

# DEMOCRATIZATION

in the Horn of Africa:

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS,  
POLITICAL DYNAMICS, AND FUTURE PROSPECTS



HORN  
CENTER FOR  
DEMOCRACY  
NURTURING DEMOCRACY

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*NURTURING DEMOCRACY*

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## **The Horn Center for Democracy (HCD)**

The Horn Center for Democracy (HCD) is an independent, not-for-profit policy advocacy and research institution based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The main objective of the Center is to foster and entrench the culture of democracy, good governance, peace and inclusive citizen empowerment in the Horn of Africa countries. As a think-and-do tank, the Center also engages in program implementation, mainly with objectives of policy advocacy, capacity building, and convening actors on democracy and governance in the HoA region. HCD aims to provide a convening platform for dialogue, coordination, and exchange of best practices at national and regional levels among national and regional CSOs, citizen movements, governments, and intergovernmental regional institutions such as IGAD. Through these efforts, the Center aims to generate evidence and identify policy options for effective approaches to democratization, human rights, governance, and peace building.

For more information: [www.horn-center.org](http://www.horn-center.org)

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## Acronyms

ARCSS	Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan
AU	African Union
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CoHA	Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement
CORD	Coalition for Reform and Democracy
CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EAC	East African Community
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
FMSs	Federal Member States
FPTP	First Past the Post (winner-takes-all electoral system)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GHoA	Greater Horn of Africa
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
HCD	Horn Center for Democracy
HoA	Horn of Africa
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IGF	IGAD Governance Forum
KANU	Kenya African National Union
KNDR	Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation
LRA	Lord's Resistance Army
NARC	the National Rainbow Coalition
NCP	National Congress Party
NRM	National Resistance Movement
ODM	Orange Democratic Movement
PFDJ	People's Front for Democracy and Justice
PR	Proportional representation
REC	Regional Economic Communities
RSF	Rapid Support Force
SAF	Sudan Armed Forces
SNM	Somali National Movement
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudan People's Liberation Movement
SSC	Sool, Sanaag and Cayn (Dhulbahante Regions)

TMC Transitional Military Council  
TPLF Tigray People's Liberation Front  
UAE United Arab Emirates  
UMP Union for the Presidential Majority

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# Introduction

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This book is based on a baseline study conducted by the Horn Centre for Democracy. HCD's core mission is to promote a deep-rooted culture of democracy and inclusive citizen empowerment across the Horn of Africa. Towards this end, this study (conducted between November 2023 and December 2025) examines the political, democratic, human rights, and governance landscape across the region. Its overall objective is to identify emerging trends, opportunities, and risks affecting democracy, good governance, citizen participation, and human rights in the region.

The chapters in this book focus on the assessment of the political, democratic, human rights, and governance landscape based on national-level data from countries within the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region. Based on the specific objectives of the baseline assessment, the book:

- provides an overview of the current state of democracy in the region, including good governance, citizen participation, civil society and media space, the rule of law, human rights, electoral processes, and judicial independence;
- examines the practice and functioning of substantive democratic processes, including political, economic, and social governance across the region;
- identifies emerging trends, opportunities, and threats to democracy and human rights in the Horn of Africa, drawing on country-specific evidence and regional cross-cutting dynamics;
- contributes to knowledge generation and sharing by documenting key findings, success stories, best practices, and approaches to democratic governance across the region; and
- provides HCD with practical recommendations, both methodological and operational, to support the design and implementation of programs that advance democratic governance and human rights.

The study adopts the Intergovernmental Authority on Development's (IGAD) definition of the Greater Horn of Africa, which comprises Djibouti, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. Standard qualitative methods were employed to generate data, including desk review, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation. The document review encompassed academic

literature, grey literature, and relevant national, regional, and continental policy frameworks on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. Given the growing role of social media as a site of political contestation and public debate, online sources were also systematically analyzed. Secondary quantitative data complemented these findings, drawing on national, regional, and global indices measuring democracy, good governance and corruption.

Recognizing the diversity of political contexts within the Horn of Africa, the analysis relies primarily on in-depth case studies of four countries: Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Kenya. This selection reflects both practical and analytical considerations. As a baseline study, the project could not comprehensively cover all eight countries in the region, given constraints of time and resources. More importantly, these four cases represent distinct trajectories and challenges in democratization while offering a comparative analysis.

