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Understanding political settlement dynamics in Galmudug state

A foundation for supporting meaningful and
inclusive political process

Introduction

Galmudug state in Somalia was, until recently, seen as a region of conflict and fragmentation, shaped by the legacy of violence passed down from the Somali civil war. Due to the constant conflict between clan-based political groupings, it has been characterized as lacking any unified political authority. Even as other parts of Somalia established basic state structures and began forming what would become the Federal Member States (FMSs), Galmudug continued to be riven by rival efforts to establish administrations. The Galmudug state formation process, which concluded in 2015, was ultimately unable to secure buy-in from several armed groups, and as such violence remained central to the political order. This state of affairs was clearly in evidence when violence flared in 2020 around the most recent election process, and even more so in October 2021, when renewed conflict erupted between the state government administration and the Sufi group, Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a (ASWJ).

Despite this history of conflict, positive trends are increasingly apparent. The Galmudug administration has fewer internal rivals (such as ASWJ) and no competing administrations. Al-Shabaab has recently lost significant territory in the state and now controls only El Buur and Galhareri. The historically fractious relationship between Puntland and Galmudug, and related tensions around the town of Galkayo, which straddles the two states, have recently ebbed. District council formation processes are also going full steam across the state.

Even so, challenges remain. Many clans are armed and wield considerable autonomous power. Although weakened, al-Shabaab continues to pose a security threat to state authority. State sources of revenue and tax collection capacity are extremely limited, preventing the administration from expanding public services. In order to unpick Galmudug's complex political trajectory and assess current dynamics, this brief employs a political settlement framework. Here, political settlement is understood to mean a shared understanding of and commitment to the exercise of power, in which political actors share basic agreement on which institutions hold what power, and how such power can be peacefully contested.¹ As such, the fragmentation and violence that has long characterized Galmudug can be understood as the total absence of a political settlement. More recent positive trends, however, can be understood as opportunities to discuss, establish and clarify the rules of the game, thereby helping establish peaceful and lasting political dynamics. This brief seeks to provide an overview of these changing dynamics with a view to proposing solutions for Galmudug stakeholders going forward.

1 This framing emphasizes the need for the fair exercising of power, rules-based competition for power, and good governance, as opposed to more narrow definitions that are often considered synonymous with an elite bargain.

Key dynamics in the political settlement

The following are the key trends in Galmudug's political settlement dynamics, which can be considered a starting point for efforts to transform the current settlement.

From fragmentation to unified political authority

A key obstacle to establishing a stable political settlement state has been the lack of unified political authority in Galmudug. Instead, a weak state administration has been forced to compete with independent entities in various power bases across the state—namely, Dhusamareb, Adado and Galkayo. While this dynamic has been through a number of phases, it has most recently centred on tensions between ASWJ and the Galmudug state administration, destabilizing the post-2015 state formation process. Following the military defeat of ASWJ, however, Galmudug has finally come under a single unified political authority, with no rival administrations—the only exception being al-Shabaab's continued, but reduced, presence in the state.

The emergence of fragile power-sharing arrangements

Galmudug currently has an interim constitution, a capital city and a parliament that represents all of the state's 11 clans. Through an unwritten clan-based power-sharing formula, the state also has a president, a vice president, a speaker of parliament, deputies and a cabinet. While agreement on these arrangements is somewhat shallow, it has not proven as contentious as in other states (for example, Jubbaland and Hirshabelle) and provides a limited starting point for strengthening the political settlement. Some study participants, however—especially those from clan groupings whose territory was until recently been controlled by al-Shabaab—raised concerns about the need to redress these arrangements. Another important aspect of power-sharing has been the gradual roll-out of clan-based district council formation processes across the state. This has helped clarify local power-sharing arrangements, although not without some challenges.

