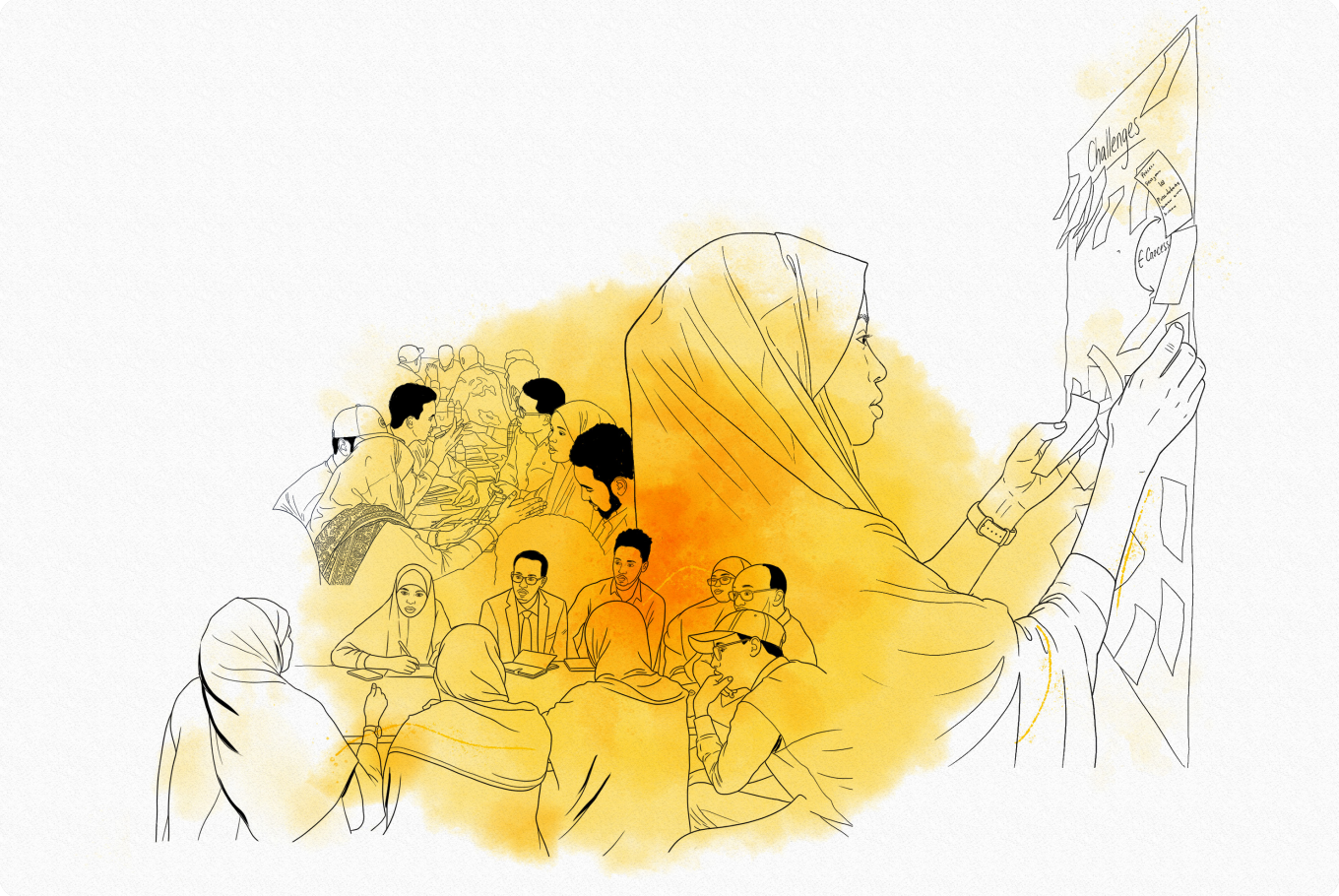
Beyond Divides: **Pathways for Somalia's National Dialogue**

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01 Executive summary

Somalia's state-building project remains deeply contested more than three decades after the collapse of the central government. Persistent political and constitutional "red lines" continue to divide Somali political actors. Highly contested issues include fostering national unity amid demands for increased independence, the nature of federalism, clan-based power-sharing, the system of government, the status of Mogadishu, and the management of political transitions. As the country approaches another sensitive political transition in 2026, these unresolved disagreements, combined with widespread mistrust in political institutions, risk further fragmentation and instability.

This paper examines if and how a nationally owned and inclusive national dialogue could serve as a possible mechanism for addressing Somalia's political and constitutional disputes. It draws on a desk review of national dialogue, alongside qualitative data from focus group discussions conducted across Somalia. Participants included civil society actors, women, youth, and members of marginalized communities, whose perspectives are often not given enough consideration.

Across Somalia, participants expressed skepticism about existing political forums, which they perceive as elite-driven, limited in participation, and disconnected from citizens' everyday lives and realities. While many view dialogue as a valuable tool for resolving conflict and building consensus, they emphasized that Somalia has never conducted a national dialogue as internationally defined. Instead, peace conferences and government-organized forums are often mixed with dialogue, while lacking broad participation and credible mechanisms for implementation.

Women, youth, and marginalized communities consistently reported being excluded from meaningful participation in political processes. Young people, who constitute most of Somalia's population, described experiencing limited political space and lack of representation. Women highlighted persistent cultural, religious, and structural barriers that marginalize them from decision making. People from marginalized clans reported systemic discrimination and a lack of access to platforms where national priorities are discussed. Participants stressed that inclusion must go beyond symbolic representation and quotas, calling for meaningful participation, influence over outcomes, and sustained engagement throughout the dialogue and implementation process.

The study found deep mistrust in political institutions and political elites, which were perceived as prioritizing personal and clan-based interests over the national good.

As a result, there is little confidence in the government's ability to convene a genuine national dialogue. Participants instead emphasized the need for what they described as neutral and independent conveners. While international actors were seen as potentially useful for technical and financial support, many participants emphasized that external involvement risk undermining local ownership and legitimacy.

Despite widespread mistrust, the research revealed strong support for an inclusive and credible national dialogue as a pathway out of Somalia's political stalemate. The study concluded that national dialogue could potentially be a transformative instrument for Somalia's state-building project. If designed around meaningful inclusion, and supported by credible convening arrangements and implementation mechanisms, it could help rebuild trust, address long-standing political divisions, and reconnect state-building efforts with citizens' realities. Without such inclusion and safeguards, however, any dialogue risks reproducing the very exclusions and power imbalances that have undermined Somalia's political processes for decades.

02 Introduction

State-building in Somalia is contested in several respects[1] with numerous political and constitutional red lines having persisted over the last three decades.

As Somaliland seeks international recognition, political actors remain divided over whether the Somali Republic should remain united. Fundamental disagreements also exist between the Federal Government and the national opposition regarding the 2026 political transition and the changes made to the Federal Provisional Constitution of 2012.

Further divisions persist over security sector reform[2], the design of the judiciary, the nature of the federation, the distribution of powers and responsibilities, and the status of Mogadishu.[3] As of the time of writing, the mandates of three Federal Member States governments, Southwest, Galmudug and Hirshabelle, have expired, while the mandate of the Federal Government is set to expire in May 2026.

Although the 4.5 clan arrangement[4] was intended as a temporary mechanism, it remains in place and has proven ineffective, while the transitional tasks necessary for direct elections have yet to be completed.[5]

Given such deep-seated challenges and the lack of an inclusive forum in which to discuss these issues openly, efforts are underway to identify effective mechanisms for resolving ongoing conflicts including national dialogue which many countries have used as a tool for conflict resolution and political transition.

This study examines the potential for national dialogue as a mechanism to address the multiple challenges of Somalia's state-building project and analyzes the shortcomings of previous attempts, firstly via a literature review on national dialogues as mechanisms for conflict resolution and political transitions. It goes on to analyze and discusses the findings from focus group discussions conducted across Somalia, organized around the themes of perceptions of national dialogue; convening authority; inclusivity; political and constitutional red lines; implementation; the role of the international community; and lessons learned.

The study concludes with recommendations on how national dialogue mechanisms could be used to address conflicts in Somalia.