At one end of the spectrum is Kenya, widely regarded, by regional standards, as the most institutionalized democratic system in the region. At the other end is South Sudan, where democratization has been deeply constrained by the intertwined challenges of state-building and nation-building, often resulting in prolonged civil conflict. Ethiopia and Sudan provide particularly instructive comparative cases: both have experienced attempts at political reform within political systems historically characterized by strong states and comparatively weak societal checks on power, as well as distinctive approaches to nation-building centered on dominant political groups.

In addition to these four core cases, the study also examines Somaliland as a special case. Although not internationally recognized as a sovereign state, Somaliland offers an important example of a hybrid political system that combines formal democratic institutions with traditional mechanisms of participation and conflict resolution. Despite the lack of wider assessment through in-depth case studies in Djibouti, Uganda, Eritrea, and Somalia, the research incorporates limited data and contextual analysis on democratization in these countries, thereby providing a broader regional perspective.

The regional overview identifies and analyzes cross-cutting trends, opportunities and constraints in the pursuits of democratization across the Horn. To this end, the case studies provide deeper insight into country-specific dynamics which include: Ethiopia's constrained democratic transition; Kenya's comparatively stronger performance on democratic

indices; cycles of popular uprisings and military coups in Sudan; South Sudan's externally driven and largely unsuccessful state-building and democratization efforts; and Somaliland's hybrid model blending customary authority with formal state structures.

A total of 75 interviews were conducted across the five case studies, including the representatives of regional and continental institutions. Participants in the case studies included government officials, ruling and opposition party members, civil society organizations (CSOs), community leaders, media practitioners, academics, and think tank representatives. Data were collected through both in-person fieldwork and remote methods. Field visits, each lasting one week, were carried out in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), Hargeisa (Somaliland), and Nairobi (Kenya). Interviews were conducted in Sudan and South Sudan –and in limited cases via email– to address specific questions. Fieldwork in Nairobi has enabled consultations with Sudanese CSO representatives temporarily based in Kenya for security reasons. Although not covered through full case studies, selected key informants were consulted to provide additional perspectives on democratic developments in Uganda, Eritrea, and Somalia.

The book comprises eight chapters. The first two chapters mainly deal with the conceptual framework of the analysis, and examine the context, challenges and prospects in the pursuits of democratization in the Horn, followed by country case studies in Chapters 3 to 7. The eighth chapter presents conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 1 revisits the debate on democracy by reviewing competing definitions and highlighting its core elements: political competition, participation, institutional constraints, and civil liberties. It then examines three major theories of democratization: functional approaches linking democracy to socioeconomic development; origin-based theories emphasizing historical sequencing and state–society contestation; and incentive theories highlighting elite strategic calculations. The chapter also compares the two dominant electoral systems, majoritarian and consociational models, assessing their strengths and limits in divided societies, and it addresses the global democratic downturn, including the rise of populism and the growing appeals of a performance-based autocracy. Finally, these theoretical insights are applied to the Horn of Africa in evaluating how regional structural conditions shape democratization pathways.

Chapter 2 analyzes crosscutting obstacles to democratization in the Horn through the lens of Rustow's genetic theory that focuses on

contestation within national unity, and incentive-based approaches, which stress elite strategic calculations. It identifies five interrelated constraints to the democratization processes in the Horn. *First*, a nation-building crisis (i.e., the absence of cohesive national unity, coupled with ethnicized politics and center–periphery tensions) undermines democratic foundations across the region. The *second* constraint relates to a pronounced state–society imbalance as a result of which historically centralized and coercive states have suppressed autonomous social forces, limited meaningful contestation and enabled elite-dominated transitions. The *third* challenge refers to winner-takes-all electoral systems, particularly First-Past-the-Post rules that intensify zero-sum competition in deeply divided societies. The *fourth* constraint is the resource curse, where oil and mineral revenues weaken accountability and fuel conflict, notably in Sudan and South Sudan. The *fifth* factor relates to weak regional and external support, as organizations such as IGAD and the AU remain constrained while global powers prioritize security interests over reform. These dynamics reinforce one another, entrenching authoritarian rule. Nonetheless, federalism, devolution, peace processes, and expanding civic activism offer cautious openings for more democratic trajectories.

