

Toward a Somali Covenant: From Contention to a Consensual Political Order. Reimagining Federalism, Identity, and Legitimacy in Post-Conflict Somalia

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ABSTRACT

This study critically examines Somalia's post-conflict governance crisis through the intersecting lenses of elite-driven reconciliation, youth exclusion, and externally imposed state-building frameworks. It argues that reconciliation efforts since the collapse of the Somali state have been dominated by elite power-sharing arrangements, lacking public participation and symbolic legitimacy. The exclusion of youth—who constitute over 75% of the population—has deepened political apathy, irregular migration, and vulnerability to extremist recruitment. International interventions, particularly those shaped by neotrusteeship and regional containment strategies, have prioritized short-term security over Somali-led recovery, often reinforcing dependency and undermining sovereignty. Drawing comparative insights from Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sierra Leone, the paper highlights the limitations of elite-centric models and the importance of civic education, emotional reintegration, and negotiated sovereignty—defined as externally supported governance under Somali-defined conditions. The study proposes a transitional framework grounded in public legitimacy, generational agency, and culturally rooted reform, emphasizing that Somalia's future depends not on imposed solutions, but on inclusive, participatory transformation.

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Keywords: Somalia; post-conflict governance; Elite reconciliation; Youth exclusion; Neotrusteeship; Symbolic legitimacy; Civic education; Negotiated sovereignty; Regional peacekeeping; Comparative federalism; Transitional justice.

INTRODUCTION

The collapse of Somalia's central government in 1991 marked not only the disintegration of state institutions but the erosion of a shared national identity. In the decades since, the country has struggled to reconcile fragmented regional administrations, clan-based loyalties, and symbolic disunity. The adoption of federalism in the 2012 Provisional Constitution was intended to decentralize power and promote inclusion. Yet in practice, it has entrenched clannism, produced fictitious governance structures, and failed to deliver constitutional legitimacy or national cohesion (Menkhaus, 2007; Elmi & Barise, 2006).

This paper contends that Somalia's crisis is not merely institutional—it is symbolic, cultural, and moral. The erosion of national symbols, the absence of civic rituals, and the ideological distortion propagated by extremist groups have fractured the emotional infrastructure of nationhood. Rebuilding Somalia requires more than

technical reform; it demands a covenant—a negotiated framework grounded in Somali values, historical memory, and inclusive dialogue.

By proposing a multi-track national dialogue architecture, a constitutionally grounded veto mechanism, and the formation of a National Dialogue Observatory Board, this paper offers a pathway toward a consensual political order. It seeks to reimagine federalism not as a contest for control, but as a platform for reconciliation, legitimacy, and civic renewal.

BACKGROUND: HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SOMALIA'S STATE-BUILDING CHALLENGES

Somalia's enduring struggle with nation- and state-building is deeply rooted in its historical, cultural, and geopolitical context. Long before colonial borders were drawn, Somali society was organized around kinship-based clans, with conflict often arising over access to water, grazing land, camels, horses, and marriage alliances. These disputes were traditionally managed through *xeer* (customary law), but they also fostered a competitive ethos that shaped Somali political culture (Lewis, 1994).

The concept of the state has historically been interpreted through a clan-centric lens, where power is viewed as a means of securing resources for one's lineage rather than serving a broader public. This zero-sum understanding of governance has made the development of inclusive, rule-based institutions exceptionally difficult (Menkhaus, 2006).

Colonial rule by Britain and Italy exacerbated these divisions. By favoring certain clans and regions, colonial administrators institutionalized inequality and rivalry. The partitioning of Somali-inhabited territories into five distinct regions—British Somaliland, Italian Somaliland, French Somaliland (now Djibouti), the Northern Frontier District (now in Kenya), and the Reserved Area (now in Ethiopia)—fractured Somali identity and sowed the seeds of irredentist conflict (Samatar, 1988). The post-independence dreams of unifying all Somalis under one flag, while emotionally powerful, perpetuated instability and regional tensions.

Some scholars argue that Somalia gained independence before its people had internalized the principles of statehood and civic governance. The absence of widespread civic education and institutional experience meant that the newly formed government lacked a social foundation (Kapteijns, 2013). The 1977 Ogaden War with Ethiopia, though initially popular, marked a turning point. Its failure triggered internal dissent and exposed the vulnerabilities of the military regime, eventually leading to rebellion and the total collapse of the Somali state in 1991 (Laitin & Samatar, 1987).

Today's challenges in federalism, legitimacy, and national cohesion cannot be divorced from this historical legacy. Somalia's path forward must reckon with these deep-rooted issues, transforming inherited fragmentation into a foundation for inclusive, reconciliatory governance.

Statement of the Problem

Somalia's post-1991 state collapse created a vacuum that was filled not by coordinated governance, but by fragmented regional administrations shaped by clan loyalties and localized power dynamics. These entities developed their own symbols, constitutions, and governance models—often functioning in isolation and without alignment to a national framework. While some regions achieved relative stability, the absence of a unified state structure has deepened divisions, weakened national cohesion, and eroded the legitimacy of central authority (Menkhaus, 2007; Bradbury, 2008).

The 2012 Provisional Constitution introduced federalism as a corrective mechanism, aiming to decentralize power and promote inclusion. Federalism was intended to accommodate Somalia's diverse social fabric and historical grievances. However, in practice, it has often reinforced clannism and produced symbolic governance structures that lack institutional capacity, legal clarity, and democratic accountability (Elmi & Barise, 2006; International Crisis Group, 2022). Federal Member States (FMS) frequently operate as quasi-sovereign entities,

engaging in direct political and economic relations with foreign actors—some of whom promote agendas that undermine Somalia's unity, political independence, and territorial integrity (Hesse, 2010).

Compounding this dysfunction is the absence of a clear national organigram, a formal structure that defines the hierarchy, roles, and chain of command between federal and regional institutions. This ambiguity fuels competition, weakens coordination, and exposes the dangers of unregulated decentralization. The lack of institutional clarity has led to overlapping mandates, contested jurisdictions, and persistent tensions between Mogadishu and regional capitals (Menkhaus, 2014).

