

Democratic Backsliding in the Horn of Africa: Is Security Becoming the New Legitimacy?

Across the Horn of Africa comprising Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, and Djibouti governance trajectories over the past decade reveal a growing tension between democratic aspirations and security imperatives. While the region has long grappled with state fragility and protracted conflicts, a more recent trend suggests a shift in the very foundation of political legitimacy: from democratic accountability to security provision.

This shift is neither accidental nor isolated. It reflects broader global dynamics in which geopolitical competition, counterterrorism priorities, and migration management have reshaped international engagement with African states. In the Horn of Africa, where strategic waterways such as the Red Sea intersect with volatile internal politics, stability has increasingly become the overriding concern of both domestic regimes and external partners. The material stakes are considerable: [roughly 14 per cent of global maritime trade and about 30 per cent of containerised trade transits the Red Sea](#), and transits through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait fell by approximately 55 per cent between November 2023 and February 2024 as attacks on commercial shipping intensified.

Security as Political Currency

Governments across the region are increasingly framing their authority around their capacity to ensure security. In Somalia, for instance, the ongoing fight against Al-Shabaab has justified the centralization of power and the postponement of universal suffrage elections. Somalia has not held a nationwide direct election since 1969, and the first one-person, one-vote municipal poll in Mogadishu in more than five decades, [held in December 2025](#), proceeded under a citywide lockdown with [over 10,000 security personnel deployed and roughly 900,000 registered voters](#). Similarly, in Ethiopia, the aftermath of the Tigray War has reinforced narratives that prioritize national unity and stability over political pluralism. [Researchers at Ghent University](#) estimate that the combined effect of violence, famine, and lost access to healthcare killed between 162,000 and 378,000 people during that war, with other published

estimates running as high as 600,000, while [a peer-reviewed mortality study](#) documented more than 102,000 deaths among Tigrayans aged 15 and above.

This securitized legitimacy is often reinforced through legal and institutional mechanisms. Emergency laws, restrictions on civil society, and limitations on media freedoms are frequently justified as necessary tools to maintain order. While such measures may yield short-term stability, they risk undermining the very institutions that sustain long-term governance: independent judiciaries, accountable executives, and participatory political systems. The media environment illustrates the pattern. In the 2025 [World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders](#), Eritrea ranked last of 180 countries, with all independent media banned since 2001, while Djibouti, Somalia, and Ethiopia all sat within the bottom quartile of the ranking.

External Actors and the Stability Paradigm

International actors play a critical role in reinforcing this trend. Western governments, Gulf states, and emerging powers such as China increasingly prioritize security cooperation over democratic reforms in their engagement with the region. Financial assistance, military training, and diplomatic support are often tied to counterterrorism efforts rather than governance benchmarks.

This “stability-first” approach has significant implications. It signals to domestic elites that democratic backsliding carries limited external costs, provided that regimes remain reliable security partners. In turn, this reduces incentives for political reform and emboldens authoritarian tendencies. Djibouti is instructive. The country hosts military facilities for France, the United States, China, Japan, and Italy, and in April 2026 returned President Ismail Omar Guelleh to a sixth term with [97.8 per cent of the vote](#), five months after parliament removed the constitutional age ceiling for presidential candidates. Presidential term limits had already been abolished in 2010, and the main opposition parties have [boycotted elections since 2016](#).

Moreover, the fragmentation of global governance norms, exacerbated by geopolitical rivalries, has weakened collective pressure for democratization. Unlike the post-Cold War era, there is no unified international front advocating for democratic standards.

This creates space for regimes in the Horn of Africa to navigate between competing partners while consolidating power domestically.

Implications for Rule of Law

The prioritization of security over democracy has profound consequences for the rule of law. Legal systems risk becoming instruments of regime preservation rather than guarantors of justice. Selective enforcement, politicized prosecutions, and weakened oversight institutions erode public trust and institutional legitimacy. The trend is measurable. Ethiopia ranked 132nd of 143 countries in the 2025 [World Justice Project Rule of Law Index](#), down from 123rd of 140 in 2022, and 30th of 34 countries assessed in Sub-Saharan Africa, with its lowest scores recorded in constraints on government powers, open government, and fundamental rights. The same index found that 68 per cent of countries worldwide registered a decline in 2025. In contexts where security threats are real and immediate, the erosion of rule of law may appear justified. However, this creates a paradox: the very measures intended to stabilize the state may ultimately deepen grievances and fuel instability. Marginalized communities, excluded from political processes and denied access to justice, may become more susceptible to radicalization or conflict mobilization.

Rethinking Legitimacy

The emerging model of “security-based legitimacy” raises fundamental questions about the future of governance in the Horn of Africa. Can stability achieved at the expense of democratic principles be sustained? And what are the long-term costs of sidelining accountability and participation? A more balanced approach is needed, one that recognizes the importance of security while reaffirming the centrality of democratic governance and rule of law. This requires both domestic and international actors to recalibrate their priorities.

Policy Considerations

First, governments in the region must invest in institutional resilience. Strengthening judicial independence, enhancing legislative oversight, and protecting civic space are essential steps toward sustainable governance. Second, international partners should

adopt a more integrated approach that links security assistance with governance reforms. Conditionalities tied to rule of law and accountability mechanisms can help realign incentives. Third, regional organizations and think tanks, including Intergovernmental Authority on Development, can play a critical role in promoting governance norms and facilitating peer learning among member states.

Conclusion

The Horn of Africa stands at a critical juncture. While security remains an undeniable priority, its elevation as the primary source of political legitimacy risks entrenching authoritarian governance and undermining long-term stability. Reclaiming a balance between security and democracy is not merely a normative imperative, it is a strategic necessity for durable peace and development in the region.