions early, even with ongoing military campaigns, to support a longer-term strategy to consolidating security in the state.
- 5 **Establish district councils and begin gradual steps towards wider democratization:** Establishing district councils across the state could enable reconciliation and provide a vehicle for addressing the grievances of more marginalized clans. It may also provide a framework for greater fiscal decentralization, although, given wider state capacity challenges, this will likely be a gradual process that takes place once progress has been made on developing Hirshabelle's revenue-raising and security capacity. Indeed, district council formation should not proceed so quickly as to raise affordability concerns. Instead, it should perhaps focus initially on state capitals. Establishing district councils could also take place alongside gradual steps towards local democratization, such as establishing an electoral commission (which can take responsibility for district council formation) and developing legislation around electoral models and political parties. Such steps will build confidence in the eventual delivery of local elections, while recognizing that significant progress in terms of security and revenue will need to be made if this is to become possible.

Credits

This policy paper is a joint product of the Somali Dialogue Platform and Somali Public Agenda.

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.

Somali Public Agenda is a non-profit public policy and administration research organisation based in Mogadishu. Its aim is to advance understanding and improvement of public administration and public services in Somalia through evidence-based research and analysis. Somali Public Agenda is a partner on the Somali Dialogue Platform.

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