1 See Elmi, Afyare & Abdi Hersi. (2020). State-Building in Somalia: Role of the Middle East and Horn of Africa Countries. In Giovanni Carbone, Africa's Thorny Horn. ISPI Report, Available at: https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/africas-thorny-horn-28197. P. 101.
2 Elmi Afyare with Paul Williams. (2023). Security Sector Reform in Somalia: Challenges and Opportunities. Publication prepared for the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, Somalia.
3 See Elmi, Afyare & Abdi Hersi. (2020). State-Building in Somalia. 2020.
4 This is a clan power-sharing formula that give the four main clans an equal number of parliamentary seats of 61 each and half (31 seats) to several unarmed 'smaller' clans.
5 Key tasks include creating a secure environment, establishing a legal framework, and conducting credible elections in the country.

03 Methodology

The research employed two complementary components. First, a comprehensive desk review mapping existing knowledge on national dialogue as a mechanism for conflict resolution and political transition, alongside an examination of Somalia's historical and contemporary experiences with dialogue-like processes. The desk review involved analyzing existing sources, including academic literature, policy reports, official documents, political agreements, and media coverage pertinent to national dialogue and Somalia's state-building process.

Second, based on the literature review and the main research questions, focus group discussion (FGD) questions were prepared and served as the primary empirical component of this study. Subsequently, researchers from HIPS traveled to all Federal Member States (Northeastern, Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Southwest, Jubaland), and the Banadir region, to collect data from 13 focus groups. Participants of the FGDs were chosen through purposeful sampling and included civil society actors, women and youth representatives, traditional elders, and members of marginalized communities.[6] Although the findings are not statistically generalizable, they offer valuable qualitative insights into public perceptions of national dialogue in Somalia.

6 Trained moderators conducted the discussions in safe and neutral environments. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was ensured, and discussions were audio-recorded. Detailed notes were made from the recordings. The empirical data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The study prioritized confidentiality and the safety of participants. Participation was voluntary, and individuals had the option to withdraw at any time.

04 Literature Review: Making Sense of National Dialogues

National dialogues have become a valuable tool for conflict resolution and political transitions, especially in post-conflict peacebuilding and state-building contexts.[7] They have been used over the past two centuries around the world. Early examples include the 1787 constitution-making process in the United States, decolonization-era conferences in Africa and Asia, and negotiations in Central and Eastern Europe during the late 1980s.[8] In the 1990s, several African countries, including Benin, Mali, Togo, and the Democratic Republic of Congo held national dialogues to facilitate political transitions or peace processes. More recently, Afghanistan, Nepal, South Africa, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia have also engaged in national dialogues.[9]

In their National Dialogue Handbook, Blunck et al. provide a comprehensive definition, describing them as "*nationally owned political processes aimed at generating consensus among a broad range of national stakeholders in times of deep political crisis, in post-war situations or during far-reaching political transitions.*"[10] In analyzing and evaluating national dialogues, Xin Guo et al. presented a conceptual framework consisting of seven criteria: pre-existing conditions, timeframe, participation, goal, process, output, and impact.[11]

According to Paffenholz, Zachariassen, and Helfer, national dialogues aim to address the root causes of conflict by bringing together a broad and diverse range of actors, including governments, armed non-state actors, political parties, civil society, women, youth, the business community, the religious community, traditional elders and the broader public. The authors identified three main types of processes that can underpin a national dialogue: peacemaking, constitution-making, and political reform. Peacemaking processes aim to end violence and promote reconciliation, as seen in Somalia's Arta (Djibouti) and Mbagathi (Kenya) peace processes. Constitution-making processes involve drafting or amending constitutions, establishing commissions, or approving new constitutional texts, as seen in Nepal and Yemen. Political reform processes focus on democratization through reforms, elections, and transitional authorities, as seen in Benin and Egypt.[12]

In other words, national dialogues involve comprehensive societal engagement to address the root causes of the conflict.[13] It is important to note, however, that not all peace, constitutional

7 Mandikwaza, Edknowledge. "A conceptual framework for national dialogues: applied theories and concepts." *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 24.2 (2024): 7-28.

8 Ibid.

9 Paffenholz, Tania, Anne Zachariassen, and Cindy Helfer. *What makes or breaks national dialogues?*. Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, 2017.

10 Blunck, Marike, Luxshi Vimalarajah, Oliver Wils, Corinne von Burg, David Lanz, Mir Mubashir, Vanessa Prinz, and Damjan Denkovski. "National Dialogue Handbook: A guide for practitioners." *Berlin: Berghof Foundation.* Available at www.berghoffoundation.org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Other_Resources/NationalDialogue/BF-NationalDialogue-Handbook.pdf (2017). P. 21.

11 Xin Guo, Morgan Miller, Perau Victor & Pujya Priyadarshni. Understanding national dialogues." *USA, Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs* (SIPA), P 16 (2015).

12 Paffenholz, Tania, Anne Zachariassen, and Cindy Helfer. *What makes or breaks national dialogues?*. 2017

13 Blunck, Marike, Luxshi Vimalarajah, Oliver Wils, Corinne von Burg, David Lanz, Mir Mubashir, Vanessa Prinz, and Damjan Denkovski. "National Dialogue Handbook: A guide for practitioners." *Berlin: Berghof Foundation.* https:// www. berghoffoundation. org/fileadmin/redaktion/Publications/Other_Resources/NationalDialogue/BF-NationalDialogue-Handbook. pdf (2017), p. 31.

or political reform processes qualify as national dialogues. Some lack the inclusive and society-wide engagements that characterize national dialogues.

Paffenholz, Zachariassen, Helfer argued that factors such as mandate authority, size, decision-making processes, and context influence the effectiveness of national dialogues. For example, dialogues with larger and more diverse participation tend to have a better chance of reaching agreements. While decision-making often relies on consensus, elite actors may circumvent established procedures, as illustrated by Somalia's Mbagathi peace process.[14] Additionally, longer processes are generally associated with higher rates of successful implementation.

The authors also identified contextual and procedural constraints including elite support or resistance, external influences, dialogue cultures, historical contexts, and violence. Procedural constraints that affect legitimacy and effectiveness encompass representation, the roles of mediators, the duration of dialogues, support structures, and coalition-building.[15]

Mandikwaza contended that national dialogues differ from negotiations and mediations in their goals and the participants involved. Mediation and negotiation typically involve limited participation: mediation relies on a third party, while negotiation typically involves a small group directly discussing and resolving a conflict. In contrast, national dialogues emphasize inclusivity, broad representation, and the participation of diverse groups to achieve national consensus.[16] Blunck et al. noted that national dialogues are structured to include diverse stakeholders from multiple tracks.

Peace negotiations are typically categorized into three tracks based on the actors involved. Track 1 includes government representatives, opposition members, military leaders, and violent non-state actors. Track 2 involves mid-level leaders such as civil society representatives, academics, religious leaders, and NGO officials. Track 3 is composed of grassroots actors, including local leaders and community developers. Within this framework, Track 1 actors engage directly in negotiations, while Track 2 and 3 contribute through consultations and discussions.[17]

The success of national dialogues often depends on the authority or facilitator who convenes them. Historically, international actors, governments, political parties, and civil society have all played this role. Governments frequently initiate national dialogues to address political and social challenges, as observed in Rwanda and Central Africa. Civil society organizations have also served as conveners; a notable example is Tunisia, where four civil society organizations, collectively known as the "Quartet," organized one of the most successful national dialogues in history, earning the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.[18] Archbishop of Cotonou, Isidore de Souza,

14 Ibid.
15 Paffenholz, Tania, Anne Zachariassen, and Cindy Helfer. *What makes or breaks national dialogues?*, 2017
16 Mandikwaza, Edknowledge. "A conceptual framework for national dialogues: applied theories and concepts." 2024, p. 11-12
17 Blunck et al. "National Dialogue Handbook: A Guide for Practitioners." P. 27
18 Blunck, Marike, et. al. "National Dialogue Handbook: A guide for practitioners." 2017. P. 303.

led Benin's 1990 National Conference. The initial advisory mandate of the dialogue was transformed, resulting in the dissolution of existing political institutions and the election of Nicéphore Soglo as prime minister to lead a transitional government.[19] At times, different actors collaborate to organize a dialogue. For instance, President Cyril Ramaphosa convened the ongoing national dialogue in South Africa, which is hosted by the University of South Africa (UNISA).[20]