Chapters 3 to 7 present country case studies. Chapter 3 examines democratization in Kenya, tracing the evolution from colonial rule and the postcolonial “imperial presidency” to the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s, which initially produced electoral authoritarianism. The chapter shows the meaningful transition that occurred in 2002 and the 2007 post-election violence that exposed institutional fragilities that led to power-sharing and the transformative 2010 Constitution. Since then, elections have been competitive yet contested, with an increasingly assertive judiciary. While the 2022 elections were relatively peaceful and youth-led activism signals civic dynamism, challenges persist: ethnicized politics, executive dominance, corruption, inequality, and winner-takes-all electoral rules. Nonetheless, devolution, judicial independence, and active civil society provide foundations for cautious democratic consolidation, provided reforms curb presidential overreach, strengthen accountability, and deepen inclusion.

Chapter 4 analyzes Ethiopia’s troubled democratic transition, rooted in a long history of centralized autocracy. Repeated liberalization efforts have failed to produce the desired durable change, as structural authoritarian legacies reassert themselves. Although the 2018 reforms briefly expanded civic space, conflict and political violence have since reversed gains. Key obstacles include a deep nation-building crisis marked by competing

nationalisms, tensions within ethnic federalism, strong state dominance over weak societal forces, political fragmentation, economic strain, rural exclusion, and youth unemployment. While post-2018 reforms have strengthened institutions such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the National Election Board, progress remains fragile. Sustainable democratization will require rebalancing state–society relations, fostering inclusive nationhood, strengthening institutional checks and balances, reforming electoral rules toward consensus, and building genuine partnerships between state and local institutions.

Chapter 5 examines the cyclical pattern in Sudan’s democratization process: brief civilian governments are repeatedly toppled by military coups. Since independence, democratic experiments (1956-1958, 1964, and 1985) were short-lived, with military rule quickly reasserted. The 2019 Revolution renewed hopes, producing a fragile civilian–military power-sharing arrangement that collapsed in the October 2021 coup. Rivalry between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) escalated into a devastating civil war in 2023, killing tens of thousands, displacing millions, and threatening both democracy and state cohesion. Ending the conflict, unifying civilian forces, and including all regional and grassroots actors in peace negotiations are essential for any democratic future. Sudan’s repeated cycles of uprisings and coups highlight why regime change has rarely translated into durable democratic institutions.

Chapter 6 deals with the challenges and prospects for democratization in South Sudan, where state-building and nation-building remain deeply intertwined. As the world’s newest state, the country must construct effective institutions while fostering a shared national identity in a society fractured by civil war, ethnic divisions, and historical marginalization. Political power remains personalized, institutions are weak, and liberation-era elites dominate a militarized political order. Oil dependence reinforces elite capture and weak accountability, thereby constraining democratic development. Emerging civic actors, youth groups, women’s organizations, professional associations, and think tanks are advocating reform and greater participation. With sustained local initiatives and principled international engagement, incremental progress toward more accountable and inclusive governance remains possible, even amid persistent structural constraints.

Chapter 7 examines democratization in Somaliland, a distinctive and often overlooked experience in the Horn of Africa, shaped by its status as

a de facto state. Since declaring independence from Somalia in 1991, Somaliland has developed a relatively stable, locally rooted system blending modern democratic institutions with customary authority. Its hybrid political system combines an elected president, bicameral parliament, and multiparty elections with traditional clan structures, notably the House of Elders (Guurti), which plays a central role in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and political mediation. Somaliland's democracy is thus context-specific, negotiated, and adaptive, though it continues to face challenges in inclusion, institutional reform, and sustainability. Despite its achievements, Somaliland's democracy faces significant contradictions. Electoral delays, executive dominance, and unelected or extended-mandate institutions raise concerns about accountability. Clan influence stabilizes but can limit participation, especially for women, youth, and minorities, while restrictions on political parties and civil society periodically strain democratic freedoms.