This paper is relevant because it addresses a critical lacuna in Somalia's governance architecture: the absence of a reconciliatory, functional, and constitutionally grounded federal model. It proposes a decentralized framework with a legally codified veto mechanism that empowers regions to protect their core interests while preserving national unity. By embedding structured dialogue, legal safeguards, and inclusive representation, the model transforms federalism from a contested concept into a practical tool for legitimacy and peace.

The paper turns the problem into an actionable solution by offering a pathway to reimagine federalism—not as a source of division, but as a covenant of shared responsibility. It calls for institutional reform, constitutional clarity, and a renewed commitment to unity through negotiated governance.

Fragmented Governance and Symbolic Disunity

Over the past two decades, Somalia's Federal Member States (FMS) have increasingly adopted their own flags, anthems, and constitutions—symbols that simulate sovereign statehood. While these emblems are often framed as expressions of regional identity, they frequently reflect entrenched clan hegemonies rather than democratic legitimacy or inclusive governance. This symbolic proliferation has created a landscape of competing sovereignties, where regional administrations operate with quasi-national authority, often in contradiction to the federal framework outlined in the Provisional Constitution.

The Somali national flag and anthem, once powerful symbols of unity, independence, and pan-Somali identity, have been sidelined in many regions. In some cases, they are replaced entirely by regional symbols during official ceremonies, public events, and even school curricula. This shift signals more than aesthetic divergence—it represents a deeper crisis of national consciousness. Citizens are increasingly socialized into regional or clan-based identities, weakening their emotional and civic attachment to the Somali nation-state.

Such symbolic fragmentation undermines coordination between federal and regional institutions, fuels legal ambiguity, and erodes the legitimacy of national governance. It also fosters public alienation, as many Somalis perceive the state not as a shared civic project, but as a contested arena for elite competition and symbolic posturing. Without a deliberate effort to reaffirm national symbols and harmonize regional identities within a unified framework, Somalia risks deepening its fragmentation.

Rebuilding national cohesion requires more than constitutional reform—it demands a cultural and symbolic reconciliation. A national dialogue that interrogates the meaning and role of symbols, fosters inclusive narratives, and reclaims the legitimacy of the Somali flag and anthem is essential. Only then can Somalia move beyond fictitious federalism and toward a genuine, people-centered statehood.

Constitutional Crisis

The Provisional Constitution, designed to guide Somalia's recovery and governance, suffers from deep structural ambiguity and silence on critical issues. Numerous clauses lack clarity, while others omit essential guidance, creating fertile ground for misinterpretation, manipulation, and legal confusion. This vagueness has enabled successive governments, including the incumbent, to selectively interpret or disregard provisions, exacerbating institutional paralysis and eroding public trust [^1].

A central pillar of constitutionalism—the Constitutional Court—remains conspicuously absent. Despite its mandated role in adjudicating disputes and safeguarding legality, no administration has demonstrated the

political will or capacity to establish it [^2]. In its absence, constitutional interpretation falls to political actors, further undermining the rule of law and fueling elite wrangling.

This dysfunction has led many Somali citizens to view the constitution not as a national covenant, but as a foreign-imposed framework designed to destabilize the country. While this perception is widespread, it is especially acute in Hargeisa, Somaliland, where secessionist rhetoric has taken deep root. There, many view other Somalis as existential threats. In extreme cases, symbolic expressions of national identity—such as wearing a blue shirt with a white star resembling the Somali flag—can provoke violent mob reactions, driven by decades of ideological indoctrination and unresolved grievances [^3].

This is not merely a legal or political failure, it is a rupture in national consciousness.

Somalia cannot build a legitimate state on a document that is misunderstood, mistrusted, and weaponized. A national dialogue that clarifies, reforms, and reclaims the constitution is not optional; it is existential.

Policy Objectives

This policy framework aims to:

1. Facilitate a nationwide, inclusive dialogue on Somali identity, governance, and constitutional reform.
2. Promote dialectical reconciliation—a process of confronting historical grievances and synthesizing ideological differences.
3. Establish a legitimate constitutional dispensation rooted in public ownership and cultural legitimacy.
4. Reinvigorate national consciousness and social cohesion through civic education and symbolic integration.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Somalia's pursuit of constitutional legitimacy and national cohesion has been shaped by decades of fragmentation, contested identity, and externally driven governance models. Scholars such as Elliesie (2012) argue that Somalia's state-building crisis is rooted in the disconnect between imported constitutional paradigms and indigenous Somali norms. The 2012 Provisional Constitution, while marking a formal transition, has struggled to gain public ownership due to limited civic participation and cultural resonance (Ainte, 2014).

Inclusive national dialogue is widely recognized as essential for post-conflict legitimacy. Abdi and Ramsbotham (2018) emphasize that reconciliation must be embedded in all reform efforts, including federalism and decentralization. Their work highlights the need for dialectical reconciliation—confronting historical grievances and synthesizing ideological differences through mechanisms such as truth commissions and the application of *xeer*, Somalia's customary law.

Cultural legitimacy is central to constitutional reform. As Elliesie (2012) notes, Somali society's precolonial governance structures were decentralized and clan-based, yet capable of maintaining social order. Integrating these traditions into modern constitutional frameworks is vital for legitimacy and sustainability. Ainte (2014) further argues that legitimacy must be earned through Somali-led processes that reflect the lived realities of citizens, not elite bargains or donor-driven templates.

Civic education and symbolic integration are foundational to rebuilding national consciousness. Adan (2025) applies the 4Rs framework—Redistribution, Recognition, Representation, and Reconciliation—to assess peace education in Somalia. He finds that while themes of civic responsibility exist in Somali curricula, they remain fragmented and lack strategic coordination. Comparative studies with Rwanda and Sierra Leone show that structured civic education can foster social cohesion and resilience.

ANALYSIS: NATIONAL DIALOGUE ARCHITECTURE AND THE LOGIC OF MULTI-TRACK

Engagement

The proposed multi-track dialogue framework reflects a deliberate response to Somalia's complex post-conflict landscape. It recognizes that legitimacy cannot be manufactured through elite consensus alone, but must be cultivated through layered, participatory engagement. This approach aligns with Lederach's (1997) peacebuilding theory, which emphasizes the need for vertical integration—connecting top-level actors with mid-level influencers and grassroots communities.