Dessu and Yohannes conducted a review of national dialogues in Sudan, South Sudan, and Kenya to extract lessons applicable to Ethiopia's national dialogue. Their analysis indicated that Kenya's National Dialogue and Reconciliation (KNDR) was more effective than those in Sudan and South Sudan due to its focused mandate, broad inclusivity, credible conveners, and a clear implementation strategy. Unlike in Sudan and South Sudan, the KNDR prioritized addressing the post-election violence of 2007 from the outset while also considering the nation's long-term goals. Furthermore, the involvement of the African Union Panel, which included prominent figures such as Kofi Annan, Benjamin Mkapa, and Graça Machel, enhanced public trust and perceptions of neutrality in the process.[21] The KNDR also established institutional mechanisms to facilitate the implementation of agreements, including the Review Commission, the Commission of Inquiry, and the Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission.[22]

In his doctoral study, Nchongayi Begealawuh examined the national dialogues of Cameroon, Mali, South Sudan, Tunisia, and Kenya, focusing on local agency, contextual knowledge, ownership, trust, and legitimacy. Through comparative case studies, he emphasized that meaningful participation rather than superficial representation is essential for genuine inclusion. For instance, the national dialogues in Mali, Cameroon, and South Sudan were often tokenistic and manipulated, whereas Kenya and Tunisia effectively incorporated civil society and local actors.

Begealawuh also noted that the mere presence of local actors does not guarantee that a dialogue process is trusted or locally owned. In Cameroon, the government employed political manipulation and intimidation in addressing the Anglophone crisis, while in Mali and South Sudan inclusion was largely symbolic, legitimizing elite control. In contrast, civil society groups played a central role in facilitating Tunisia's national dialogue. Ultimately, Begealawuh called for measures to prevent "elite capture" in national dialogues.[23]

19 Ibid. P. 210-211.

20 Lesedi Sibiya. The National Dialogue, a turning point for healing South Africa. Diplomatic Insider, 15 August 2025. Available at: https://diplomaticinside.com/2025/08/15/the-nation-dialogue-a-turning-point-for-healing-south-africa/

21 Kofi Annan is a Ghanaian diplomat and the former Secretary-General of the United Nations. Benjamin Mkapa is the former president of Tanzania. Graça Machel is a Mozambican politician and the first woman to serve as first lady of two different countries - Mozambique and South Africa.

22 Dessu, Meressa Kahsu, and Dawit Yohannes. "National dialogues in the Horn of Africa: Lessons for Ethiopia's political transition." *ISS East Africa Report* 2020.32 (2020): 1-24.

23 Begealawuh, Nchongayi. "Building Peace Through National Dialogues: What Role for Civil Society Organisations in Cameroon and in Africa?." PhD diss., Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa, 2025.

05 Findings and Analyses

This section presents the key findings and analysis from the literature review and the focus group discussions. It examines participants' understanding of national dialogue, its perceived shortcomings, and its potential role in addressing Somalia's political and constitutional red lines.

The findings revealed differing perceptions of dialogue, widespread mistrust in political institutions, the exclusion of key social groups, and the lack of a credible convening authority. The study contextualizes the findings within Somalia's historical peace processes and state-building efforts. Overall, the results highlight a significant gap between the theoretical concept of national dialogue and its practical application in Somalia, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive, credible, and national-owned process.

5.1 PERCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL DIALOGUE

The focus group discussions revealed that participants hold contradictory understandings and perceptions of the national dialogue. Some view it as an important platform that brings together different sectors of society to shape the future. Others are skeptical, perceiving dialogue platforms as exclusive clubs for the elite, where ordinary citizens are excluded.

Participants appeared to conflate different types of dialogues. Many reported participating in local dialogues, which are often aimed at resolving pressing community issues or facilitating the establishment of local governments or federal member states. As a result, the focus group findings were mixed.

Many participants reported that they or their representatives had engaged in dialogues, which they viewed positively, recognizing them as spaces for conflict resolution and inclusive collaboration. One participant stated: “It [dialogue] is the best method to resolve conflicts, reduce tensions, and achieve mutual agreement.”[24] However, some had never engaged in dialogues, perceiving them as elite-driven and irrelevant to their realities. As one participant remarked: “Opportunities to engage in these processes have not been accessible, and my community and I have remained outside formal political conversations.”[25]

Most participants from member states acknowledged that dialogues have occurred, providing some experience in political discussions. One participant explained: “Yes, local and regional dialogues have taken place in the area. These dialogues happened at different times and were usually organized to address issues affecting the community or to settle disagreements through peaceful discussions.”[26] Another participant noted: “Yes, local dialogues have taken place, though their frequency and impact have been limited. These events are important stepping stones for building trust and preparing communities for broader participation in

24 FGD Participant, Northeastern State, October 2025.
25 FGD Participant, Banadir Region, November 2025.
26 FGD Participant, Puntland State, November 2025.

national processes."[27] However, respondents also observed that these dialogues were infrequent, inconsistent, or not fully inclusive of the wider society. Participants emphasized the need to improve the quality of the national dialogue process and highlighted the crucial importance of focusing on peace and security.

Participants believed that local dialogues contribute to the national dialogue process in multiple ways. One participant explained: "Community-level dialogue has the potential to provide real solutions for ongoing political deadlocks and broader national issues. Engaging local voices strengthens national unity and encourages a more inclusive sense of belonging."[28]

For many participants, community dialogues enhance the national process by building from the grassroots level. They help identify local challenges and solutions that reflect community needs, ensuring that national decisions are grounded in local realities and thus increasing their legitimacy. Another participant noted: "Community-level dialogues can create a stronger foundation for national processes by promoting unity, stability, and shared purpose."[29] Participants emphasized that such dialogues foster inclusivity, cooperation, and local ownership, helping prevent local issues from escalating into national crises and supporting broader state-building efforts. As one participant remarked: "Community-level dialogue can help identify challenges early and develop shared solutions that reflect local needs. When communities speak openly about their concerns, it becomes easier to bring those issues into national discussions and influence broader political processes."[30]

The confusion and contradictory perceptions among the focus group participants are understandable. In fact, Somalia has not yet conducted a "national dialogue" as defined in this paper. However, some participants conflate peace conferences, such as the Arta Peace Conference, which brought together a broad range of actors, with a national dialogue. Others use a simplistic definition that encompasses all kinds of political discussions, including talks managed by the government, negotiations between the Federal Government and the Federal Member States, and mediation efforts between Somalia and Somaliland.

During the post-transition period (2012–present), leaders of the Federal Government and Federal Member States frequently negotiated important matters related to the transition. Various federal ministries organized two- or three-day conferences on issues such as education,[31] security, and justice.[32] However, these conferences were largely limited to government supporters and, as a result, failed to meet the threshold necessary for national dialogue.

27 Ibid.
28 FGD Participant, Puntland State, November 2025.
29 FGD Participant, Jubaland State, November 2025.
30 FGD Participant, Banadir Region, November 2025.
31 See the communique from the Conference on Education at: https://moe.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/WAR-MURTIYEEDKA-SHIRWEYNAHA-WAXBARASHADA-QARANKA-2023.pdf
32 See the communique from the Reform of the Judiciary, Available at: https://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/somalia-Communique%20-%20April%202013-National%20Dialogue-som.pdf

Talks between Somalia-Somaliland over the past 15 years often took place outside the country in Abu Dhabi, London, Istanbul, Ankara, Addis Ababa, and Djibouti. Various government leaders, including those from the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Ethiopia, and Djibouti, have attempted to mediate between Mogadishu and Hargeisa. Although some conferences yielded agreements on marginal issues, the substantive questions of secession or unity have yet to be addressed.[33]

The study found that comprehensive and inclusive national dialogue has yet to be implemented in Somalia. Somalia's political leaders have primarily relied on negotiations between the two levels of government to address political transition issues. The focus groups revealed that participants conflated local and national peace processes, constitution-making, and issue-specific major conferences with the concept of national dialogue.