The last chapter concludes with recommendations to create a more enabling environment for democratization in the Horn based on the analysis in Chapters 1 to 7. It synthesizes the crosscutting challenges to democratization across the Horn of Africa, drawing on the detailed analyses presented in previous chapters. It highlights recurring themes such as fragile state institutions, the legacies of conflict, elite capture, ethnic and clan-based divisions, and the limits of externally driven democratization efforts. The chapter underscores how these structural, political, and social factors interact to constrain democratic consolidation, creating both shared regional patterns and country-specific dynamics.

Building on this synthesis, the chapter offers a set of targeted recommendations aimed at enhancing the prospects for democratization in the Horn. These include strengthening institutional capacity while ensuring local ownership, promoting inclusive governance that bridges ethnic, clan, and regional divides, supporting participatory nation-building processes, and adopting adaptive, context-sensitive approaches to international engagement. By integrating lessons from both successes and setbacks across the region, the chapter provides recommendations for advancing sustainable, contextually grounded democracy in one of the world's most politically complex regions.

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## Chapter 1

# Revisiting the Debate on Democracy

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### Introduction

The study of democracy has long been characterized by the debate over its meaning, origins, institutional arrangements, and global trajectory. At the definitional level, democracy is contested. Some scholars emphasize procedural elements such as free and fair elections, rule of law, and separation of powers, while others prioritize substantive outcomes like political inclusion, civil liberties, and the protection of minority rights. Understanding these core elements is critical, as differing definitions shape how democratization is analyzed and measured.

Theoretical approaches to democracy further broaden the debate. Functional theories link the emergence and stability of democracy to socioeconomic development, education, and social modernization. The relationship, however, is complex and often two-way. Economic development can create favorable conditions for democratic governance, while democratic institutions can also promote long-term development by strengthening the rule of law, protecting property rights, reducing inequality, and encouraging investment in human capital.

As emphasized in Modernization Theory, rising levels of income, education, and urbanization can increase demands for participation and accountability. Nonetheless, these factors are better understood as enabling conditions rather than strict prerequisites, since democratic transitions have also occurred in relatively poor societies while some economically developed states remain authoritarian. Origin-based theories focus on the historical processes, emphasizing the interplay of state structures and societal forces, particularly the role of contestation in constraining authoritarian power. Incentive-based theories, on the other hand, highlight the strategic calculations of elites and institutions, arguing that rulers may adopt democratic concessions when such decisions align with their material or political interests.

Debates over institutional forms of democracy often distinguish between majoritarian and consociational models. *Majoritarian* systems concentrate power in the hands of the electoral winner, emphasizing decisive governance but risking exclusion of minorities. *Consociational*

systems, by contrast, rely on negotiated power-sharing, proportional representation, and veto mechanisms to maintain stability in divided societies, though these arrangements face challenges of adoption, maintenance, and potential immobilization. Scholars also note that democracy's global trajectory is neither linear nor assured. The decline of democratic hegemony is evidenced by the rise of populist movements, performance-based or "benign" autocracies, and the erosion of liberal norms in both established and emerging democracies. These trends raise questions about the resilience of democratic institutions and the conditions under which democracy can thrive or falter, particularly in regions with entrenched divisions and weak state capacity.

The discussion in this chapter proceeds in five sections. Section 1 examines the contested meaning of democracy as a political order, surveying competing definitional approaches while clarifying its core elements, i.e., political competition, participation, institutional constraints, and civil liberties. Section 2 reviews major theories of democratization, focusing on three influential strands: (i) functional theories that link democracy to socioeconomic development; (ii) origin-based theories that emphasize historical sequences and state–society contestation; and (iii) incentive theories that highlight strategic elite calculations and institutional payoffs. Section 3 compares the two dominant institutional models of democracy, i.e., majoritarian and consociational, assessing their underlying assumptions, strengths, and limitations, particularly in divided societies. Section 4 analyzes the contemporary erosion of democracy's global hegemony, as reflected in the rise of populism and the renewed appeal of "benign" or performance-based autocracy. Section 5 applies these theoretical perspectives to the Horn of Africa, evaluating how structural conditions in the region shape the prospects and pathways of democratization.

