

Report

Somalia: Another Paradigm Shift?

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[Abdullahi Mohamed Farmaajo, a former prime minister who holds dual Somali-US citizenship has been declared Somalia's new president.
[Al Jazeera]

Abstract

On 8th February 2017, Somalia elected Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo as its 9th president. His election was widely celebrated and generated new optimism and high expectation among Somalis. Unlike other candidates who were competing with him during Election Day, Mr. Farmaajo was seen as credible and patriot candidate who can challenge the status quo and salvage Somalia from the abyss.

Nevertheless, there are a number of fundamental challenges that Somalia still finds itself; from security, poverty, economic, external players to weak government institutions. This essay aims to assess the capacity of the current government to address these formidable challenges, and the opportunities and space that he inherited from previous government to overcome and chart new path for Somali's future.

Introduction

The inauguration of Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo as Somalia's new president on 22 February 2017 marked a major milestone in Somalia's long and often troubled transition towards political maturity and constitutional democracy. Although the practice of a peaceful transfer of power isn't a new for Somalia – and dates back to the 1960s when Somalia gained its independence – this particular handover marked a historic leap for Somalia's nascent and fragile democracy. The process that culminated in 2017 transfer

was the result of four years of arduous political transition that was midwived by a range of international actors in partnership with the Somali federal government and its federal member states. Moreover, the previous government, led by president Hassan Sheikh, made considerable progress in laying a foundation for establishing Somalia's federal framework, pushing al-Shabaab out of the major cities and sketching the first National Development Plan (NDP) as a guiding document for the country.

There has been, unfortunately, major setbacks as well. First, the process itself was flawed and shrouded in secrecy, electoral fraud, political bickering, manipulation and intimidation by the federal government and regional administrations. In the days leading up to the presidential election, several parliamentary candidates were allegedly intimidated and even attacked by rivals trying to get them to withdraw. In some cases, contenders pulled out leaving just one remaining candidate. In one striking case, Mumunio Saeed Mursal, who was vying for a seat in the Upper House, said <http://www.wardheernews.com/i-was-railroaded-says-a-female-candidate-in-the-south-west-elections/> she was detained and beaten by soldiers, and later found out that her name had been withdrawn from the race following a forged letter claiming to be from her. The UN described the process as "egregious" and warned that Somalia's election was "hanging in the balance".

The election of Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo was widely celebrated across Somalia and sparked a new wave of optimism and euphoria, mainly among ordinary people. Although he wasn't elected through a popular vote, he was the popular favorite among Somalis and was seen as credible and a clean break from the past, with a proven track record. This was due to his short tenure as prime minister of Somalia in 2010 when he cracked down on corrupt politicians and paid the salary of Somali police – a moral gesture that put his political ascendancy on the map and propelled him to the presidency. On inauguration day in Mogadishu, more than one hundred international delegates including neighboring countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Sudan were invited and committed to collaborate with the new government. President Uhuru Kenyatta from Kenya delivered particularly rapturous remarks saying <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Uhuru-in-Mogadishu-for-President-Mohamed-Abdullahi-inauguration/1056-3823232-5sxvenz/> : "The successful elections and peaceful transfer of power are a clear demonstration of the desire and ability of the people of Somalia to strengthen governance structures and build sustainable peace"

Despite this impressive support from both the populous and international actors, the new government inherits a set of complex and fundamental challenges. These challenges stem from deteriorating security, a devastating drought and famine that is affecting millions of Somalis, government institutions that are woefully weak, chronic corruption, and a resurgence of al-Shabaab attacks that has flourished under the previous government's watch. While Somali national forces are clearly making progress, the government

continues to be dependent on African Union's troops, better known as AMISOM, for critical assets and capabilities. Although Somalia's economy has grown remarkably by 3.7 percent, according to the IMF, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2016/11/21/PR16519-Somalia-Statement-by-the-IMF-Mission> the Somali government depends on financial support from its international donors for budgetary, operations, and basic salaries for its security forces.

Most dangerously, al-Shabaab has increased its guerrilla warfare, including complex operations, assassinations and coordinated attacks. Al-Shabaab has been militarily degraded but they remain a potent force and have been able to mount frequent attacks against high-visibility targets throughout the country. Between 2006 and 2017, al-Shabaab has carried out more than 360 complex attacks, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2016/08/al-shabab-attacks-somalia-2006-2016-160830110231063.html>, with the last one targeting the country's new chief police. Additionally, the government's ability to extend and assert its power outside Mogadishu is very limited, and often relies on AMISOM to liberate and recover surrounding regions from al-Shabaab, which still controls significant territory. Last week, Ethiopian troops withdrew from various towns in Central Somalia and al-Shabaab immediately filled the vacuum.