5.2 CREDIBLE AND NEUTRAL CONVENING AUTHORITY

Participants overwhelmingly preferred neutral and independent actors over political authorities as convening authorities. The most trusted actors included universities, think tanks, scholars, educators, civil society organizations, and traditional elders. Participants believed an inclusive committee selected by communities, representing various groups (local organizations, humanitarian actors, women, and youth), would be the most trustworthy.

Another important finding from the focus group discussions was that trust is minimal or absent in the current government institutions. Participants said that political leaders prioritized personal interests and clan-based agendas over national interests. A participant from Southwest said: "Politicians should not lead national dialogue, as most have personal or clan-based interests that could influence the process."[34] A participant from Banadir added: "Trusted institutions such as universities, think tanks, and educators should take the lead, as they can maintain neutrality and fairness."[35]

Some participants argued that they would trust politicians if the government and opposition worked together for the national good. One noted that the Federal Government "could lead only if it is chosen fairly, acts neutrally, and prioritizes the national interest."[36]

Participants believed that actors removed from day-to-day politics are more trustworthy and can ensure a fair and transparent dialogue. Institutions such as think tanks, universities, scholars, and educators are perceived as more neutral. These actors are seen as credible, neutral, and capable of facilitating inclusive and transparent dialogue, unlike government institutions which are largely distrusted.

33 The meetings that have taken place so far did not address the main issues of secession or unity. Instead, the mediators started with a confidence-building measure.
34 FGD Participant, Southwest State, November 2025.
35 FGD Participant, Banadir Region, November 2025.
36 Ibid.

Participants identified civil society organizations and traditional elders as potential neutral and trustworthy actors. Community advocates, particularly those advocating for women and minorities, help promote fairness and inclusivity and should therefore be engaged in the process. One participant said: "Scholars and customary elders contribute moral authority, cultural legitimacy, and deep knowledge of local dynamics, making them key actors in ensuring fairness and transparency."[37] Another added: "Women are increasingly seen as key actors who can contribute to an inclusive and balanced dialogue process. Their involvement brings different perspectives and strengthens fairness in discussions."[38]

In the past, external conveners have hosted three major Somali peace processes. President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti convened the Arta Peace Conference, which brought together over 2,500 Somalis. The conference aimed to end the violent conflict in Somalia and establish a transitional government. Participants, primarily civil society representatives, traditional elders, religious leaders, intellectuals, the business community, as well as grassroots community leaders, agreed to lay the groundwork for the political settlement of the Third Republic, including a parliamentary system, 4.5 clan power-sharing, and democratic governance. The conference successfully approved the Transitional National Charter and established the Transitional National Assembly, which subsequently elected President Abdiqasim Salad Hassan to lead the Transitional National Government (TNG).[39]

The Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) convened a follow-up peace conference in Mbagathi, Kenya, from 2002 to 2004. Although civil society members and traditional elders participated, the Mbagathi conference brought together the Transitional National Government and the faction leaders that opposed it.[40] Over the course of two years, the Mbagathi Peace Conference reaffirmed the key political settlements from Arta, including the parliamentary system, 4.5 clan power-sharing, and democratic governance, while replacing federalism with regional autonomy as agreed by the Arta participants. The conference also produced the Transitional Federal Charter, the Transitional Federal Parliament, and created the Transitional Federal Government in October 2004, with led by President Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed.[41]

In 2008, a United Nations-led peace conference in Djibouti brought together the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia and the government. The Islamist leader, Sharif Sheikh Ahmed became the president of the Transitional Federal Government. The United Nations Political Office led negotiations to conclude the transition period, involving six political leaders: the president, the prime minister, the speaker of the TFG, and the leaders of Puntland,

37 FGD Participant, Hirshabelle State, November 2025.
38 FGD Participant, Northeastern State, November 2025.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid. See also Elmi, Afyare Abdi. *Understanding the Somalia conflagration: Identity, political Islam and peacebuilding*. Pluto Books, 2010.
41 Christian Webersik explains the reasons that multiple peace processes have failed. See Webersik, Christian. "Bargaining for the spoils of war: Somalia's failing path from war to peace." *African Security* 7, no. 4 (2014): 277-302.

Galmudug, and Ahlu-Sunnah Wal-Jama'ah. These discussions resulted in the Federal Provisional Constitution of Somalia.[42]

Clearly, Somalia lacks a credible convening authority trusted by different political actors. The country is marked by a polarized environment in which the government is constrained, and civil society remains weak. Widespread skepticism toward the involvement of external actors further complicates the situation. As a result, identifying a credible convener capable of bringing all parties together remains a significant challenge.

5.3 INCLUSION OF WOMEN, YOUTH, AND MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES

Participants overwhelmingly reported that women, youth, and marginalized communities, including people with disabilities, are frequently excluded from important dialogues. A participant said: "Women and youth are among the most excluded, even though they play a major role in society and make up a large part of the population."[43] Another participant added: "Minority and disability groups, who often face discrimination, also struggle to participate meaningfully."[44]

Some said that civil society groups and opposition scholars were also overlooked, resulting in discussions that primarily involve governments and their supporters. One participant said: "Civil society voices and even traditional leaders, such as senior elders or certain clan representatives, sometimes do not receive the space they deserve."[45] Another added: "Civil society members, senior elders, clan representatives, vulnerable groups, scholars, and cultural groups are also overlooked in many cases."[46]

Cultural and religious beliefs are often cited as key reasons for excluding women and young people (under 35 years old) from decision making. In Somali culture and stories, women are frequently portrayed as emotional and youth as inexperienced, justifications commonly used to limit their participation. As one participant noted: "Cultural beliefs are a major barrier. Many people still believe women should not participate in decision making, and youth are considered inexperienced."[47] Another added: "Cultural norms, including beliefs about women's roles, continue to disadvantage them and restrict their ability to contribute openly."[48]

Structural, political, and economic barriers, including a lack of political space, the 4.5 clan power-sharing formula, weak implementation of quotas, and limited economic power were also cited by participants as limiting the participation of women and young people.

42 See BBC. Somali election: Hassan Sheikh elected as president. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-19540325
43 FGD Participant, Northeastern State, November 2025.
44 FGD Participant, Jubaland State, November 2025.
45 FGD Participant, Southwest State, November 2025.
46 FGD Participant, Galmudug State, November 2025.
47 FGD Participant, Hirshabelle State, November 2025.
48 Ibid.

Women's participation in the Arta Peace Process in 2000 was notable. Aisha Haji Elmi co-chaired the conference, and women played an important role in advocating for peace. Many women delegates came from civil society, some well-known musicians and singers. Abdidhuh Yusuf, a well-respected poet, composed a play entitled *Darajo iyo Xil Yaa Mudan* (Who Deserves Leadership and Promotion), which was performed by famous artists at the conference.[49] Women also demanded equal inclusion in the political process. Although a formal quota was not granted, 25 women joined the Transitional National Assembly, which consisted of 245 members, and two women joined the cabinet as junior ministers.[50]

Many women also participated in the Mbagathi conference in Kenya in 2004. Although warlords dominated the conference, the women were more experienced and active. With the support of the international community, women received a 12% quota[51], significantly lower than the 30% they had requested.

Women also joined the council of ministers and other government bodies including commissions. However, in 2012, during the negotiations for the Federal Provisional Constitution, women lost a specific quota. The constitution includes a general article stating that women should participate in all elected and appointed positions.[52] Despite this setback, women's political participation has continued to increase. Between 2016 and 2022, women's representation in parliament reached a high of 24%. In the current parliament, women make up around 20%.[53]

Women's participation in the post-transition constitution-making process has been mixed. Maryam Arif Qasim and Asha Gelle initially led the Independent Constitution Review and Implementation Commission and the Parliamentary Oversight Committee. In the 2016 draft of the constitution, led by women, provisions for a gender quota were included, notably an article that allowed women who married non-Somalis to pass citizenship to their children. However, by 2016, women's representation in these commissions was negligible and this provision was reversed by subsequent committees dominated by former warlords and military leaders.[54]

Women's participation in the constitutional committees remains minimal. The 10-member Independent Constitutional Review and Implementation Commission (ICRIC) has only one woman,[55] and the Oversight Committee includes just one woman. This committee has altered the first four chapters of the constitution, removing both the gender quota and women's right to pass citizenship to their children.