### **1.1 Democracy - Commonly Named, yet Rarely Defined**

Precise definitions of *democracy* in social science literature are surprisingly elusive. Even when definitions are offered, they are frequently contested, reflecting divergent meanings shaped by context, author, and purpose. Robert Bates<sup>1</sup> addresses this definitional ambiguity by identifying a core feature shared across competing interpretations. He observes that, "While differing in the attributes they posit and the qualifications they

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Bates (2010). "Democracy in Africa: A Very Short History." *Social Research*, 77(4)77, no. 4, pp. 1133–48.

impose, those who write of democracy join in emphasizing its essential property: that it is a form of government in which political power is employed to serve the interests of the public rather than of those who govern”.

Similarly, Kidane Mengisteab<sup>2</sup> defines democracy as “a system of governance that creates mechanisms by which the general population is represented in advancing its interests in the process of decision-making.” This understanding closely aligns with the Greek etymology of the term *dēmokratia* - “rule of the people” - derived from *dēmos* (people) and *kratos* (rule). Yet the question of who constitutes the *dēmos* has varied significantly across time and place. In ancient Athens, political participation was restricted to a narrow segment of society, excluding women, slaves, and foreigners. Over centuries, particularly in Europe, the concept gradually expanded to encompass broader segments of the population through the extension of civil, political, and social rights.

Steinmetz (2021)<sup>3</sup> broadens the conceptual boundaries of democracy to include not only institutional arrangements but also the norms and values that sustain it. He argues that “Democracy requires a set of norms and values that affirm its place in society... [It] requires public acknowledgment, understanding, and deliberation on why we choose democracy and what specific forms a democracy should take” (p.107).

Under this broader view, democracy extends beyond formal electoral processes. Civic engagement encompasses a wide range of political and non-political activities through which individuals and groups collaborate to address collective problems and improve their communities. Volunteering, participating in local governance, organizing community initiatives, and fostering public dialogue all contribute to a vibrant public sphere. Valuing such participation is foundational to democratic life.

This expansive understanding moves beyond contemporary preoccupations with elections in the Horn. This conception of democracy comprises a constellation of interrelated principles: political rights and civil liberties, human rights and equality, free and fair elections, accountability and transparency, the rule of law, and meaningful citizen participation. Together, these elements form not merely a system of






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<sup>2</sup> Kidane Mengisteab (2020). *The Crisis of Democratization in the Greater Horn of Africa: An Alternative Approach to Institutional Order in Transitional Societies*. James Currey Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Jay Steinmetz (2021). *Politics, Power, and Purpose: An Orientation to Political Science*. Press Books.

government, but a normative and participatory framework through which public power is constituted and exercised in the service of the people, as summarized in Table 1 below:

TABLE 1. *Political Rights and Civil Liberties of Democracy*

 <p><b>HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All people living in a democracy have guaranteed rights, such as freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of religion, and the right to organize and take part in peaceful protests.</li> <li>• In most democracies, individuals are valued equally [...].</li> <li>• Fundamental freedoms and equality rights are protected by National Constitutions.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens have the right to vote in elections to choose their political representatives, as well as equal opportunity to run for political office.</li> <li>• Obstacles to voting and threats to citizens exercising this right - including the right to peacefully contest elections - are nonexistent, both before and after electoral periods.</li> <li>• Elections to choose government officials occur every four to five years.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRANSPARENCY</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elected representatives are accountable for their actions, performing their duties according to the interests and wishes of the people, not for their own.</li> <li>• The press holds government accountable and aims to keep citizens informed.</li> <li>• Elected representatives participate in open forums like 'Question Periods' or 'Townhalls' to answer their actions and respond to questions from both supporters and opposition parties.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>THE RULE OF LAW</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laws are enforced equally, fairly and consistently, meaning everyone, including government officials, the police and members of the military, must obey the law.</li> <li>• Governments cannot punish people unless they have broken the law without reasonable justification of a life or death or safety reason.</li> <li>• All citizens have a responsibility to respect the laws of the land, even if they disagree with them.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>CITIZEN PARTICIPATION</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizen participation in government is more than just a right—it is a civic duty.</li> <li>• Participation includes voting in elections, being an informed citizen, debating issues, attending community meetings, paying taxes, serving on juries and protesting democratic violations.</li> <li>• Citizen participation is designed to build a stronger democracy, not self-interested divisions.</li> </ul>