Track I, composed of federal and regional leaders, religious scholars, and traditional elders, represents the formal architecture of power. However, its effectiveness is constrained by Somalia's fragmented sovereignty and the persistent threat posed by AlShabaab (Hansen, 2013). The inclusion of religious and customary authorities is critical, as these actors retain moral legitimacy in many communities and can bridge the gap between state and society.

Track II introduces civil society, youth, women, intellectuals, and diaspora networks—groups often excluded from formal negotiations but essential for shaping inclusive governance. Their role as watchdogs and cultural mediators is especially vital in countering elite fragmentation and ideological extremism (Kapteijns, 2013; Elmi & Barise, 2006). This track ensures that dialogue is not only representative but also responsive to lived realities.

Track III, the grassroots layer, is the most transformative. It centers the voices of ordinary Somalis, particularly those in conflict-affected areas, and reclaims the moral terrain of reconciliation. Marchal (2009) underscores the importance of localized forums in restoring civic agencies and countering extremist narratives. These spaces embody the principle that legitimacy must be earned from below.

Together, the multi-track structure is not merely procedural, it is philosophical. It affirms that Somali unity must be built through empathy, cultural resonance, and shared responsibility. It operationalizes the covenantal logic of governance: that every Somali voice matters, and that constitutional legitimacy must be co-produced across society.

Dialogue Principles: Foundations for Legitimate and Lasting Reconciliation

For Somalia to emerge from decades of fragmentation, mistrust, and symbolic disunity, it must embrace a national dialogue process that is not only inclusive in form but transformative in substance. Dialogue must be more than a political ritual—it must be a deeply human process that reflects Somali values, heals historical wounds, and builds a shared future (Samatar, 1997).

Inclusivity: Representation Beyond Elites

True reconciliation cannot occur when dialogue is confined to political elites or dominant clans. Every region, clan, and ideological group must be represented—not as tokens, but as equal stakeholders. This includes marginalized communities, youth, women, religious scholars, diaspora voices, and even ideological outliers such as proponents of secessionism or political Islamism. Exclusion breeds resentment and delegitimizes outcomes. Inclusivity, by contrast, fosters ownership, trust, and the possibility of genuine consensus (Menkhaus, 2007; Laitin & Samatar, 1987).

In a country where identity is often contested and politicized, inclusive dialogue affirms that every Somali voice matters. It transforms the process from a negotiation among power brokers into a national conversation rooted in dignity and mutual recognition.

Cultural Grounding: Dialogue in Somali Language and Spirit

Somalia possesses rich indigenous traditions of conflict resolution and consensus building. Tools such as *xeer* (customary law), *guurti* (councils of elders), and poetry have long served as mechanisms for mediation, truth-

telling, and moral reflection (Lewis, 1994; Gundel, 2006). These traditions must not be sidelined in favor of imported models. Instead, they should be integrated into the dialogue process to ensure cultural legitimacy and emotional resonance.

When Somalis speak in their own idioms—through storytelling, proverbs, and poetic debate—they engage not just intellectually, but spiritually. Cultural grounding makes dialogue feel familiar, authentic, and trustworthy. It also allows the process to tap into collective memory and moral imagination, essential for healing and unity.

Consensus Over Majoritarianism: Negotiated Outcomes, Not Winners and

Losers

Somalia's political culture has often been shaped by zero-sum thinking, where victory for one group means loss for another. This mentality must be replaced by a commitment to consensus. Majoritarianism may work in stable democracies, but in Somalia's fragile context, it risks deepening divisions and triggering backlash.

Consensus means that decisions are negotiated, not imposed. It requires patience, compromise, and empathy. It also reflects Somali traditions, where elders deliberate until all parties feel heard and respected. Consensus-based dialogue builds durable agreements and prevents future contestation.

Transparency: Public Ownership of the Process

Dialogue must be visible, accessible, and accountable. Proceedings should be broadcast, summaries published, and feedback mechanisms established. Transparency ensures that the public does not feel excluded or manipulated. It also deters elite capture and builds confidence in the process.

When citizens see their voices reflected in outcomes, they begin to trust institutions again. Transparency turns dialogue from a closed-door affair into a national movement for renewal.

Together, these principles form the ethical and practical backbone of a Somali national dialogue. They ensure that the process is not only technically sound but morally compelling—capable of restoring legitimacy, unity, and hope.

Embedding Regional Veto Power in the Somali Constitution: Legal Pathways for Inclusive Federalism

In a fragile and diverse state like Somalia, where historical grievances and contested identities shape political behavior, the design of federal governance must go beyond symbolic decentralization. It must offer real constitutional guarantees that protect regional interests while promoting national cohesion. One such mechanism is the regional veto power—a structured legal right for Federal Member States (FMS) to formally object to national decisions that threaten their core interests. However, for this tool to serve its purpose, it must be constitutionalized and codified with clear guidelines and strict legal pathways (Campbell & Matanock, 2024; Somali Ministry of Constitutional Affairs, 2024).

Veto power cannot remain informal or discretionary. If left undefined, it risks becoming a source of obstruction, elite manipulation, or constitutional paralysis. Therefore, the Somali constitution must explicitly recognize the right of regional states to invoke veto under specific conditions. These conditions should be limited to strategic domains—such as resource control, cultural and religious values, internal security, and territorial integrity. Routine legislation, budgetary matters, or administrative decisions must remain outside the scope of veto to preserve functional governance (de Tommaso & Osmani, 2016).

To ensure legitimacy and prevent abuse, the constitution must establish a legal pathway for exercising veto. This includes:

1. A formal notification process, where the regional parliament or executive submits a written objection to the federal government.

2. A public justification clause, requiring the region to explain how the proposed national decision violates its protected interests.
3. A time-bound review mechanism, where the objection triggers the convening of a National Dialogue Council—a body composed of national federal and regional state leaders, affected community representatives, legal experts, and civil society.
4. A negotiation phase, facilitated by neutral mediators, aimed at reaching consensus or compromise.
5. A final arbitration clause, where unresolved disputes may be referred to a Constitutional Court—once established—to ensure legal resolution.