49 See the play at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAXCeVEbJ34
50 The first parliament of the Third Republic consisted of 245 members. Somalia's clans divided 225 members using the 4.5 rule. The President of Djibouti was given 20 seats for resolving outstanding issues.
51 See the Transitional Federal Charter, 2004.
52 See the Federal Provisional Constitution. 2012, Available at: https://icric.gov.so/
53 See Ladan Affi and Zainab Hassan. Women and Politics. Heritage Institute for Policy Studies, 2024, Available at: https://heritageinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Women-and-Politics-July-2022.pdf, p. 4. See also Affi, Ladan. "The Old Men Who Hold Us Back: Clan Elders, Elite Bargaining and Exclusionary Politics." *Journal of Somali Studies* 7, no. 2 (2020); See also Affi, Ladan. "Excluding women: the clanization of Somali political institutions." CMI Brief (2020).
54 See Article 8 of the draft constitution that the Oversight Committee of 2016-2022.
55 See the members of ICRIC at their website. Available at: https://icric.gov.so/guddiga/

The FGD data suggest several strategies to promote inclusion. Participants recommended fostering cultural awareness about the importance of participation, as well as providing education and financial support for women, youth, and marginalized groups.

They also advocated for structural reforms, including establishing quotas, expanding political space, and implementing meaningful programs such as awareness campaigns, inclusivity initiatives, and advocacy through media and community leaders to challenge discriminatory attitudes. Legal and institutional measures should ensure equality, guarantee representation, and create opportunities for economic empowerment and political education. As one participant noted: "Women's quotas are often insufficient and are not matched with real empowerment or support."[56]

Finally, participants suggest replacing the 4.5 clan system with a party-based, one-person-one-vote system to strengthen democratic participation.

5.4 MAJOR PRIORITIES: POLITICAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL RED LINES

FGD participants identified justice, representation, and basic needs as the top priorities for their communities. They expressed a strong demand for justice, fairness, and equal treatment under the law, along with a desire for expanded political space and public service. Some communities feel excluded due to flaws in the representation formula. Additionally, participants noted that their basic needs are not being met, citing issues such as unemployment, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient public services, including healthcare and education, which significantly impact their daily lives.

Participants identified the main causes of disagreement and conflict among political actors as personal self-interest and structural flaws within the political system. Many noted that leaders often prioritize clan-based agendas over national interests. As one participant observed: "When leaders prioritize their own gain instead of the national interest, disagreements easily escalate."[57] Moreover, competition over resources, the divisive 4.5 power-sharing arrangement, and a lack of constitutional clarity exacerbate conflicts among various actors. One participant explained: "The 4.5 system also contributes to conflict because of power-sharing disputes and competition over power and resources."[58]

Others highlighted corruption and tribalism as additional challenges, with one noting: "Corruption and tribalism are the two challenges that have weakened the government and divided society."[59] Another emphasized that "the constitution is not fully implemented, and its ambiguous areas create different interpretations among leaders."[60]

56 FGD Participant, Northeastern State, November 2025.
57 FGD Participant, Puntland State, November 2025.
58 FGD Participant, Hirshabelle State, November 2025.
59 FGD Participant, Puntland State, November 2025.
60 FGD Participant, Galmudug State, November 2025.

The FGD findings revealed that participants view Somaliland, federalism, and the 4.5 power-sharing system as significant political issues that need attention. One participant noted: "National issues such as the Somalia–Somaliland question, clan power-sharing, federalism, the system of government, and political transitions are indeed essential and deserve attention. These topics shape the country's direction and influence stability at every level."[61]

However, they cautioned that leaders often misuse these matters for personal political agendas. Communities stressed the importance of balancing high-level political debates with immediate local issues, such as security, education, healthcare, and justice. They also advocated for transitioning the 4.5 system to either a political party framework or a one-person, one-vote system. Another participant noted: "There are more urgent problems affecting daily life that should be prioritised instead. Issues like education, health, justice, and security are seen as more immediate and necessary, especially for ordinary citizens who struggle with basic needs."[62]

In Fukuyama's state-building framework, he argues that the political development process is lengthy and consists of three sets of institutions: the state, the rule of law, and democratic accountability. Together, these institutions constitute the political order and must exist in a balanced manner.[63] Max Weber defined the state as "the form of human community that (successfully) lays claim to the monopoly of legitimate physical violence within a particular territory."[64] These include armies, police, bureaucracies, and ministries.

Fukuyama defines the rule of law as "a set of rules of behavior, reflecting a broad consensus within the society, that is binding on even the most powerful political actors in the society, whether kings, presidents, or prime ministers."[65] He notes: "If rulers can change the law to suit themselves, the rule of law does not exist, even if those laws are applied uniformly to the rest of society."[66] Institutions such as courts and tribunals fall under this category.

Finally, democratic accountability institutions ensure that governments respond to citizens' needs. Through periodic elections, citizens can hold rulers accountable, making political parties and elections central components of this set of institutions.[67]

Somalia's state-building project is contested in many ways. Political actors differ in their approaches to rebuilding the three sets of institutions discussed above, and there is significant disagreement on the fundamentals of state-building. One example is how to create a secure

61 FGD Participant, Northeastern State, November 2025.
62 FGD Participant, Galmudug State, November 2025.
63 Fukuyama, Francis. *Political order and political decay: From the industrial revolution to the globalization of democracy.* Macmillan, 2014. P. 21.
64 Max Weber, The Vocation Lectures. Edited and with an Introduction by David Owen and Tracy B. Strong. Published by Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. P. xlix.
65 Fukuyama, Francis. *Political order and political decay*: 2014. P. 22.
66 Ibid. P. 22.
67 Ibid.

environment, with the national army, police, and intelligence agencies all contentious subjects. Many do not trust the Federal Government and therefore refuse to collaborate with Mogadishu on the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of militias.

Regarding rule of law institutions, there is an ongoing debate between Islamic and secular law, with many Somalis preferring Islamic jurisprudence and customary law over secular courts. Outside of Somaliland, disagreements persist over whether the country should adopt a unified or federated court system.[68] Without shared security and functioning rule of law institutions, establishing democratic accountability at the national level remains challenging.[69]

The main political red lines for Somali groups who participated in this research included the Somalia versus Somaliland debate, clan power-sharing, federalism, the debate between parliamentary and presidential systems, and periodic political dispensations.

FGD participants considered the Somalia-Somaliland issue as one of the most important factors affecting the state-building project in Somalia. To clarify the background, the Greater Somalia dream intensified in 1940s when Somalis discovered that the British Empire had ceded Somali territories to Ethiopia, fueling their desire for independence and unity among all five Somali territories. These efforts ultimately led to the establishment of the Somali Republic in 1960, comprising independent Somalia and Somaliland.[70]

Within the first two years of the Somali Republic, Somaliland leaders felt betrayed as the capital, the flag, the president, the prime minister, and many more key posts went to the political leaders of Somalia. In 1961, military officers from Somaliland attempted a failed coup to take over Somaliland.[71] The exclusion-related grievances that started in the 1960s, along with repression under the military government in the 1970s, led to the formation of the Somali National Movement (SNM) in the 1980s[72] and an armed struggle against the military regime. After a long and brutal civil war, which included the destruction of Hargeisa and Bur'o, the SNM captured most of today's Somaliland in 1991.[73]

68 The Federal Government and the Federal Member States signed an agreement. But this has not materialized

69 Somaliland conducts periodic elections without the involvement of Mogadishu. Puntland has also held local elections and indirect elections without Mogadishu. The rest of Somalia uses indirect elections.

70 See the 1960 Constitution, titled the Constitution of the Somali Republic, Available at: https://icric.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/1960-Constitution-Som-English.pdf. See also Article 1 of the Act of Union between Somalia and Somaliland in 1960, Available at: https://citizenshiprightsafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Somalia-and-Somaliland-Union-Law-1960.pdf. For the analyses of the Act of Union, see Contini, Paulo. The Somali Republic: An experiment in legal integration. London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1969; and Mohamed I. Trunji. "Somalia: The untold history 1941-1969", Published by Looh Press. P. 365 -367.