Lack of resources makes the consolidation of state power challenging

While political fragmentation has lessened, a lack of government revenue streams and wider economic development continues to hamper the prospects of a lasting political settlement and, in turn, the consolidation of political authority. As with the rest of Somalia, the socio-economic situation in Galmudug is bleak. According to the Somali National Development Plan (NDP-9), about 80 per cent of the population lives on or below the poverty line.² The situation in Galmudug has been further exacerbated by the extended absence of government institutions and services, protracted insecurity, and rampant conflict, as well as cyclical droughts that have ravaged the region for decades. All this is reflected in the extremely low levels of human capital development in the area. Combined with the fact that political instability has prevented successive Galmudug administrations from developing revenue mobilization

² The Ministry of Planning, Investment and Economic Development, *Somalia National Development Plan 2020 to 2024*, Mogadishu: Federal Government of Somalia, 2020, PAGE. Accessed 15 May 2023, <https://andp.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Somalia%20National%20Development%20Plan%202020%20to%202024.pdf>.

capacities, the state has been left with very limited resources, restricting the means available for forging a political settlement.

Militarized clans continue cycles of violence from the civil war era

The weakness of the state administration is mirrored by the strength of rival clan-based political groupings. Conflict between these groups is an ongoing source of violence in Galmudug, especially as most clans in the state can still mobilize militia very effectively. In the absence of governance capacities and arrangements for managing conflict, these militias regularly come into violent conflict, often over land disputes or through cycles of revenge killing. Moreover, such conflicts are increasingly exacerbated by the impacts of climate change and recurring humanitarian crises, which put pressure on access to pasture and water points—often the centre of conflict.

Al-Shabaab's current military campaign may also have a significant impact on inter-clan dynamics. Much of this campaign has focused on mobilizing *macawisley* (clan militia; literally those who wear *macawis*, a Somali sarong) from key Galmudug clans as part of the group's efforts to bring districts back under its control. These clan militias may prove to be both more assertive in making claims over land and pasture, and increasingly resistant to the role of state authorities, leading to continued fragmentation and conflict in the borderlands between clan enclaves.

The fight against al-Shabaab

Since 2006, the fight against al-Shabaab has driven instability and threatened the prospects for a political settlement in the region. Al-Shabaab's long rule in certain territories is likely to have heavily impacted the citizenry there, including the broader ideological currents at play. There is now, however, a clear prospect of al-Shabaab losing further territory in the state, leading to a unified Galmudug for the first time. Even without direct control of territory, though, al-Shabaab may be able to maintain a network in rural areas, allowing it to conduct guerrilla warfare. It may also be able to control key supply routes between major Galmudug cities and will likely continue to influence and manipulate conflict between clans.

The intersection of national and Galmudug politics

A key dynamic shaping Galmudug's political settlement is the intersection between national- and state-level politics, which has had both positive and negative impacts on the state. Galmudug has especially close ties to politics in Mogadishu, with the same communities involved in both the state and the capital. Moreover, localized tensions often escalate to encompass national-level stakeholders and dynamics, while national political contests in Mogadishu often play out in Galmudug. Under President Hassan Sheikh's new administration, there have thus far been few tensions between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the state administration, potentially enabling improved stability. Galmudug is also heavily reliant on the FGS for both revenue and security, as demonstrated by the significant presence of the Somali National Army (SNA) and the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) in the state.

This state of affairs is not guaranteed to hold, however. A number of factors could place a strain on relations between the FGS and Galmudug, potentially provoking renewed instability. The timing and process of the next Galmudug state elections poses particular risks in this regard, especially if FGS leaders try to install an ally in the Galmudug presidency. Any deterioration in overall FGS–FMS relations may also impact on FGS–Galmudug relations.

Galmudug–Puntland relations

Historically, there have been tensions between Puntland and Galmudug due to their contested territorial boundaries, often centring on the town of Galkayco. There have also been resource-related contestations and revenge killings, which have impacted Galmudug’s political stability. More recently, the relationship between Galmudug and Puntland, as well as localized relations within Galkayo, have improved, reducing the saliency of this dynamic in the political settlement.

Tensions over the next election

A key barrier to greater stability are emerging tensions around Galmudug’s next state elections. Over the past decade, state elections have proven to be flashpoints in almost every FMS, with Galmudug no exception. The political bandwidth and resources taken up by elections mean they can distract from genuine progress being made towards a political settlement and other state-building priorities. On the other hand, the recent establishment of the Galmudug Election Commission (GEC), as well as the passing of relevant legislative frameworks, has created momentum towards wider democratization in the state, opening a path to a more sustainable and inclusive political settlement.