Codifying this process ensures that veto power becomes a tool for structured dialogue, not political sabotage. It affirms the principle that no region should be coerced into decisions that undermine its people, but also that no region should hold the nation hostage to narrow interests. The balance lies in legal clarity, procedural safeguards, and a shared commitment to unity through negotiation.

Moreover, constitutionalizing veto power sends a powerful message to regions like Puntland and Somaliland: that their concerns will be heard, their identities respected, and their participation valued. It transforms federalism from a contested framework into a negotiated partnership, where sovereignty is shared and legitimacy is earned. This vision redefines Somalia not as a centralized authority that imposes decisions, but as a collective enterprise where every citizen and region contributes meaningfully. It shifts governance from a struggle for dominance to a framework built on mutual trust, dialogue, and shared duty—where power is distributed, voices are respected, and legitimacy is earned through inclusion and accountability.

In Somalia's context, where mistrust runs deep and secessionist rhetoric remains potent, embedding regional veto power within the constitution is not a threat to unity—it is a guarantee of inclusion. It invites regions to stay, to speak, and to shape the nation together. And it ensures that the Somali state is built not on imposed authority, but on consensual legitimacy.

SYMBOLIC RECONCILIATION AND CIVIC EDUCATION: RESTORING NATIONAL BELONGING

Somalia's fragmentation is not only political—it is symbolic. The erosion of shared national symbols, the rise of regional flags and anthems, and the absence of civic rituals have contributed to a profound rupture in Somali identity. Many citizens no longer see themselves reflected in the Somali state. Rebuilding unity requires more than institutional reform—it demands a deliberate process of symbolic reconciliation and civic education that reawakens national consciousness and fosters emotional belonging (Kapteijns, 2013; Samatar, 1997; Hussein, 2020; Lederach, 1997). This process must engage not only intellect but also the heart, rekindling a sense of pride, ownership, and shared destiny among citizens who have long felt excluded or alienated.

A key obstacle to this effort is the ideological indoctrination propagated by extremist groups like Al-Shabaab. Through years of propaganda and coercion, Al-Shabaab has cultivated a worldview in which the Somali national flag is portrayed as un-Islamic, even satanic. In areas under their control, citizens are taught to reject national symbols as foreign, corrupt, or spiritually dangerous (Hansen, 2013; Marchal, 2009; Menkhaus, 2006). This distortion has taken root in vulnerable communities, especially where state presence is weak and civic education is absent. Reclaiming the legitimacy of national symbols must therefore begin with confronting and dismantling these narratives through culturally grounded counter ideological campaigns (UNDP Somalia, 2024; Warsame, Mohamed, & Yusuf, 2023). These campaigns must be sustained, locally resonant, and delivered through trusted messengers—elders, poets, teachers, and religious leaders—who can reframe national identity in terms that resonate with Somali values and lived experience.

The first step is to launch a National Symbol Reaffirmation Campaign. This initiative would celebrate the Somali flag, anthem, and shared history through storytelling, music, poetry, and public dialogue. It must go beyond formal ceremonies—reaching schools, mosques, markets, and media platforms. The goal is to reconnect citizens

with the symbols that once united them, reminding Somalis that their identity is deeper than clan or ideology (Lewis, 1994; Hussein, 2020). These efforts should be inclusive and intergenerational, ensuring that youth and elders alike participate in the rediscovery of national meaning.

However, reconciliation must also be responsive. If current symbols are perceived as exclusionary or politically contested, the constitution should allow for symbol redesign through inclusive dialogue. This process must be participatory, transparent, and culturally grounded, inviting all regions, clans, and social groups to contribute (Menkhaus, 2014; Berghof Foundation, 2020). Symbolic legitimacy cannot be imposed—it must be earned through dialogue and mutual recognition.

To sustain civic identity, Somalia must institutionalize national holidays and unity rituals. Days of remembrance, reconciliation, and independence should be observed nationwide, with inclusive programming that honors diversity and shared struggle. These rituals should be designed not only to commemorate the past but to cultivate a forward-looking sense of collective purpose.

Finally, civic education must be embedded in schools, media, and community life. Young Somalis should learn not only about governance and rights, but about the meaning of citizenship, the value of unity, and the power of symbols (Warsame et al., 2023; Adan, 2025). Civic education must be experiential and dialogic, encouraging critical thinking, empathy, and a sense of national stewardship.

Symbolic reconciliation is not cosmetic—it is foundational. Without it, no constitution can gain legitimacy, and no governance model can endure. Somalia must reclaim its symbols, reeducate its citizens, and rebuild the emotional infrastructure of nationhood. Only then can unity become more than a slogan—it can evolve into a lived reality, reflected in everyday interactions, shared civic rituals, and a renewed sense of belonging across Somalia's diverse communities. This transformation requires more than rhetorical commitment; it demands sustained investment in cultural healing, inclusive education, and the reaffirmation of national identity through symbols that resonate with all Somalis. When citizens begin to see themselves in the state—and the state reflects their values, histories, and aspirations—unity ceases to be an abstract ideal and becomes the emotional and symbolic foundation of governance.

Comparative Insights: Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sierra Leone

Post-conflict governance trajectories in Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sierra Leone offer instructive contrasts for Somalia's efforts to restore national belonging through symbolic reconciliation and civic education.

In **Ethiopia**, the federal model emerged from liberation-era promises of ethnic self-determination. However, the institutionalization of ethno-linguistic federalism without mechanisms for civic integration has deepened fragmentation and elite competition, culminating in renewed civil conflict (CSIS, 2025). The Ethiopian experience illustrates the dangers of embedding liberation identities into governance structures without fostering shared national narratives.

South Sudan, shaped by the SPLA/M's liberation legacy, adopted a power-sharing framework under the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). While this formalized elite bargains, it failed to embed accountability or public participation. The absence of civic education and symbolic reconciliation has left youth disillusioned and institutions fragile (Gai, 2025). South Sudan's trajectory underscores the limitations of elite-centric peace deals absent grassroots legitimacy.

In contrast, **Sierra Leone** pursued a hybrid post-war recovery model that combined transitional justice with civic reintegration. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Special Court addressed wartime atrocities while promoting national healing. Though praised for peaceful elections and institutional reform, recent unrest and youth frustration reveal that symbolic reconciliation must be sustained—not assumed (Bangura & Nederkoorn, 2024).