Source:

<https://studentvote.ca/canada/wp-content/uploads/2019/-The-Principles-of-Democracy.pdf>

## 1.2 Theories of Democracy: Functions, Origins, and Incentives

Within the literature on democratic stability, three major schools of thought have been especially influential: functional, origin and incentive theories of democracy. Twentieth-century theories of democracy initially concentrated on a functional question: *What makes democracy endure?* Only later did scholars turn more systematically to the more complex issue of democratic origins: *how democracy emerges in the first place*. The third theme in the discourse, i.e., the *incentive theory* of democracy is a framework that explains democratization as the outcome of strategic calculations by political elites rather than attributing its origin solely to social mobilization or historical processes.

### 1.2.1 Functional theories of democracy

Functional theories of democracy explain the stability and quality of democracy based on the functions and characteristics of social, economic, and political systems. They link democracy to structural and societal conditions that make democratic governance viable. There are various strands of functional theories of democracy. The first links democratic endurance to *favorable socioeconomic conditions*. In his seminal 1959 article, Lipset<sup>4</sup> argued that high levels of economic development, measured by per capita income, literacy, industrialization, and urbanization, create the structural foundations for democracy. Economic growth expands the middle class, diffuses education, and moderates class conflict, thereby fostering tolerance, compromise, and institutional trust. From this modernization perspective, democracy is more likely to survive where social and economic conditions sustain it.

The second strand, often described as cultural or consensus theory, emphasizes *shared beliefs and value orientations* among citizens. Democracy, in this view, rests on a common commitment to constitutional principles and procedural norms, a framework captured in the concept of “civic culture.” Ernest Barker<sup>5</sup> famously described democracy as an “agreement to differ,” underscoring tolerance, mutual restraint, and respect for pluralism as essential democratic virtues. Stability arises not simply from institutions, but from a political culture that legitimizes dissent while maintaining allegiance to shared rules of the game.

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<sup>4</sup> Seymour Lipset (1959). ‘Some social requisites of democracy: Economic development and political legitimacy’. *The American Political Science Review*.

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Barker (1942). *Reflections on Government*. Oxford University Press.

A third approach highlights the role of *institutional arrangements* that structure and manage conflict. Arend Lijphart (1969)<sup>6</sup> argued that democracy survives not by eliminating social divisions, but by accommodating them through inclusive, power-sharing mechanisms. In deeply divided societies, arrangements such as proportional representation, coalition governments, and minority vetoes can institutionalize compromise and reconciliation. Democracy, from this perspective, endures because it provides structured channels for negotiating conflict.

Other scholars have stressed the role of elite commitment. Dahl (1956)<sup>7</sup> maintained that democratic stability requires strong adherence to democratic norms and procedures, not only among citizens but also among political leaders. Without elite restraint and acceptance of competition, democratic rules are unlikely to hold.

Building on this insight, Harry Eckstein (1988)<sup>8</sup> advanced the theory of “congruence,” arguing that democracy is most stable when authority patterns across society reflect democratic norms. When families, religious institutions, businesses, and trade unions operate through participatory and accountable forms of authority, these practices reinforce democratic governance at the state level. In this account, democracy thrives when the broader social fabric mirrors and sustains the principles embedded in political institutions.

Taken together, these theories underscore that democratic stability is multidimensional. It depends variously on socioeconomic development, shared cultural commitments, institutional design, elite behavior, and the alignment of authority structures across society. Democracy, therefore, is not sustained by a single factor but by the interaction of structural conditions, normative orientations, and political incentives.

