

# Somalia's Electoral Impasse: A Threat to the State-Building Process

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International partners' [calls for Somalia's feuding leaders](#) to end the political stalemate has fallen on deaf ears for some time. However, Somali leaders [have agreed to hasten the electoral process](#) and conclude the long-overdue elections by the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. The agreement [was reached on 09 January 2022](#) after several days of negotiations between the state leaders and Prime Minister Mohamed Hussein Roble to try and put an end to a bitter political crisis. It is expected that the election of Somalia's 275 legislators and 54 senators will conclude by the 25<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. Both houses of parliament are then expected to elect a president in a joint session. Bringing to an end the long-delayed election process could help prevent Somalia from backsliding into clan conflict and instability.

Now that the election stalemate seems to be coming to an end, the UN Security Council must signal its willingness to impose targeted sanctions against spoilers who might undermine the election process by causing further political instability. [Resolution 2607 \(2021\)](#) sanctions individuals and entities that engage in acts that impede Somalia's peace, security, or stability. Further, the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) [is mandated](#) by the Security Council to work with the Somali government and federal states to support national reconciliation while also providing policy and strategic advice on peacebuilding and state-building. UNSOM can incentivize the leaders of Somalia's federal government and states to ensure the success of the election process while also setting out a roadmap to address the root causes of the current political crisis.

Despite [ongoing security challenges](#), Somalia has established some degree of political stability and state capacity within the last decade. It is also noteworthy that the country's political class has managed to establish a consensus on [indirect elections](#) that allowed a peaceful transfer of power in the 2012 and 2017 elections. However, [the political crisis](#) emanating from the recently resolved electoral disputes could still cause Somalia to slide back into violence and ultimately reverse the progress made on state-building. Therefore, Somalia's political class must be encouraged to complete both parliamentary and presidential elections without further delays and forge a better constitutional and electoral path forward.

## Electoral Impasse

The electoral stalemate has been a roadblock on Somalia's path toward democratization and, more importantly, its struggle to rebuild a functioning government. Since 2012, successive governments [have been unable to deliver their promises of universal suffrage](#) due to political wrangling between elites. In both 2012 and 2017, the government lacked the desire to give the public a voice through universal suffrage, creating suspicion and eroding confidence among the public. [Disagreements on the framework for managing elections](#) also emanated

from the [deep-rooted mistrust](#) between the federal government and the states. As a result, Somalia's political class has been unable to prepare for or hold elections more than a year after the incumbent administration's mandate expired in February 2021.

Although in September 2020 the federal government and the states [agreed on a framework](#) for an indirect election, both parties failed to implement it because of three contentious issues. First, [contentions over who should lead the State Indirect Electoral Implementation Team \(SIEIT\) for Somaliland](#) led to political wrangling between the federal government and opposition groups. Although Somaliland declared independence in 1991, it has not been formally recognized and is still considered to be part of Somalia. Somaliland refuses to participate in Somalia's national elections, yet politicians and representatives from Somaliland compete in the elections in Somalia. Second, [the dispute over the electoral process in the Gedo region of Jubaland State](#) has also been a matter of contention, as President Mohamed was accused by Jubaland's leader, Ahmed Madobe for trying to influence the election in his favour. Finally, [several presidential candidates have disapproved of the electoral commission](#) and voiced their concerns about its independence and government's interference.

However, in May 2021, [the federal government and the states finally reached an agreement](#) on these issues and revised the 2020 framework. In addition, the president, with the approval of parliament, asked the [prime minister to lead the preparations](#) for the elections and related security measures. [Parliamentary elections were scheduled to take place that September, and the presidential election was expected to be held the following month.](#) However, a [power struggle](#) between the president and the prime minister derailed and delayed the planned elections.

### **Keeping the Delayed Election on Track until a New Government Is Sworn In**

Given the high levels of mistrust among Somalia's political class and their inability to find a solution to the deadlock for more than a year, UNSOM needs to put pressure on all stakeholders so the road to concluding the election is not derailed again. Although an indirect electoral model is not satisfactory, as many Somalis expected a one-person, one-vote model, [it remains the only acceptable option to all stakeholders](#) (including [UNSOM](#)). This is because the federal government [failed to prepare the country for universal suffrage](#) during its four-year term, so direct elections likely could not have been held within [the expected time frame](#), the delay of which had already triggered a constitutional crisis. As a result, [the federal government and the states agreed to another indirect election](#) based on clan selection.

The Security Council must support [this renewed hope for concluding the elections](#) in Somalia, including by signalling its willingness to impose targeted sanctions on stakeholders who attempt to obstruct or derail them. The UN's [sanctions-listing criteria for Somalia](#) include acts that threaten the country's security, peace, stability, or reconciliation processes. To ensure that all stakeholders keep their commitments, sanctions could include asset freezes and travel bans.

### **A Path Forward**

Avoiding a repeat of past election difficulties, the crucial task for Somalia's next administration will be to develop a free and fair electoral system, including by laying out a clear road map for direct elections. The review and completion of the provisional constitution will also be a critical task for the newly elected government. As a social contract, the constitution will lay down the principles and rules not only for state-society relations but also for Somalia to be a fully functioning state. Unfortunately, Somalia's current provisional constitution, adopted in 2012, is [insufficiently detailed](#) to provide such guidance. [Persistent disagreements are the norm](#) due to how it defines the relationships between the federal states and the government, including [longstanding issues](#) over the sharing of power and resources.

The Security Council can broaden its scope of intervention by ensuring that Somalia's political class addresses the root causes of the current political crisis in Somalia, particularly by giving citizens a voice through both universal suffrage and the completion of a permanent and democratic constitution. It can also pressure leaders to prioritize these tasks, which are crucial to strengthening Somalia's state-building efforts and avoiding breakdowns during future political transitions.