These cases affirm that durable governance and restored belonging require more than elite consensus or technical frameworks. They demand emotionally resonant, culturally grounded civic education and inclusive dialogue.

For Somalia, symbolic reconciliation must reconnect citizens to the state—not just through policy, but through shared memory, dignity, and generational agency.

INSTITUTIONAL SAFEGUARDS AND IMPLEMENTATION: BUILDING TRUST THROUGH

While symbolic reconciliation and civic education are essential for restoring emotional belonging, they must be reinforced by institutional safeguards that translate unity into durable governance. Somalia's post-conflict recovery demands not only inclusive dialogue but credible mechanisms that protect rights, balance power, and foster trust between citizens and the state. This section outlines the structural and sovereignty-based instruments—such as veto protocols, oversight bodies, and phased implementation strategies—that can anchor legitimacy and ensure that national dialogue outcomes are not merely aspirational, but actionable and resilient (Campbell & Matanock, 2024; de Tommaso & Osmani, 2016).

Structure and Sovereignty

For Somalia's national dialogue and constitutional reform to succeed, it must be anchored in robust institutional safeguards and a clear implementation strategy. The process must be protected from elite capture, politicization, and external manipulation. It must also be phased, deliberate, and transparent, ensuring that each stage builds public trust and reinforces legitimacy.

Phased Strategy for Implementation

Phase I: Preparation and Infrastructure

This initial phase focuses on laying the groundwork for a credible and inclusive process.

It involves:

Establishing a National Dialogue Secretariat under a neutral body, such as the Ministry of Justice or an independent commission.

Mapping stakeholders across federal, regional, clan, religious, and civil society lines.

Training facilitators in cultural mediation, conflict resolution, and civic engagement.

Designing a communication strategy to inform and mobilize the public.

Phase II: Regional Dialogues and Community Engagement

Dialogue must begin at the grassroots. This phase includes:

Organizing community forums in every Federal Member State and disputed territory. Facilitating discussions on governance, identity, justice, and reconciliation using Somali traditions like xeer, guurti, and poetry. Documenting grievances, aspirations, and proposals from local communities. Ensuring safe participation in areas affected by insecurity or extremist control.

Phase III: National Conference and Constitutional Synthesis

Insights from regional dialogues are synthesized into a National Dialogue Conference held in Mogadishu or a neutral location. This phase includes:

Debating governance models, constitutional clauses, and national symbols. Drafting a revised constitution based on public input and negotiated consensus. Establishing mechanisms for symbolic reconciliation and civic education.

Phase IV: Institutionalization and Referendum

The final phase ensures that outcomes are embedded in law and practice:

Creating a National Reconciliation Commission to oversee implementation. Rolling out civic education campaigns nationwide. Conducting a national referendum to ratify the revised constitution. Institutionalizing annual Unity Summits to monitor progress and renew commitment.

External Support and Sovereignty Safeguards

Somalia's reform process must be Somali-led and Somali-owned. External actors can play a supportive role but must not dictate outcomes or manipulate agendas.

Engage AU, IGAD, and UN for technical assistance, capacity-building, and logistical support. Their role should be advisory—not political or prescriptive [^7].

Demand non-interference pledges from foreign governments and donors. Somalia's sovereignty must be respected, and external funding must not be tied to political conditions. Mobilize diaspora networks for funding, advocacy, and bridging divides. The Somali diaspora holds immense intellectual, financial, and emotional capital. Their involvement can strengthen legitimacy and connect global Somali voices to the national process.

Institutional safeguards are not bureaucratic formalities—they are the backbone of trust. Implementation must be phased, inclusive, and protected from manipulation. Only then can Somalia move from symbolic fragmentation to structural unity, and from elite negotiation to public ownership. This is not just a roadmap, it is a commitment to building a nation that listens, heals, and belongs to its people.

Risks and Mitigation: Safeguarding the Path to Unity

Any national dialogue and constitutional reform process in Somalia must confront a complex landscape of risks—political, ideological, and structural. These risks, if unaddressed, could derail progress, deepen mistrust, and reinforce fragmentation. However, with foresight and deliberate safeguards, they can be mitigated and transformed into opportunities for resilience and legitimacy.

Elite Capture and Political Manipulation

One of the most pressing risks is the potential for elite capture, where powerful actors dominate the dialogue to protect their interests. This undermines inclusivity and public trust. To mitigate this, the process must be governed by a neutral body with transparent selection criteria for participants. Civil society, youth, and marginalized groups must be actively included, and proceedings should be publicly accessible to deter backroom deals.

Clan-Based Obstruction and Symbolic Contestation

Clan loyalties can obstruct consensus, especially when dialogue threatens entrenched power structures or symbolic dominance. To address this, facilitators must be trained in cultural mediation and xeer-based negotiation. Dialogue must be framed not as a zerosum contest, but as a shared journey toward mutual recognition and national belonging.

Extremist Disruption and Ideological Sabotage

extremist disruption in Somalia is not merely a security challenge—it is a symptom of deeper structural and

generational fractures. Groups like Al-Shabaab have exploited the vacuum left by decades of political exclusion, institutional collapse, and symbolic fragmentation. Their ideological sabotage, which portrays national symbols and institutions as un-Islamic or foreign, resonates most strongly among youth who have never experienced a functioning state or inclusive governance. In communities where civic education is absent and public trust

eroded, extremist narratives offer not only grievance but a distorted sense of purpose and belonging (Menkhaus, 2006; Kapteijns, 2013).

Mitigating this threat requires more than counterterrorism—it demands a parallel strategy of civic renewal. Community resilience must be built through culturally grounded counter-narratives, inclusive dialogue forums, and the empowerment of moderate religious voices who can reclaim moral authority. These efforts must be adapted to local realities, ensuring safety, confidentiality, and legitimacy in areas vulnerable to ideological coercion.