### **1.2.2 Origins of democracy – a genetic theory**

Genetic (Origin) theories of democracy, also called historical or developmental theories, explain democratization by examining how democracy emerges from the historical evolution of states and societies. Unlike functional theories (which focus on socioeconomic conditions) or incentive theories (which focus on elite calculations), genetic theories emphasize sequential processes and contingent historical events that create

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<sup>6</sup> Arend Lijphart (1969). “Consociational Democracy.” *World Politics* 21, no. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Dahl (1956). *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (1956), Chicago University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Eckstein (1988). ‘A Culturalist Theory of Political Change’. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 82, No. 3, pp. 789-804

the conditions for democracy. The first comprehensive theory of democratic origins was advanced by Dankwart A. Rustow in his seminal 1970 article, “*Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model*.”<sup>9</sup> Often described as a genetic model of democracy, Rustow’s framework shifts analytical attention away from socio-economic factors toward the historical processes through which it emerges. Rather than identifying structural prerequisites, he traces the sequence of political developments that have produced democratic outcomes across diverse national contexts. Rustow conceptualizes democratization as unfolding through four phases: (i) a single background condition; (ii) a preparatory phase; (iii) a decision phase, and (iv) a habituation phase.

*National unity as the background condition for democracy*

As Rustow explains, the sole background condition for democracy is national unity, which must precede all other phases. He explains, democracy requires that “the vast majority of citizens... have no doubt or mental reservations as to which political community they belong to”.<sup>10</sup> (p. 350). National unity, therefore, is not merely desirable; it is foundational. Importantly, Rustow treats unity as a background condition in the strict sense: it must exist prior to democratization, but its historical timing may vary. Some societies undergo prolonged nation-building; others achieve cohesion more rapidly. What matters is that unity crystallizes into a shared *Gemeinschaft*, a sense of collective belonging in which citizens perceive themselves as being “in the same lifeboat.”

This insistence on a single background condition carries major theoretical implications. Rejecting modernization theory, Rustow argues that no minimum level of economic development or social differentiation is required for democracy. Economic and social variables matter only indirectly, either as foundations for unity or as sources of entrenched conflict that obstruct it. His model is therefore neither time-bound nor region-specific. In principle, democracy can emerge anywhere, provided national unity exists.

*The preparatory phase: Conflict as catalyst*

Once unity is established, democratization begins with the preparatory phase, defined as a prolonged and inconclusive political struggle. Democracy does not originate in abstract commitments to democratic ideals or elite benevolence; rather, it emerges from sustained conflict. The

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<sup>9</sup> Dankwart A. Rustow (1970). “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model”. *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3, pp. 337– 363

<sup>10</sup> Id., 350.

contending forces must be socially entrenched and politically consequential, often rooted in class divisions or comparable collective actors, and the issues at stake must be deeply significant. Frequently, a new elite mobilizes previously marginalized or leaderless groups into coordinated political action.<sup>11</sup>

The form of struggle varies across contexts. In Sweden and Turkey, for instance, economic conflicts were central. In India and the Philippines, nationalist movements confronted imperial bureaucracies over self-government. In Lebanon, denominational divisions structured political rivalry. In each case, democracy emerged not from harmony but from intense contestation within an overarching framework of unity.

A key insight of Rustow's model is that democracy is rarely the original objective of such struggles. More often, it is pursued instrumentally or emerges as an unintended by-product of conflict. Consequently, democratization follows distinct national trajectories shaped by the character of social struggles and their institutional resolution. Therefore, Rustow cautions against wholesale institutional transplantation. Democracy is most likely to take root when societies confront their own conflicts directly and devise context-appropriate mechanisms for accommodation: "A country is likely to attain democracy not by copying the constitutional laws or parliamentary practices of some previous democracy, but rather by honestly facing up to its particular conflicts and by devising or adapting effective procedures for their accommodation".<sup>12</sup> During the preparatory phase, polarization, not pluralistic consensus, is the defining feature. Yet polarization is productive only if national unity is intact. Without a shared political community, prolonged conflict risks fragmentation rather than a democratic breakthrough. As Rustow famously put it, democracy requires "not a lukewarm struggle but a hot family feud".<sup>13</sup>

#### *The decision phase: Institutionalizing compromise*

The third stage in Rustow's origin of democracy is the decision phase, when political leaders deliberately institutionalize democratic procedures and accept diversity within unity. Compromise arises not from moral conversion but from strategic calculation. Incumbents may fear catastrophic losses; opposition forces may accept partial gains; mutual exhaustion may compel negotiation. What matters is not abstract devotion

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<sup>11</sup> Id., 352.