71 See the analyses of this event: Contini, Paulo. The Somali Republic. 1969; and Mohamed I. Trunji. "Somalia: The untold history 1941-1969." 2015. P. 405 -408.

72 A group of political and intellectual leaders from Somaliland established the Somali National Movement in 1981 in London. Initially, their aims did not include secession but to remove the dictatorship through armed struggle.

73 When the military regime collapsed and President Mohamed Siyad Barre fled the capital, the Somali National Movement took control of most of Somaliland.

When the United Somali Congress (USC) expelled President Siyad Barre from the capital in January 1991, it announced, without consultation, that President Ali Mahdi Mohamed would lead an interim government.[74] In response, the SNM leadership unilaterally declared secession, arguing that it was withdrawing from the union established in 1960.[75] On 26 December 2025, Israel became the first country to officially recognize Somaliland, a decision rejected by Somalia.

For this paper, the question of whether the two partners of the 1960 Somali Republic will remain together or separate is the most important political red line.

According to the FGD participants, the second political red line is clan power-sharing. Following the collapse of the military government in 1991, Somali factions convened a dozen times to resolve the conflict and establish an interim government. Meetings took place in several countries, including Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Egypt, and Yemen, but no compromise was reached on a power-sharing arrangement. In 1996, the Somali factions that gathered in Sodere, Ethiopia, agreed to adopt a clan power-sharing formula, though it was not implemented at the time.[76]

In 2000, delegates in the Arta Peace Process instituted the clan power-sharing model by allocating parliamentary seats among four major clans, each receiving equal shares, while unarmed clans were allotted half of one share.[77] Currently, Somalia has a bicameral legislature. The House of the People consists of 275 seats[78], with each of the four major clans (Darod, Digil and Mirifle, Hawiye and Dir) receiving 61 seats, and 31 seats designated for minority clans. The second chamber, the Senate, has 54 seats[79], with three seats allocated to each of the 18 administrative regions established by the former military government.

Initially, the clan power-sharing arrangement was intended as a temporary solution during the transition period, with the goal of transitioning to one-person, one-vote elections once security was stabilized and a census was conducted. However, after 25 years, Somalia remains in the transition phase, which has led to the 4.5 clan power-sharing becoming an entrenched practice.

Views among Somalis vary on this issue. Some view the formula as a necessary compromise that helped resolve the deadlock, arguing that it allowed the warring clans to agree on the relative size of each community. Others criticized it as a discriminatory practice that

74 Ali Mahdi became an interim president on January 28, 1991. See: "New President of Somalia Is Sworn In", January 29, 1991, Available at: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1991-01-29-mn-417-story.html

75 The Somali National Movement leadership seceded from the Somali Republic on May 18, 1991. SNM chairman, Abdirahman Ahmed Ali, "Tur" became the interim president of Somaliland.

76 See the Sodere Agreement at: https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2024/05/solemn20declaration20adopted20on20320january20199720by20the20high.pdf

77 See Afyare Elmi, Understanding the Somalia Conflagration: Identity, Political Islam and Peacebuilding. London: Pluto Books.

78 See chapter six of the Federal Provisional Constitution, 2012. Available at: https://icric.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2012-Adopted_Constitition_ENG_Final-for-Printing_19-SEPT12-1.pdf

79 Ibid.

institutionalizes identity politics and exacerbates divisions.[80] Political actors, such as Puntland State, consistently advocate for an end to this formula.[81]

FGD participants overwhelmingly reported that the 4.5 clan power-sharing arrangement has overstayed its welcome. Instead of transitioning to citizen-based governance, this power-sharing model has been imported into merit-based institutions. The mentality of dividing state resources among clans has permeated all institutions, including the bureaucracy, army, diplomacy, and parliament. Consequently, most FGD participants advocated for the elimination of clan power-sharing in favor of an equitable meritocratic system.

Federalism is the third political red-line for the Somali political groups. Five questions must be addressed: Is federalism an appropriate governance structure for Somalia?[82] If yes, what specific model of federalism should be implemented? How many levels of governance should there be? What criteria should be used to define the parameters of a state? How should the powers and responsibilities be allocated among various levels of government?

Although the delegates of the Mbagathi Peace Conference determined that Somalia would adopt a federal system,[83] there are disagreements over the nature of that federation. The constitution establishes two levels of government:[84] the Federal Government and Federal Member States. However, the Federal Government, under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, made changed the constitution, aiming to establish three levels of government: the Federal Government, Federal Member States, and local governments.[85] This created another political fault line between the FGS and the Federal Member States.

The Federal Provisional Constitution says that two or more administrative regions prior to 1991 can become a federal member state. The boundaries between the states will remain those of the administrative regions, and the regions will join each other voluntarily.[86]

Puntland, the first member state, was established in 1998. Galmudug, in its smaller form, became the second in 2009. During President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's first term (2012-

80 See Afyare Elmi who summarized the debate on the 4.5 issue in his "Decentralized Unitary System: A Possible Middle Ground Solution for Somalia". Doha Institute. Available here: https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/UPDATED_Somalia_Decentralization_Paper.pdf

81 In the Garowe Agreement, Puntland included the following article, "The 4.5 formula shall never become the basis for power sharing in any future political dispensation after the above-mentioned term concludes." See: https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2022/07/sogaroweprinciplesen2011.pdf

82 See Elmi, Afyare. "Decentralized Unitary System: A Possible Middle Ground Model for Somalia." *Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Issue May* (2015). Available at: https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/UPDATED_Somalia_Decentralization_Paper.pdf; See also Afyare Elmi, Reviewing Somalia's Federal Constitution, Available at: https://heritageinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Constitution-Report-English.pdf

83 See Article 11 of the Transitional Federal Charter, 2004. Available at: https://icric.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/2004-Feb-Transitional-Federal-charter-English.pdf

84 See Federal Provisional Constitution, Article 48.

85 See the four chapters the government changed in 2024. Available at: https://icric.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Nuqulka-Rasmiga-ah-Final-Print.pdf

86 See Chapter 5 of the Federal Provisional Constitution, 2012.

2016), Galmudug was expanded and three more member states emerged under varying circumstances: Jubaland (2013), Southwest (2014), and Hirshabelle (2016). In August 2025, the FGS completed the establishment of the Northeast State, though it was alleged the government had not followed practical constitutional guidelines.[87] Communities in Banadir, Lower Shabelle, Hiran, and Gedo have all expressed grievances regarding the government's approach to forming federal member states, further deepening this fault line.

Another contentious issue linked to federalism is how the government should approach the distribution of powers and responsibilities among different levels of government.

The Federal Provisional Constitution assigns foreign affairs, defense, monetary policy, and citizenship/immigration to the Federal Government,[88] in consultation with federal member states on matters affecting their interests.[89] The constitution requires negotiation between the two levels regarding the allocation of powers and responsibilities.[90] In December 2022, the National Consultative Council (comprising FGS and FMS leaders) agreed on the distribution of powers and responsibilities. Under this agreement, the Federal Government will have exclusive powers in 44 areas, while it will share another 20 powers and responsibilities with the FMS. Local governments will have 32 exclusive powers and responsibilities, while the FMS will have 29.[91]

In practice, although the constitution clearly mandates cooperation, each level often intrudes upon the others. Puntland and Jubaland, for instance, frequently act as though they are independent of the federal government, conducting their own foreign relations, making decisions affecting monetary and defense matters, and even creating their own citizenship.

Conversely, the FGS regulates every aspect of the state, leaving little for the Federal Member States.[92] Galmudug, Hirshabelle, Southwest and Northeast heavily depend on the Federal Government and therefore recognize and follow its authority.[93]

87 Puntland, Galmudug, and Northeast changed the boundaries of the 18 regions that the military government left behind. Hirshabelle, Jubaland and Southwest also violate the "voluntary agreement" criterion. The government was largely interested in the federal seats that would be placed in these regions and therefore it established these states to meet election deadlines and manipulate the process.

88 See the Federal Provisional Constitution of 2012.

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid.