Despite these daunting challenges, president Farmaajo maintains a positive vision for the country and enjoys a higher degree of popular legitimacy than his predecessors. But looking ahead, whether president Farmaajo's election represents a genuine paradigm shift in Somalia's political transition depends on how he accommodates and addresses these daunting tasks and capitalizes on the popular goodwill entrusted to him.

New Government, Old Hurdles

On 23 February, after only a few days in office, president Farmaajo appointed Hassan Khaire as the country's prime minister. Mr Khaire, who previously worked in the humanitarian sector and is well liked within the donor community, was quickly unanimously endorsed by the parliament. After intense and grueling consultation with clans, PM Khaire immediately formed a new but bloated cabinet staffed with technocrats and professionals. The new cabinet has been greeted with optimism and also received an overwhelming approval from the parliament.

Furthermore, both the president and PM have committed to reform and chart a new path for Somalia's future. Unlike his predecessor who outlined a broad-based roadmap in the form of a "six pillar policy," the new president has identified three priority areas that can be summarized as: (a) Ending the Political Crisis, (b) Combating Corruption and (c)

Defeating al-Shabaab. These priorities encompass most of the myriad problems that Somalia is facing, but they're not the only ones.

Crisis of Governance

In laying out a strategy for his new administration, president Farmaajo repeatedly emphasized that his government will end the notorious political infighting and bickering that has crippled previous governments from delivering basic services. Prior to his election, he lamented his predecessors for having three prime ministers in one term and promised that his government will end the perpetual political instability.

Since the early 2000s, practically every president has fought with his prime minister, ultimately resulting in the latter's removal. This political crisis has its roots, primarily, in Somalia's provisional constitution, which vests great power and authority in the hands of the unelected prime minister over the elected president. Second, there is a political element to the crisis. Under the current system, the political practice and culture is far more important than the constitutional rules. In the absence of effective rule of law and political parties, crises are settled through political bargaining between the stakeholders and elites. Without clear checks and balances, the provisional constitution provides both the president and prime minister with excessive power to abuse for their own gain.

While the constitution is still subject for review and public referendum, it also creates a convoluted and confusing federal structure system for one of the most homogenous, impoverished and conflict-ridden societies in the world. Compounding this is the weakness of the parliament, judiciary and the absent constitutional court that might be able to constrain and counterbalance the executive branches in the event of a constitutional crisis. Unfortunately, the previous governments abjectly failed to advance genuine reform of the constitution, government institutions and federal political system as stipulated in the Vision 2016. While the previous government was recognized as a legitimate and permanent entity, it was operating under a provisional constitution and hence engaged in transitional tasks. In fact, the absences of these crucial institutions provided al-Shabaab with an opening to mobilize and galvanize local clans with grievances to turn against the government. The ability of al-Shabaab to organize and coalesce around the disgruntled and marginalized communities enhances their legitimacy and constituency base. In order to increase and expand the government's legitimacy, president Farmaajo needs to win back these disaffected communities by addressing their grievances and integrating them into the political process. Furthermore, the establishment of inclusive-politics, which is paramount for political stability, depends on the interpretation and completion of the provisional constitution. Over the last few years, trust between the federal government in Mogadishu and regional administrations has been eroding as result of contradictory

interpretations of the constitution concerning resource- and revenue-sharing and the decentralization of power.

Keeping that in mind, the new president needs to recognize and appreciate the aspirations of the Somali people who demand local control over their government and the delivery of rudimentary services at the local and regional level as well.

Combating Corruption

Both president Farmaajo and PM Khaire have prioritized the war on corruption and repeatedly emphasized their intention to clean up and hold accountable government officials implicated in graft.

Of the multiple challenges that threaten Somalia's long-term stability and economic development it is chronic corruption and state-capture that decays government institutions and impedes economic development the most. As president Farmaajo put it: "corruption breeds and feeds into insecurity". Although corruption and security are different in nature, they are inextricably linked and reinforce one another in the process of state building and reconstruction. Widespread corruption impacts all government institutions, particularly the security sector. These vulnerabilities have allowed the insurgency to infiltrate and plant moles within the security apparatus that provide intelligences and information.

