

POLICY BRIEF 04

Which Electoral Model Should Somalia Pursue for the Federal Presidency and Parliament?

FIKIR Institute · 18 August 2026

Executive Summary

Universal suffrage, one person, one vote, has been a central goal of Somalia's political reformers for years, grounded in the principle that democracy should rest on equal citizenship rather than clan representation. But the federal government's attempt to impose a national one-person-one-vote model unilaterally, without federal member state consensus, is itself the immediate trigger of the constitutional crisis now underway: Puntland and Jubaland have rejected the process, parliament's and the presidency's mandates have been extended without agreement, and talks in May collapsed. This brief examines four electoral models under active discussion in Somalia, assesses the security and technical obstacles to direct national voting, draws lessons from Galmudug's first-ever direct state-level election in July, and recommends a phased hybrid model: direct one-person-one-vote for parliamentary seats where security permits, indirect presidential selection by the elected parliament as an interim safeguard, and a binding, pre-negotiated agreement with federal member states on the model itself before implementation, not after.

The Issue

Somalia has never held a direct national election for its president or federal parliament. Since the end of the transitional period, both have been selected indirectly: clan elders and delegates allocate parliamentary seats, and the resulting parliament elects the president. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has said a one-person-one-vote election is the only legitimate mechanism for transferring power, and the federal government has pursued voter registration and a direct-vote roadmap since April 2025. Puntland and Jubaland have rejected this process as a unilateral change to the power-sharing arrangement that underwrites their participation in the federation, and Puntland formally withdrew recognition of the federal government after the president's term lapsed in May 2026 without an agreed electoral process to replace it. The question is no longer only whether one-person-one-vote is desirable in principle. It is whether any electoral model, direct or indirect, can be implemented in the next electoral cycle in a way federal member states will accept as legitimate, given the security environment and the trust already lost.

Background

Somalia's federal parliament and presidency mandates expired in April and May 2026 respectively. Constitutional amendments passed in March extended both by a year and pushed elections to 2027, a move the national opposition, Puntland and Jubaland have rejected as an unconstitutional extension rather than a negotiated transition. Voter registration for a national one-person-one-vote election began in April 2025, the first in the capital in roughly fifty years, and had reached approximately 900,000 registered voters by mid-2026, a fraction of Somalia's electorate of several million and concentrated overwhelmingly in Mogadishu and other government-secured areas. Four distinct electoral models have circulated in technical and political discussions: the Electoral Bill of 2018, built around closed-list proportional representation and centralised national oversight; the Electoral Act of 2024, the most administratively demanding option, using open-list proportional representation with the only framework that regulates elections at federal, state and local levels simultaneously; the Federal Member State Council proposal, which shares electoral authority between Mogadishu and the states, permits independent candidates, and uses a simpler first-past-the-post system explicitly designed for faster implementation; and a Unity Council model centred on national party competition. A negotiated hybrid compromise, under which the public would vote directly for members of parliament and the resulting parliament would elect the president, has also been floated as a concession to federal member states, though it has not been implemented at the federal level. Galmudug offers the closest real precedent: on 30 July 2026 it held Somalia's first-ever direct one-person-one-vote election for local councils and state parliament, with twelve parties fielding candidates for 89 House seats and sixteen parties for 243 regional assembly seats, drawing on 215,860 registered voters. The presidency that legislature will go on to select was, however, effectively pre-decided by the federal ruling party before the election took place, a dynamic FIKIR Institute has examined separately.

Analysis

Three constraints bear directly on which model is actually implementable in the coming cycle, as distinct from which is most desirable in principle. First, security: Al-Shabaab controls significant rural territory and has a documented record of targeting election participants, including candidates, clan elders and electoral college members, during past indirect elections. A genuinely universal direct vote is not achievable while large populations sit outside government and African Union-secured areas, and even a vote restricted to secured areas exposes participants there to reprisal risk. Second, technical capacity: approximately 900,000 registered voters against an electorate of several million represents a fraction of the coverage a credible national one-person-one-vote election would require, and registration has been concentrated in Mogadishu rather than distributed nationally. Third, and most decisive, political consensus: the federal government's pursuit of direct national elections without federal member state agreement is not a parallel problem to the current legitimacy crisis, it is the same problem. Puntland and Jubaland's objection has consistently centred on process, a model imposed rather than negotiated, more than on universal suffrage as a principle. Galmudug's experience in July demonstrates something important in both directions at once: that direct one-person-one-vote elections for parliamentary seats are logistically achievable in Somalia today, since the vote itself proceeded and drew genuine multi-party competition, but also that layering an indirect, elite-controlled presidential selection on top of a directly elected legislature does not by itself produce a legitimate outcome if the presidency is settled by a ruling party before the electing body exists. A national model that copies only the achievable half of the Galmudug precedent, direct legislative elections, while replicating its failure mode, pre-decided executive selection, would resolve the technical

objection to indirect elections without resolving the legitimacy objection that is actually driving the current crisis.