Key considerations for transforming the political settlement

Despite historical challenges, there is currently a vital, but fleeting, opportunity to leverage Galmudug’s unified political authority and make real progress in transforming the political settlement. Seizing this opportunity is essential, as it is also possible that a less consensus-based political order could emerge, with state authorities imposing order militarily. Moreover, a return to disorder cannot be ruled out. The following is a list of policy considerations for Galmudug stakeholders, aimed at improving the prospects of a sustainable, inclusive political settlement in the state.

- **Maintain momentum by ensuring free-and-fair state parliamentary and presidential elections.** The current unified political order could easily be shattered by a dispute over the next election process. Early set up of and support to the institutions responsible for the process, as well as agreement on the design of the process, would instil greater confidence. The state administration also needs to be open to dialogue with opposition actors, especially if resistance to the one-year term extension builds.
- **Prepare a consensus-based revision of core power-sharing arrangements.** Although Galmudug’s underlying clan-based power-sharing deal is stronger than in other FMSs, there is a clear need to consolidate and, in some instances, revise power-sharing in the executive and state assembly, as well as more widely. This is particularly the case following the liberation of areas previously controlled by al-Shabaab, which will likely stoke the grievances of communities that feel excluded from the state formation process. Setting up a series of large-scale conferences to discuss these issues following the conclusion of the military campaign against al-Shabaab would provide a

valuable format for building a fairer, more inclusive, consensus-based power-sharing modality.

- **Support the ongoing district council formation process and the broader development of local governance structures.** District council formation offers an opportunity to extend the legitimacy of the Galmudug administration across state territory and fund support for the establishment of local government structures. Effective, legitimate local authorities can also play a role in mitigating inter-clan conflict, which continues to drive volatility in Galmudug. There is a risk, however, that top-down efforts to establish and run local administrations may pay insufficient attention to local power-sharing formulas, thereby exacerbating conflict.
- **Support gradual security sector reform, while recognizing the need for hybrid models in the interim.** The integration or disarmament of clan militias in Galmudug is essential to progressing the political settlement. In the first instance, this should include mapping the armed groups in the state and negotiating with political and traditional leaders about which militias should be integrated into the SNA, Galmudug Darwish or state police, and which should be demobilized through wider disarmament, demobilization and reintegration efforts. This is likely to be an extremely lengthy process and should occur in an iterated, phased way, in tandem with implementation of the revised national security architecture.
- **Prepare specific policies and programmes to seize the opportunities and mitigate the risks arising from re-capturing territory from al-Shabaab.** While the military defeat of al-Shabaab in Galmudug clearly adds to the sense of opportunity outlined in this assessment, it is essential that concerted efforts in line with the three recommendations above (re-visiting power-sharing; supporting effective, legitimate local government; phased security sector reform) are made in re-captured areas.
- **Enable opportunities for private sector investment in the region, especially in Hobyo, while simultaneously supporting institutional revenue-raising capacities.** State authorities (with international support) should look for opportunities to convene and attract the state's significant private sector actors, with a view to encouraging investment in key productive sectors. This could include investing in Hobyo port as a strategic trading point, although competition would be faced from existing Somali ports, as well as the newly open Garacad port to the north in Puntland.
- **Enable the growth of a plural civil society capable of holding the political space to manage disputes.** Civil society has played a fairly limited role throughout Galmudug's history. Supporting the growth of existing and new entities could be a valuable way of supporting the state's peace infrastructure and ability to manage political instability.
- **Provide long-term support to democratization in Galmudug, including the state election commission and development of the legislative framework.** While the roll-out of elections in Galmudug may take many years, recent progress in the legislative framework and the establishment of the GEC have created entry points for long-term international support. Such support could include development of the GEC's long-term institutional and material capacity, as well assistance to the Ministry of Interior and other institutions in elaborating election laws and other relevant frameworks.

Credits

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