For years, Transparency International has consistently ranked Somalia in the top-five most corrupt countries in the world. Although corruption is not new in Somalia, it has been more prevalent and systematic in the last government. The looting of public funds and state-capture reached its zenith during Hassan Sheikh's administration. There has been numerous of reports that alleged graft has diverted millions of dollars of foreign aid and private contracts. These reports resulted in major scandals exposed by the UN Monitoring Group for Somalia. Perhaps the most egregious and disastrous case was the revelation and resignation of the former governor of the central bank Ms. Yusura Abrar after she was cajoled to accept arrangements that could potentially open the door to corruption. Moreover, corruption was not only confined to the top political elite, it became systemic across government institutions and standard practice. According the Auditor General, Mr. Nur Farah: "Massive corruption have involved last election as some parliamentarian seats were sold between and upto one million USD dollar" [sic.]. The fight against corruption can't be won without examples of transparent and accountable leadership from the top echelons of the government. In an attempt to demonstrate seriousness, both president Farmaajo and PM Khaire requested government ministries to declare their assets and said that the fight against corruption is a priority for their government. While these steps are encouraging, they are not sufficient to slay the corruption dragon. Empowering Somalia's

civil society, watchdogs, media and other whistleblowers will allow the government to accept further scrutiny and investigation. Granted, corruption in Somalia can't be eliminated over night but it can be reduced significantly.

Countering al-Shabaab

The third priority of president Farmaajo's strategy with respect to security is the fight against al-Shabaab and stabilization of the country. An important aspect of this strategy involves winning the hearts and minds of radicalised Somali youth, who make up the bulk of al-Shabaab's foot soldiers. Although he did not go into details, the president offered a general amnesty to disgruntled youth, provided they lay down arms and are willing to enter into a rehabilitation program. Part of this offer includes a US\$100,000 reward for tipping off police with information leading to a potential terrorist attack. In doing so, the president declared war on al-Shabaab

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/africa/somalia-shabab.html?_r=0 and reorganized the entire security apparatus by appointing a new police commissioner and chief of the national intelligence agency. Defeating al-Shabaab and stabilizing the country has been the preoccupation and priority for every passing government but little progress has been made. In part, because the problem of defeating al-Shabaab – and subsequently stabilizing the country – entails both military means but also a broader political solution with various warring actors, including some reconcilable elements within al-Shabaab. This is because the political stabilization of Somalia depends as much on the extension, legitimacy and credibility of the state's authority and the re-establishment of the rule of law as any military operations.

The international coalition – AMISOM, US, UK and other foreign troops – have made virtually no effort to find political solution to the perpetual war and have prioritized military solution over diplomacy. This narrow focus on counterinsurgency has created fatigue among the foreign troops who celebrated their 10th anniversary still in combat with al-Shabaab and searching for a political solution. More worryingly is the shaky mandate of AMISOM and the continuous threat of Uganda and Burundi – two biggest contributors to AMISOM – to withdraw from the mission due to adequate funding and internal politics.

The basic contours of negotiating with al-Shabaab have been theoretically in place for some time but have not been put into practice. President Farmaajo recently said that his government is ready to sit down with al-Shabaab, but he didn't outline the process to do so. Similarly, the rebuilding of the Somali National Army hinges primarily on a political agreement between the federal government and regional administrations. It is widely believed that Somali forces are built along clan lines and lack allegiance to the federal government. Moreover, they are heavily reliant on external support for salary, training

and equipment. Cognizant of this, president Farmaajo has promised to improve the quality of Somalia National Army and reestablish a competent, capable, and well-disciplined national force. The recently adopted plan for a new Somali national security architecture was an important step in that process, but requires political buy-in from the various regional administrations and other competing actors.

Conclusion

While president Farmaajo's election has generated high hopes and an unprecedented level of expectation, the government's capacity to deliver on those expectations is very limited. Most government institutions are either weak or dysfunctional. The government's own survival is dependent on 22,000 African Union troops and it doesn't have the legitimacy to develop a monopoly over the instruments of violence. Even worse, the government is financially bankrupt and relies on foreign aid and budgetary support from its international donors and partners to sustain its operations, in large part because its capacity to generate and collect adequate revenue and tax is very limited.

Nevertheless, president Farmaajo faces a formidable set of transitional challenges. The biggest challenge is to sustain the current political gains – such as the National Leadership Forum that brings together the various political stakeholders from the regional administrations. Second, and equally crucial, is to maintain the security gains made over the last four years. Although al-Shabaab isn't down yet, they've lost a large swathe of territory to Somali forces and AMISOM. However, it is worrying that following the recent withdrawal of Ethiopia troops from various cities, al-Shabaab was able to swiftly retake and fill the vacuum. If left unchecked, this could embolden the militants to retake additional grounds and reassert its power.

A related hurdle is how to organize the existing political powers and groups who are not part of the new system, but holdovers from previous governments who maintain influence. In fact, a handful of these political groups want to sustain the status quo, fuel nepotism and, perhaps sabotage any potential reforms. When you combine these realities they form a towering challenge that leaves the new government, as Atta-Asamoah puts it, as popular but without the means to deliver the euphoria and expectations showed by the masses.

Whether president Farmaajo can govern Somalia better than his predecessor and chart a new pathway to bring peace and stability remains to be seen.

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