Yet the most enduring antidote to extremist influence lies in addressing the generational crisis of political exclusion. Somalia's youth who comprise the vast majority of the population have been systematically sidelined from decision-making, denied meaningful participation, and left to navigate a landscape of broken promises and symbolic alienation. The absence of credible pathways to civic engagement has created fertile ground for radicalization, despair, and irregular migration. If Somalia is to reclaim its future, it must begin by restoring hope and agency to its youth. The following section explores how decades of failed governance and elite-driven politics have produced a crisis of youth disillusionment—one that must be confronted through inclusive reform, civic education, and generational empowerment.

Youth Disillusionment and the Crisis of Political Exclusion

With over 75% of Somalis under the age of 30, the country's demographic reality is overwhelmingly youthful. Yet this generation has come of age in the absence of a viable state, functional institutions, or inclusive political discourse. Instead of witnessing democratic consolidation, they have experienced a governance system dominated by elite fragmentation, clan-based contention, and symbolic exclusion (Samatar, 1997; Kapteijns, 2013). These conditions have eroded public trust and dashed the aspirations of young Somalis who seek dignity, opportunity, and national belonging.

The disconnect between citizens and decision-makers is particularly acute among youth, who remain largely excluded from political processes. The absence of meaningful public participation has fostered widespread apathy, disillusionment, and a sense of hopelessness. Many educated young Somalis, facing unemployment rates exceeding 60%, are left with few viable options. In desperation, some turn to irregular migration routes, often facilitated by human traffickers. Tragically, many lose their lives in transit, leaving behind grief-stricken families and deepening societal trauma (Adan, 2025).

This crisis is not merely economic, it is existential. Somali politics, dominated by zero-sum competition and narrow self-interest, has failed to offer youth a credible stake in the nation's future (Bradbury & Healy, 2010). Political elites often view emerging youth voices not as partners in reform, but as competitors in a crowded arena of power. Without urgent reforms that prioritize youth inclusion, civic education, and participatory governance, Somalia risks perpetuating a cycle of alienation and losing its most vital asset: a generation capable of rebuilding legitimacy from the ground up (Warsame, Mohamed, & Yusuf, 2023).

Reversing this trend requires more than policy, it demands a cultural shift in how leadership engages with youth. Somalia's future depends on transforming disillusionment into agency, and exclusion into participation. Only then can the country begin to heal its generational divide and build a governance model rooted in legitimacy, inclusion, and hope.

Neotrusteeship and Somali Sovereignty: From Cold War Patronage to Contemporary Geopolitical Contestation

Somalia's post-conflict governance landscape has been shaped by decades of foreign involvement—beginning with Cold War patronage, evolving through the global war on terror, and now entangled in a complex web of regional and global geopolitical interests. These external engagements have often substituted Somali agency with externally driven agendas, raising critical questions about sovereignty, legitimacy, and the future of Somali-led governance. The concept of *neotrusteeship*, though controversial, offers a lens through which to examine the evolving role of international actors in Somalia's state-building efforts (Butler, 2012).

Cold War Legacies: Strategic Patronage and State Militarization

Somalia's post-independence trajectory was profoundly shaped by Cold War dynamics, as global superpowers competed for strategic influence across the Horn of Africa. Initially aligned with the Soviet Union, Somalia received extensive military aid, ideological training, and logistical support, which contributed to the centralization and militarization of the state under Siad Barre's regime (Rozoff, 2009). Following the 1977–78 Ogaden War, Somalia shifted allegiance to the United States, which continued to fund and arm the regime in exchange for strategic access to the Indian Ocean and counterbalance against Soviet-backed Ethiopia (Schmidt, 2022).

This patronage entrenched authoritarian governance, suppressed dissent, and prioritized military expansion over institutional development. The influx of foreign weapons and training created a coercive state apparatus that lacked public legitimacy and civic accountability. When Cold War support evaporated in the late 1980s, Somalia's fragile institutions collapsed, leaving behind a heavily armed society and a political vacuum. The legacy of Cold War militarization continues to haunt Somalia's governance landscape, where centralized power structures and external dependency remain obstacles to inclusive reform and national reconciliation.

Legacy of Armed Rebellion and the Collapse of National Cohesion

Somalia's state collapse in the early 1990s was not solely the result of authoritarian rule under the military regime—it was also driven by the rise of clan-based rebel movements whose actions, though framed as liberation, ultimately fractured the nation. Key factions such as the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), Somali National Movement (SNM), United Somali Congress (USC), and Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM) were backed by Ethiopia, a historical rival with strategic interests in weakening Somalia's territorial integrity and national unity. While these groups succeeded in toppling President Siyad Barre's regime, they lacked a coherent national vision. Their primary objective was regime change, not reconstruction, and their infighting, narrow clan loyalties, and absence of transitional leadership accelerated Somalia's descent into civil war (Abdullahi, 2019; Menkhaus, 2018).

Contrary to popular narratives, Somalia has not experienced genuine reconciliation since the collapse of the state. What has been labeled as "reconciliation" has largely consisted of elite bargaining over power-sharing arrangements, often brokered by external actors and devoid of meaningful public participation. These processes have failed to address historical grievances, symbolic fragmentation, or the emotional rupture between citizens and the state. Instead of fostering national healing, they have entrenched factionalism and perpetuated a governance model built on exclusion and transactional politics (Abdullahi, 2021; Stabilisation Unit, 2018).

More than three decades later, Somalia continues to grapple with the consequences of rebellion without reform and dialogue without inclusion. Despite constitutional initiatives and donor-backed frameworks, the country has yet to establish a legitimate and functional governance system. The enduring disconnect between elite negotiations and public ownership remains a central obstacle to peacebuilding. Moving forward, reconciliation must be redefined—not as elite compromise, but as a participatory process rooted in civic engagement, cultural legitimacy, and national belonging.

Humanitarian Engagement or Strategic Containment? The Limits of Regional Peacekeeping and the Rise of Extremism

The early 1990s marked a shift in international engagement with Somalia, framed initially as a humanitarian intervention through UNOSOM I and II. These missions aimed to deliver relief and restore order but quickly became entangled in Somalia's internal power dynamics. The 1993 "Black Hawk Down" incident catalyzed the withdrawal of U.S. forces and a broader retreat from robust international engagement. Critics argue that these missions lacked cultural sensitivity and failed to empower Somali institutions, reinforcing dependency rather than resilience (Menkhaus, 2006).

