

How Somalia's political dynamics are shaping up before historic polls

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A man casts his ballot on November 16, 2016, in Somalia. Since 2017, Somalia's poll agency and the Office of the Political Party Registrar have been registering political parties, for the first time in nearly half a century. PHOTO | SIMON MAINA | AFP

In Summary

- Amisom launched the Elections Awareness Campaign, meant to keep the public updated with the preparations.
- The programme is endorsed by most of Somalia's international partners and includes federal state authorities

The African Union Mission in Somalia, Amisom, has underscored its intent to

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launching the Elections Awareness Campaign, meant to keep the public updated with the preparations.

The programme is endorsed by most of Somalia's international partners and includes federal state authorities.

According to Simon Mulongo, the deputy special representative of the chairperson of the African Union Commission in Somalia, the programme is essentially civic education for citizens who have never directly voted in elections since 1969.

“Amisom and other partners will ensure that all Somalis participate in the elections by educating and preparing them for the electoral process to ensure democracy is fully implemented in Somalia,” said Mr Mulongo.

Since 1969 when a military coup deposed a government elected in a one-person-one-vote process, Somalia had opted for clan-based electoral college system, where elders nominate those who vote for candidates.

The first step, said Abdifatah Kassim, a member of the Somali Parliamentary Ad Hoc Committee that is gathering views, is to amend the Elections Act to allow for the universal suffrage and discard the clan college system. This, he told the audience at the Amisom launch in Mogadishu this week, will ensure every Somali adult votes in the 2021 elections.

Observers however say there are a number of issues that could shape the vote itself and whether it happens at all.

Mr Kassim spoke of the “mentality” shift where all adults can be enticed to vote.

Political parties

Since 2017, Somalia's National Independent Electoral Commission and the Office of the Political Party Registrar have been registering political parties, for the first time in nearly half a century.

At least 25 political parties have filed their papers. It is these parties, some led by former presidents Sheikh Sharif Ahmed and Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, which could rally the public to voting booths.

But current political leaders have been squabbling among themselves. President Mohamed Farmaajo, for instance, has had lukewarm relations with the six federal state presidents.

After a five-day meeting in May this year, in Garowe, Puntland, the president and the leaders emerged without a deal on the programme for constitutional review, electoral laws and natural resource sharing.

Each of these leaders have clout argued Dr Abdiwahab Sheikh Abdisamad of SouthLink Consultants in Nairobi.

This includes negotiating deals with foreign leaders or organisations by representing the states of Jubbaland, South West, Puntland, Galmudug, Hirshabelle and Somaliland. The latter has demanded total Independence.

In Jubbaland where an election is scheduled for next week, President Farmaajo has been accused by the incumbent Sheikh Ahmed Madobe of trying to plant candidates. Yet some commentators see that very election in Jubbaland as the curtain-raiser of the 2021 race.

“Jubbaland needs to establish leadership based on the genuine aspirations of the people,” argued Farah Maalim, a former deputy Speaker of the Kenyan parliament, indicating an acceptable outcome will be a step towards consolidating Somalia's politics.

With the threat of al-Shabaab hanging over Somalia, he argued that any false starts in Jubbaland could mean “a problem for our region” because Shabaab could prevent a successful universal suffrage vote.

Kenya-Somalia maritime dispute

Somalia’s court case with Kenya over a maritime boundary at the International Court of Justice also presents another dimension.

“The maritime dispute may be escalated depending on who wins in Jubbaland, and later in the Somalia elections in 2021,” said Dr Hassan Khannenje, the director of the Horn International Institute for Strategic Studies in Nairobi, explaining that different political leaders may see different ways of resolving disputes.

Somalia’s vulnerable situation has also attracted international players: Qatar, Turkey and Ethiopia who are pro-Farmaajo and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other allies who favour the federal states.

“It is going to be the Waterloo for a number of countries,” said Peter Kagwanja, chief executive of the Nairobi-based Africa Policy Institute. At the centre of what he calls the "Cushitic Alliance" which brings together Ethiopia, Somalia and Eritrea, Prof Kagwanja said President Farmaajo’s recent dalliance with the Horn of Africa leaders except Kenya, makes him their favourite, because he can sustain the “trinity.”