91 See the NCC agreement on December 2023. https://icric.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Heshiiska-Astaynta-Awoodaha-saxiixan-28-Dec-2022.pdf

92 See Mohamed Riyad M. Almosly, "Comparative Analysis of the Constitutions of the Federal Member States of Somalia and the Federal Provisional Constitution of Somalia", Max Planck Institute Report, 2020; see Afyare Elmi and Abdirizak Muhumed, *On Reviewing Somalia's Provisional Constitution: Background, Challenges and Future Prospects, Published by the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies*, 2022. Available at: https://heritageinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Constitution-Report-English.pdf

93 The leaders of these regions officially joined the ruling party in 2025. See "Justice and Solidarity Party Officially Launched", Available at: https://www.ftlsomalia.com/justice-and-solidarity-party-officially-launched-ahead-of-2026-elections-in-somalia/. See the NCC Rebranded as Ruling Party as President Launches Bid for Re-election. Available at: https://icric.gov.so/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Heshiiska-Astaynta-Awoodaha-saxiixan-28-Dec-2022.pdf

The status of Mogadishu also remains a contentious issue. The city became the capital when Somalia was established in 1908 under Italian colonial rule.[94] By 1990, Mogadishu was the largest and most diverse city in the country, serving as the primary national center while other areas remained relatively peripheral. At that time, Mogadishu had 14 districts.

However, the civil war disrupted its natural growth and harmony. Atrocities committed by the faction leaders who controlled Mogadishu forced hundreds of thousands to flee, seeking refuge in their original regions.[95] This led to the emergence of multiple centers, including Hargeisa, Borama, Bur'o, Garowe, Bosaso, Galkayo, Beled-Weyn, Baydhaba, and Kismayo.

Despite this, Mogadishu grew in both size and population. Today it has 20 districts and remains the largest city in the country.[96] However, due to the civil war and lack of reconciliation, some political actors argue that Mogadishu cannot serve as the capital for the entire country and be exclusively owned by certain clans. Three proposals have been discussed: Mogadishu as a capital city (like Washington, D.C.), Mogadishu as a city within a Federal Member State (like Ottawa), and Mogadishu as a Federal Member State itself (like Berlin).[97] In short, the status of Mogadishu remains contested.

The debates over parliamentary versus presidential systems represents another major political divide for Somali political groups. This issue entered the public domain in 2024 when the government proposed to change the country from a parliamentary to a presidential system.

It was the delegates at the Arta Peace Process[98] and the Mbagathi Peace Process[99] who agreed that Somalia would adopt the 1960 semi-parliamentary model for its third republic. In this model, the people elect a parliament, which in turn elects the president and gives confidence in the prime minister and the council of ministers.

However, achieving executive stability proved elusive. Frequent conflicts arose between presidents and prime ministers, leading to structural challenges.[100] Presidents, elected by parliaments, appoint prime ministers whom they cannot dismiss. This ongoing power struggle created a semblance of checks and balances in the system and ultimately paralyzed the government's functioning.

In response, at the start of his second term in 2022, President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud sought to replace the parliamentary system with a presidential system through constitutional

94 See Mohamed I. Trunji. The Untold Story, 2015.
95 Many residents of Mogadishu fled the city, seeking a refuge in the regions and beyond, including Kenya and Ethiopia.
96 See Afyare Elmi and Faisal Ali. Mogadishu: Synthesis Report. University of Manchester, Available at: https://www.african-cities.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/ACRC_Working-Paper-20_August-2024.pdf
97 See the Options Report of the Constitution Commission, under the leadership of Maryan Arif Qasim. 2016.
98 See the Transitional National Charter, 2000.
99 See the Transitional Federal Charter, 2004.
100 With the exception of 2022 to the present, Somalia's presidents have experienced internal power struggles with their prime ministers, frequently changing prime ministers.

changes.[101] Most members of the political class rejected this move, resulting in a political stalemate.[102] In August 2024, the president indicated a willingness to abandon this approach, although significant ambiguity remains.[103] Consequently, the question of whether Somalia will retain its semi-parliamentary system or transition to a presidential system remains unresolved, marking another critical fault line.

The political transition between different regimes is the sixth political fault line among Somali political groups. Somalia's Third Republic is known for conducting political transitions at the end of each government's mandate every four or five years. Over the last 25 years, six governments have been formed. However, transitioning to a new regime has become a significant problem, requiring help from the international community.[104]

Incumbent governments often attempt to extend their terms or manipulate the selection and election processes. The country lacks security, an accepted electoral law, and a functioning election commission. Disagreements between the Federal Government and the Federal Member States further complicate this situation. Currently, the president and his team have changed the constitution and created a self-serving electoral law and election commission.[105]

The opposition and some federal member states, specifically Puntland and Jubaland, have rejected these changes and threatened to pursue a parallel administration. On 2 October 2025, the national opposition, along with Jubaland and Puntland, met in Nairobi and agreed to form a national council for the future of the country. This troubling development indicates that the Third Republic is disintegrating, and there may be a parallel process unfolding in Garowe.

As of the writing of this report, opposition groups had convened in Kismayo in December 2025, issuing an ultimatum to the government to initiate discussions on the 2026 dispensations. They warned that if the government fails to comply, they will pursue a parallel process to establish their own government.

Fortunately, the government invited members of the Future Council (Opposition Coalition) to Mogadishu for discussions. Although it unilaterally determined the format for the talks, members of the Future Council, including the presidents of Puntland and Jubaland, accepted the invitation and travelled to Mogadishu. The talks began in February 2026 but have not produced substantive results. At the time of writing, the government and the main opposition group were unable to reach agreement on electoral and constitutional matters.

101 See Chapter 4 of President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's changes to the constitution.
102 Somalia's national opposition and some federal member states such as Puntland and Jubaland rejected the government approach.
103 The government signed an agreement with some members of the opposition, but did not present the changes to the parliament. See TRT, "Somali opposition's breakaway faction strikes election deal with president". Available at: https://trt.global/afrika-english/article/b1fa1596d307
104 At the end of each mandate, the UN, the Troop Contributing Countries, IGAD, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States have been instrumental in helping Somalia transition to the next stage.
105 See the Electoral Law, Political Parties Law and Election and Boundaries Law that the government approved in 2024. Available at: https://parliament.gov.so/?eeFolder=Shuruuc%2FSHURUUC%2FShuruucda-2024&eeFront=1&eeListID=1&ee=1

Related to this issue is the management of the 57 seats held by the northern Dir clans and the numerous seats allocated to unarmed clans and women. Villa Somalia, regardless of who occupies it, has significant control over the selection of representatives for the northern Dir clans as well as the Banadiri groups.[106]

Furthermore, leaders of the Federal Government and the Federal Member States often manipulate the seats designated for women.[107] Although women's participation has been increasing, the political class has resisted the implementation of a gender quota for the last 25 years.[108] Overall, this manipulation of the selection process undermines parliament's function. Those who engage in this manipulation are primarily focused on the presidential election and show little concern for the qualifications of those sent to parliament. Consequently, parliaments become paralyzed and ultimately serve as a rubber stamp for the executive.

Focus group participants reported that political conflict directly affects their lives. Disputes among different groups over political issues can escalate into violent confrontations, resulting in loss of life. A participant noted: "In some cases, political disputes have escalated into violence, leading to the deaths of relatives and innocent people. Such tragedies leave emotional wounds that stay with families for years."[109]

Political conflicts also lead to economic losses, manifesting as high unemployment, reduced investment, and disruption of essential services like education. One participant said: "High unemployment is one of the most significant consequences, leaving many people without a stable income or opportunities."[110] Another participant added: "Even basic services such as education certification, administrative documentation and visa processing become harder to access when systems are affected by political deadlock."[111] Participants said that these conflicts foster feelings of hopelessness and uncertainty.

The participants repeatedly noted that corruption and nepotism are major political red lines that have paralyzed the governance institutions. They suggest that the national dialogue should tackle corruption and tribalism. Participants emphasized the need for reforms in constitutional and governance matters, such as federalism and equitable resource sharing, as major priorities. One participant said: "Clan power-sharing, particularly the 4.5 formula, requires long-term solutions. While it has played a stabilizing role in the past, there is growing recognition that it limits political inclusivity and fails to support sustainable governance."[112]

106 Villa Somalia is the presidency of the country. Presidents often manipulate and gerrymander the process by selecting their friends for the seats without the due process.
107 Government leaders often favor men over women and not respect quotas. Women are often excluded from seats occupied by powerful businessmen and major clans.
108 See Ladan Affi and Zainab Hassan. Women and Politics. 2023.
109 FGD Participant, Puntland State, November 2025.
110 GD Participant, Southwest State, November 2025.
111 FGD Participant, Hirshabelle State, November 2025.
112 FGD Participant, Hirshabelle State, November 2025.