In the aftermath, the United States and its allies adopted a containment strategy, outsourcing Somalia's stabilization to neighboring states—particularly Ethiopia and Kenya. These countries, with historical territorial

disputes over Somali-inhabited regions such as Ogaden and the Northern Frontier District, were not neutral actors. Their involvement in AMISOM, and now in its successor AUSSOM, has raised legitimate concerns about whether their strategic interests align with the revival of a unified Somali state (Samatar, 1997; Schmidt, 2022). Ethiopia's 2024 Memorandum of Understanding with Somaliland, which led to its exclusion from AUSSOM, further illustrates the geopolitical entanglements undermining Somali sovereignty.

This containment model, while tactically effective in degrading militant groups, contributed to the rise of Al-Shabaab by fueling public resentment, legitimizing anti-state narratives, and sidelining Somali-led governance. Al-Shabaab exploited the vacuum left by elite fragmentation and foreign-backed interventions, using ideological propaganda to portray national institutions as illegitimate and externally imposed (Campbell & Matanock, 2024). Their ascent marked a shift from localized insurgency to transnational extremism, characterized by asymmetric violence and moral coercion.

Humanitarian engagement, when subordinated to strategic containment, risks deepening instability. Somalia's recovery requires a recalibration—where international support reinforces Somali agency, and peacekeeping is grounded in legitimacy, inclusion, and national ownership.

The War on Terror: Security-Driven Neotrusteeship

After 9/11, Somalia re-emerged as a strategic concern—not as a failed state needing reconstruction, but as a potential haven for terrorism. The U.S. and its allies adopted a containment strategy, targeting Al-Shabaab and other militant groups through drone strikes, intelligence operations, and proxy warfare. This securitized approach sidelined governance reform and civic reconciliation, reducing Somalia to a battleground in the global war on terror (Menkhaus, 2014). While these interventions weakened militant networks, they also undermined Somali sovereignty by bypassing national institutions and fueling local resentment.

Regional Powers and Strategic Fragmentation

In recent years, Somalia has become a theater for regional rivalries. Ethiopia, Kenya, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates have pursued divergent interests—ranging from border security and trade corridors to ideological influence and resource control. Ethiopia's involvement in federal-state dynamics, Kenya's military operations in Jubaland, and Egypt's strategic posturing over Nile politics reflect a shift from stabilization to strategic competition. These actors often support rival factions, exacerbating internal divisions and complicating national dialogue efforts (Bradbury, 2008).

Turkey presents a more nuanced case. While Ankara has invested in infrastructure, education, and military training, its growing influence raises questions about long-term strategic alignment and the risk of dependency. Turkish drone operations and naval agreements, though effective in counterterrorism, must be balanced against Somali oversight and constitutional accountability (Campbell & Matanock, 2024).

Global Powers and the New Trusteeship Debate

The African Union's transition from ATMIS to AUSSOM in 2025 marks a new phase of international engagement. While framed as a Somali-led stabilization mission, AUSSOM faces funding shortfalls, troop composition disputes, and unclear mandates. The European Union and United States continue to provide financial and logistical support, but their influence over strategic priorities remains significant. This raises the question: is Somalia being supported or steered?

Neotrusteeship, as defined by Butler (2012), refers to international administration of state functions under limited sovereignty. In Somalia's case, this model has evolved into a hybrid arrangement—where foreign actors manage security, aid, and reform agendas, while Somali institutions struggle for autonomy. The danger lies not in the presence of international actors, but in the erosion of Somali ownership over national processes.

Toward Somali-Led Sovereignty: Reframing Neotrusteeship

To avoid repeating the failures of past trusteeship models, Somalia must assert a Somali-led framework for

international engagement. This includes:

1. **Codified boundaries** between technical assistance and political influence
2. **Transparent oversight** of foreign-funded programs and military operations
3. **Diaspora engagement** to monitor external agendas and advocate for Somali priorities
4. **Institutional safeguards** that ensure all interventions align with constitutional mandates and national dialogue outcomes

Somalia's sovereignty must be negotiated—not surrendered. A calibrated neo-trusteeship, limited in scope and time-bound, can serve as a scaffold for rebuilding governance, provided it is Somali-directed and culturally grounded. The goal is not isolation, but strategic partnership—where foreign support reinforces Somali legitimacy rather than replacing it.

From Vulnerability to Agency

Somalia's experience with foreign intervention from Cold War patronage to counterterrorism operations and contemporary geopolitical entanglements reveals a persistent pattern of externally imposed solutions that often disregard local realities and undermine national ownership. These interventions, while framed as stabilization efforts, have frequently substituted Somali agency with strategic containment, elite bargaining, and institutional dependency. The cumulative effect has been a governance landscape shaped more by external priorities than by Somali aspirations.

Yet within this history lies an opportunity to reframe Somalia's trajectory from vulnerability to agency. The concept of neotrusteeship, if recalibrated through Somali leadership and civic inclusion, offers a transitional framework for stabilization—one that supports rather than supplants domestic sovereignty. For such a model to succeed, it must be grounded in Somali-defined priorities, culturally legitimate institutions, and mechanisms of public accountability.

The challenge is not merely to absorb external support, but to do so without compromising the integrity of Somali governance. Every international footprint must reinforce Somali-led recovery, not redirect it. This requires a shift from transactional engagement to principled partnership—where foreign assistance is aligned with national vision, and legitimacy is earned through inclusion, transparency, and public trust. Somalia's future depends on its ability to transform imposed vulnerability into deliberate agency, reclaiming its path toward sovereign, participatory, and resilient governance.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION: ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY, LEGITIMACY, AND PUBLIC TRUST

In a country emerging from decades of fragmentation, mistrust, and contested legitimacy, the success of any national dialogue or constitutional reform process depends not only on its design but on its ability to be monitored, evaluated, and refined in real time. Somalia's journey toward unity and reconciliation must be transparent, inclusive, and responsive to public sentiment. This requires a robust Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) framework that tracks progress, documents outcomes, and ensures that the process remains accountable to the Somali people.

