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Hits and misses in Somalia's four-year quest for stability

It is exactly 30 years since Somalia extricated itself from the dictatorial rule of Siad Barre in a bloody civil war. Sadly, the Horn of Africa country remains in the throes of instability punctuated by mutating conflict – from state collapse in post-Barre's autocratic regime, warlordism, clan factionalism, to an ideological conflict and Al Shabaab terrorism.

This is despite more than a dozen attempts to reconcile the various factions of the Somalia conflict. The 2020 elections, later rescheduled to early 2021, were the latest attempt and opportunity for the country to consolidate democratic achievements. As is, the country appears to be entombed in an infinite cycle of volatility and internal disagreements. What will it take to finally set Somalia towards the path to stabilisation and reconstruction?

In February 2017, Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (Farmaajo) was elected to serve as the ninth president of Somalia in a clan-based system which was also rife with corruption. The election conduct notwithstanding, the country was keyed up to a renewed Somalia and the new president was expected to midwife a raft of reforms – key among them political and security – to pave way for the country's take-off. Progress has been made, but it has been negligible vis-a-vis the country's worrying political trajectory. With significant support from Amisom troops, security has been restored in most parts of the country while Al Shabaab has been pushed out of major towns.

'Somalia rising'

Other achievements include securing debt relief, military reforms that have spawned Gorgor and Haramcad brigades, among others including administrative and economic reforms. These restructurings, nonetheless, have not been sufficient to engender or create a firm political and economic foundation for the much-anticipated 'Somalia rising' as evidenced by the current political crisis; military politicisation and splintering along clan lines, humanitarian challenges and volatile security situation.

As the country ponders over its immediate future, its political stability and security should be the top priorities for the next administration. Al Shabaab has been degraded but not extinguished. Towards the now-aborted elections, the Al Qaeda-linked group steadily increased its guerrilla warfare characterised by coordinated attacks with a clear intent to disrupt elections and undermine government operations.

The group has certainly been revitalised by the messy political bickering being witnessed in Mogadishu. This state of affairs is a by-product of Farmaajo's administration's failure to fully implement a national security architecture necessary to stem the terror group's activities in the four years he has been in power.

A politically progressive Somalia can only



be realised if and when the group has been smothered – but this needs honest leadership committed to this cause and close collaboration with regional and international partners. Security analysts and countering violent extremism (CVE) experts have also emphasised that the largely successful military operations ought to be followed by efficient systems of governance that ensure delivery of basic services to the citizenry. Disconcertingly, in some areas, Al Shabaab has become a local champion in providing basic services including security and justice.

The management of internal political dynamics, as seen through the lens of the federal system and manifested in central and peripheral power structures, needs far-sighted leadership. The increasing tensions between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and the five Federal Member State (FMS), particularly, Puntland and Jubaland, have further polarised the country and stifled any meaningful political progress especially with regards to elections.

Challenges abound, but while at it, fostering harmonious (as opposed to being antagonistic) political engagement between the FGS and FMS through consensus building on sticking issues is conceivably the only way out of the

woods for the Federal Republic of Somalia whose 2012 provisional constitution mentions the term 'federal' more than 600 times. Advancing a unitary system, as exhibited by Farmaajo's administration, will only widen fissures and create suspicion between the two levels of government.

It is also noteworthy that the recent move by the Lower House of Parliament to extend the president's term by two years (but which has since been rescinded) not only sparked violent protests in Mogadishu and condemnation elsewhere but rekindled Siad Barre's tactical steps to centralise power.

Many observers in Somalia perceive the move as a mechanism to consolidate and personalise power – the two notable strategies used by Barre in the 1970s to purge his opposition on the road toward authoritarianism. Such political decisions only serve to increase suspicion among ordinary Somalis and perhaps even more among FMSs who feel estranged and threatened by a dominant and aggressive FGS.

All said, the political leadership in Somalia, in Mogadishu and in all the five federal member states, should choose cycles of peace over cycles of violence for a better country.