5.5 ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

When examining the role of the international community in national dialogues, the findings from the FGD data were mixed. Some participants viewed the international community as valuable for supporting dialogue, acting as mediators, and advocating for the inclusion of women, youth, and minorities. One participant noted: "Their involvement can offer technical assistance, financial backing, and external pressure to support stability."[113]

Others are skeptical, arguing that the international community overshadows local voices and often dictates policies tied to funding priorities. This suggests that the international community creates mistrust and divides. One participant said: "In some cases, they are seen as part of the problem because their funding and influence can dictate how policies and constitutions are developed."[114] Some participants contended that dialogue is an internal issue and that the international community should not be involved. One participant said: "The support from international partners should complement, not replace, local leadership."[115] Another added: "National solutions should come from within the Somalis."[116]

5.6 WAY FORWARD: FROM DEADLOCK TO DIALOGUE

In this section, participants discussed their views on how to break the deadlock among Somali stakeholders and initiate a credible national dialogue to address major political and constitutional red lines. The findings highlighted the importance of employing national dialogue as an instrument for addressing multiple conflicts, the necessity of honest discussions, accountability, political sacrifice, and a shift in focus from personal or clan interests to national priorities.

There was also a call to move beyond short-term power arrangements in favor of long-term structural solutions. Participants emphasized the importance of security, public accountability, and inclusive dialogue mechanisms, recommending the establishment of a neutral and trusted committee.

National dialogue, as outlined in the literature, has not been part of the toolkit for peace processes, constitution-making, or addressing various national priorities in Somalia. The closest the country came to a national dialogue was the Arta and the Mbagathi peace processes, both of which had significant limitations. Neither was held in the country. While civil society heavily participated in the Arta process, it was ultimately boycotted by warlords and faction leaders. In contrast, civil society's involvement in the Mbagathi conference was limited, with the warlords and faction leaders dominating. To date, there has not been an inclusive national dialogue that has resulted in an implementable agreement.

113 FGD Participant, Jubaland State, November 2025.
114 FGD Participant, Banadir Region, November 2025.
115 FGD Participant, Hirshabelle State, November 2025.
116 FGD Participant, Galmudug State, November 2025.

Given this context, the first step toward a national dialogue requires more than simply demonstrating its potential benefits to the political class. Political actors may have various reasons to resist such process. The current stalemate reflects these constraints, yet an inclusive national dialogue remains one of the few mechanisms capable of addressing them. For this to occur, the national government must either lead or meaningfully participate in the process. While government ministries often hold conferences, these gatherings often consist mainly of supporters who echo the government's agenda and can therefore not be considered as national dialogues. Meanwhile, opposition groups, despite their numbers, engage through multiple platforms, resulting in fragmented conversations.[117]

Based on the literature, the first lesson for Somalia is to adopt national dialogues as instruments for conflict resolution, transition, or addressing various issues. A dialogue can also be applied at the federal member state level, where significant problems persist. For example, communities in Jubaland, Hirshabelle, and Southwest face multiple issues related to their structure but lack forums to discuss them. Therefore, state-level dialogues would be useful in dealing with the pertinent issues.

Findings from the FGDs highlight both structural and behavioral mechanisms necessary for implementing the outcomes of the dialogue. Participants emphasized that the dialogue process requires honesty, acceptance, accountability, and transparency from all political leaders. Furthermore, they stressed that this process must be continuous rather than a one-time event.

The findings also underscored the importance of including women, youth, minorities, civil society, and scholars. One participant noted: “When all sectors participate, it creates more substantial ownership and makes it harder for political actors to ignore or change the results later.”[118] For a genuine national dialogue to occur, multiple actors must be allowed to participate. Key partners were excluded from Arta and Mbagathi. Faction leaders and many warlords boycotted the Arta process, undermining its outcomes. Consequently, the faction leaders dominated the Mbagathi conference, excluding Islamist groups and the business community while granting civil society groups only observer status.

This exclusion significantly damaged the legitimacy of the process. Islamist groups organized against the Transitional Federal Government, successfully taking control of the capital and several regions in southern Somalia. The international community and regional powers later recognized the error of excluding influential groups, leading to the inclusion of moderate Islamist groups in the government in 2008. In this context, it is essential for politicians (both government and opposition), groups outside the system such as Somaliland, civil society organizations, intellectuals and even extremist groups to participate in the national dialogue.

117 At the time of writing, the government and the opposition are not engaging with each other. The National Salvation Forum has been meeting with traditional elders, businesspeople and intellectuals while the government and likeminded politicians are speaking to each other. Puntland and Jubaland are not in either conversation.

118 FGD Participant, Puntland State, November 2025.

Some participants cautioned against using clan power-sharing formulas to facilitate participation in the dialogue. One participant noted: "There is a strong feeling that leaders need to put aside their personal interests and genuinely serve the national interest. Without this willingness to compromise, no agreement will last."[119]

Participants suggested that politicians make sacrifices and prioritize national interests over personal gains. One participant said: "Overcoming the political stalemate requires a spirit of sacrifice among politicians and a shift toward serving the national interest rather than personal or clan-based agendas."[120] Participants advocated for constructive and meaningful dialogue focused on long-term solutions. One participant noted: "The focus should be on resolving the root causes rather than temporary political arrangements. This includes addressing structural barriers, institutional weaknesses, and the existing gaps in trust."[121] They suggested enhancing security and amplifying the public voice to hold leaders accountable. Another participant said: "Security is also a significant part of breaking the deadlock, because without a stable environment, political agreements cannot be implemented."[122]

To initiate an inclusive national dialogue, a neutral and independent committee must be established to oversee the process. One participant said: "The first practical step is to form an inclusive and independent committee - one that is trusted and not influenced by political sides."[123]

Clear mechanisms for accountability and implementation must be in place from the outset. Additionally, all parties must accept the national interest as the foundation of the dialogue before it begins. A participant noted: "Acceptance of the national interest as the foundation of the discussion is also crucial."[124]

Participants believed that resolving the deadlock would benefit their communities, leading to stability, a functioning state, and good governance. They also anticipated economic and social progress through development, job creation, and investment, which would improve access to public services such as education and healthcare while reducing irregular migration. One participant said: "Reliable stability would reduce the need for external migration, end cycles of displacement and allowing people to build their futures at home."[125] Another added: "Job creation and expanded market opportunities would open up as stability improves."[126] Another participant agreed: "Stability would also improve Somalia's image internationally, showing that the country can function as a productive and peaceful society."[127]

119 Ibid.
120 FGD Participant, Banadir Region, November 2025.
121 FGD Participant, Hirshabelle State, November 2025.
122 FGD Participant, Puntland State, November 2025.
123 FGD Participant, Puntland State, November 2025.
124 FGD Participant, Hirshabelle State, November 2025.
125 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.

06 Conclusion

Somalia's state-building project is not only stagnant but also deeply contested. Numerous political "red lines" divide Somali groups, including issues over unity versus secession, the nature and implementation of federalism, parliamentary versus presidential systems, the 2012 constitution versus proposed 2024 changes, the status of Mogadishu, and the management of periodic political transitions, including the upcoming 2026 transition.

In this polarized environment, this study found that a genuine national dialogue remains a crucial yet largely underutilized mechanism for resolving conflict and facilitating political transitions in Somalia. Drawing lessons from experiences elsewhere, this study emphasized the importance of organizing a Somali-owned and inclusive national dialogue.

For such a process to be effective and legitimate, it must ensure broad participation from politicians, civil society, and intellectuals, and must include women, youth, and marginalized communities – whose perspectives have been underrepresented in previous efforts (peace processes and constitution-making processes) yet are essential for credibility and inclusivity. Moreover, identifying a credible and neutral convener is essential in Somalia's deeply polarized landscape. Effectively organizing such a dialogue could serve as a foundation for greater national cohesion and a more stable political future.

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