At the heart of this framework is the proposed National Dialogue Observatory Board (NDOB)—an independent, non-partisan oversight body tasked with ensuring that Somalia's national dialogue and constitutional reform process is credible, inclusive, and publicly owned. The NDOB is not merely a technical institution; it is a civic guardian, a moral compass, and a mechanism for institutional memory.

Mandate and Composition

The NDOB's core mandate is to monitor progress, document outcomes, and safeguard inclusivity and public trust. It will be composed of diverse representatives, including civil society leaders, traditional elders, religious scholars, legal experts, youth, diaspora members, and academics. This composition reflects Somalia's pluralism

and ensures that the board carries both moral authority and societal legitimacy.

To preserve its independence, the NDOB must be legally protected from political interference. Its operations should be codified in the revised constitution or enabling legislation, with clear provisions for autonomy, transparency, and accountability. Rotational leadership and conflict-of-interest clauses will ensure fairness and prevent dominance by any single group or region.

Core Functions

The NDOB will perform several key functions:

1. **Tracking Implementation:** Monitor the rollout of dialogue phases, regional consultations, constitutional drafting, and referendum preparations.
2. **Documentation and Reporting:** Record proceedings, decisions, and stakeholder participation. Publish quarterly updates and comprehensive annual reports.
3. **Community Feedback Integration:** Analyze input from grassroots forums, civic education campaigns, and public consultations. Ensure that citizen voices shape the process.
4. **Risk Identification and Mitigation:** Flag emerging threats such as elite capture, symbolic contestation, or extremist disruption. Recommend timely interventions.
5. **Public Engagement:** Facilitate media briefings, town halls, and educational outreach to keep the public informed and involved.

Community Feedback Loops

Monitoring must extend beyond institutional oversight to include community feedback loops. These mechanisms allow ordinary Somalis to express their views, concerns, and suggestions throughout the process. Feedback can be gathered through:

Local town halls and listening sessions facilitated by neutral mediators. Mobile surveys and SMS platforms, especially in rural and insecure areas. Partnerships with radio stations and community media to amplify public sentiment. Youth-led civic forums and school-based dialogue clubs.

Feedback must be systematically collected, analyzed, and used to refine dialogue formats, outreach strategies, and thematic priorities. In areas affected by Al-Shabaab or other extremist groups, feedback mechanisms must be adapted for safety and confidentiality, relying on trusted local actors such as elders, religious leaders, and educators.

Annual Reports and Public Accountability

To institutionalize transparency, the NDOB will publish annual reports detailing progress on reconciliation, constitutional reform, and civic engagement. These reports will include:

A summary of activities, outcomes, and stakeholder participation. An assessment of inclusivity, regional representation, and gender balance. Documentation of constitutional revisions and public consultations. Analysis of civic education efforts and symbolic reconciliation initiatives. Recommendations for improving process design, outreach, and coordination.

Reports should be written in accessible Somali and English, distributed widely through media, schools, mosques, and community centers. They should be presented publicly—ideally during an Annual Unity Summit—where citizens, leaders, and observers can reflect on progress, debate challenges, and renew commitment.

Embedding M&E in the Constitutional Framework

To ensure sustainability, the revised Somali constitution should include provisions for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of national processes. This embeds accountability into the legal fabric of the state and ensures that future governments remain committed to transparency, civic engagement, and adaptive governance.

Monitoring and evaluation are not bureaucratic formalities—they are the backbone of trust. By establishing the NDOB, integrating community feedback, and publishing transparent reports, Somalia can transform its national dialogue from a political exercise into a civic institution. In doing so, it builds a culture of accountability, responsiveness, and public ownership, laying the foundation for a state that listens, learns, and belongs to all its citizens.

CONCLUSION

Somalia stands at a pivotal juncture. Decades of fragmentation contested legitimacy, and symbolic disunity have left the nation searching for a governance model that reflects its cultural complexity, historical grievances, and generational aspirations. Federalism, as currently practiced, has failed to deliver meaningful inclusion or national cohesion. Instead, it has entrenched clannism, enabled fictitious institutions, and exposed the dangers of unregulated decentralization.

Yet this crisis is not irreversible. Somalia's demographic vitality, cultural resilience, and indigenous traditions offer the foundation for a renewed national covenant—one built on shared sovereignty, earned legitimacy, and symbolic reconciliation. A reimagined federal model, grounded in constitutional clarity, civic education, and structured dialogue, can transform governance from a contest for control into a partnership of mutual responsibility. Lessons from Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Sierra Leone affirm that durable peace emerges not from elite bargains or imposed frameworks, but from inclusive, context-sensitive reform. This is not merely a political imperative, it is a moral and cultural necessity.

Somalia's future depends on rejecting transactional stabilization and embracing participatory transformation. The path forward must be Somali led, emotionally resonant, and institutionally grounded.

Call to Action and Recommendations

To move from fragmentation to unity, the following actions are recommended:

a. Launch a National Dialogue Process

Convene inclusive forums across all regions, led by neutral facilitators and rooted in Somali traditions of consensus-building. Ensure representation of youth, women, elders, religious leaders, and marginalized groups.

b. Codify a Decentralized Federal Model with Veto Power

Embed regional veto mechanisms in the constitution, regulated by strict legal pathways and structured negotiation. Establish a National Dialogue Council to mediate disputes and uphold constitutional balance.

c. Clarify Institutional Roles and Hierarchies

Develop a national organigram that defines the chain of command between federal and regional institutions. Prevent overlapping mandates and ensure coordinated governance.

d. Form the National Dialogue Observatory Board (NDOB)

Establish an independent, non-Partisan body to monitor, evaluate, and document the dialogue and reform process. Include civil society leaders, elders, legal experts, youth, and diaspora representatives. Publish annual reports and integrate community feedback to ensure transparency and public trust.

e. Reclaim National Symbols and Civic Identity

Launch a National Symbol Reaffirmation Campaign to restore emotional belonging. Institutionalize civic education in schools, media, and community life.

f. Demand Non-Interference and Mobilize the Diaspora

Secure pledges from foreign actors to respect Somalia's sovereignty. Engage diaspora networks for funding, advocacy, and bridging divides. Somalia's future depends on bold, inclusive, and culturally grounded reform. The time to act is now.

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