Policy Options

- Pursue immediate nationwide one-person-one-vote elections for both parliament and the presidency, on the model the federal government has favoured since 2025. Achieves the reform movement's stated goal directly, but is not achievable within the current security and registration coverage, and pursuing it unilaterally is what produced the present standoff with Puntland and Jubaland.
- Revert fully to the traditional indirect clan-elder model used since the transitional period, abandoning direct elections for this cycle. Avoids the security and capacity obstacles, but forfeits the legitimacy gains of the reform era and does nothing to prevent the kind of pre-decided outcome Galmudug's own indirect presidential selection just produced.
- Adopt a phased hybrid model: direct one-person-one-vote elections for the House of the People in areas where security and registration coverage permit, building on the Galmudug precedent, with the elected parliament then selecting the president as an interim safeguard, paired with binding procedural rules preventing pre-election party anointment of a single presidential candidate.
- Adopt the Federal Member State Council proposal's shared-authority, first-past-the-post model nationally, prioritising fast implementation and federal-state power-sharing over electoral sophistication, at the cost of the more representative proportional systems in the 2018 and 2024 frameworks.

Recommendations

- Pursue the phased hybrid model as the primary path: direct one-person-one-vote elections for parliamentary seats in secured areas, indirect presidential selection by that parliament in this cycle, with an explicit, published commitment to expand direct suffrage to the presidency and to currently insecure areas in the following cycle rather than treating the hybrid as permanent.
- Negotiate the electoral model itself with Puntland, Jubaland and the opposition before further implementation, not after, using the National Consultative Council or an equivalent forum, and treat their sign-off as a precondition for legitimacy rather than a courtesy step.
- Prohibit ruling-party pre-nomination of a single presidential candidate before the relevant electing legislature has been seated, the specific failure that undermined Galmudug's own indirect selection, through a binding electoral commission rule rather than a norm.
- Expand voter registration on a transparent, published geographic schedule that prioritises federal member state capitals and contested regions alongside Mogadishu, so registration coverage itself is not read as a tool of federal executive advantage.
- Commission an independent, joint federal-FMS security assessment of which districts can safely host direct voting for the next cycle, and publish the methodology, rather than leaving the security case for or against universal suffrage to be asserted unilaterally by whichever side benefits from a given answer.

Conclusion

One person, one vote remains the right long-term destination for Somalia's federal elections, and Galmudug's July election shows the logistics of direct voting are no longer the binding constraint they once were. But the model that gets Somalia there fastest is not necessarily the model that gets it there durably. A national election imposed without federal member state consensus, however procedurally sound, will reproduce the legitimacy crisis it is meant to resolve. A phased hybrid model, direct legislative elections now, negotiated expansion to the presidency and to currently insecure areas next cycle, offers a credible path that treats consensus with Puntland and Jubaland as the actual precondition for legitimate elections, rather than an obstacle to be managed around it.

References

- International Crisis Group, "Electoral Showdown in Somalia: Averting Another Round of Turmoil."
- Heritage Institute, "Somalia's 2026 Mandate Test: Navigating Elections and Federal Tensions."
- Axadle, "Somalia's Four Electoral Models Compared in New Analysis."
- Hiiraan Online, "Somalia launches voter registration ahead of 2026 one-person, one-vote elections."
- Hiiraan Online, "Galmudug state holds first direct elections as voters choose councils and state MPs."
- Dawan Africa, "Somalia Election Commission Sets July 20 Galmudug Vote, 215,860 Register."
- Wikipedia, "Constitutional crisis in Somalia."
- Prior FIKIR Institute analysis, "Somalia's Mandate to Govern Expired in May. In August, Its Troops Retreated From a City It Claims to Rule.," 11 August 2026.
- Prior FIKIR Institute analysis, "Galmudug's New Parliament Hasn't Been Elected Yet. Somalia's President Already Named Its Next Leader.," 18 August 2026.