<sup>12</sup> Id., 354.

<sup>13</sup> Id., 355.

to democratic values, but concrete institutional commitments: legal reforms, electoral rules, and power-sharing arrangements that formalize competition and dissent.<sup>14</sup>

*The habituation phase: Learning democracy*

The final stage, habituation, occurs as democratic practices become normalized through repetition. Initially controversial or risky decisions grow more acceptable as actors learn to operate within democratic rules. Over time, democracy rewards those who rationalize (and eventually internalize) their commitment to it. Habituation is reinforced by generational turnover. Leaders who made painful compromises are replaced by actors for whom democratic norms are routine. This creates a form of Darwinian selectivity favoring committed democrats –through electoral competition among parties and leadership contests within them.<sup>15</sup>

Crucially, democracy is not merely a mechanism for choosing rulers; it is a structured process for managing conflict under conditions of uncertainty. Through multilateral debate, institutionalized compromise, and trial and error, democracy fosters collective learning. Successful settlements encourage actors to submit further disputes to democratic resolution.<sup>16</sup> Rustow's genetic model portrays democratization as a dynamic progression: from national unity, through conflict and compromise, to habituation. It explicitly rejects fixed socioeconomic or cultural prerequisites. Economic growth may intensify conflicts that trigger democratization; education may consolidate it. But they are not preconditions for democracy to begin. Democracy is inherently open-ended. New conflicts will always arise, and democratic legitimacy rests not on enforced unanimity but on the management of disagreement. As Rustow concludes, democracy "is that form of government that derives its just powers from the dissent of up to one-half of the governed".<sup>17</sup>

Rustow's theory of democracy remains highly relevant, especially for understanding democratic transitions in divided, conflict-prone, or late-developing societies, even though it does not explain everything about democracy today. It explains how democracy emerges, not just why it works. Most earlier theories (e.g., Lipset) focused on the conditions under which democracy survives. Rustow's contribution was to shift the question

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<sup>14</sup> Id., 355- 356

<sup>15</sup> Id., 358.

<sup>16</sup> Id., 360.

<sup>17</sup> Id., 363.

to how democracy comes into being in the first place. This remains crucial for post-authoritarian societies, post-conflict states, divided societies (ethnic, religious, regional) or regions like the Horn of Africa. In these contexts, democracy can emerge without prosperity, consensus, or civic culture, as Rustow predicted. Rustow's insistence that a minimum sense of political community must precede democracy remains one of his most enduring insights. Without agreement on *who "the people" are*, democratic competition risks becoming existential rather than political. According to Rustow, a pre-existing agreement on the legitimacy of a political community is needed before the democratization process sets in. Lest democratization generates existential conflicts including nature and definition of the political community itself.

Rustow's "decision phase" also highlights that democracy often emerges not because leaders are democrats, but because they fear continued conflict, face stalemate or exhaustion and seek to preserve core interests through compromise. This realism makes the model especially useful for analyzing elite-driven transitions. Rustow's idea that democratic commitment is learned through practice, not assumed beforehand, aligns well with contemporary understandings of democratic consolidation, generational change, and institutional learning through elections, bargaining, and contestation. Democracy, in Rustow's view, is a process of mutual learning, not a moral conversion.

### **1.2.3 From *origins* to *incentives***

Normative recommendations for democracy, particularly those advocating power-sharing or consociational arrangements, are insufficient when existing power structures lack incentives to implement them. Where sharp asymmetries exist between state elites and societal forces, calls for reform often carry little weight. The central challenge, therefore, is not merely institutional design but political motivation: why would a powerful state willingly constrain itself? Democracy, by definition, limits centralized authority through power-sharing, minority protection, and negotiated compromise. Yet a dominant ruling elite has little reason to adopt such constraints unless compelled by countervailing forces or strategic necessity.

In Rustow's genetic model, democratization assumes a rough balance of power between state and societal actors within a framework of national unity. Democracy emerges from sustained contestation in which the state is compelled to negotiate and gradually learns to institutionalize limits on its authority. Over time, this iterative process of struggle, compromise, and

habituation produces democratic outcomes. In this account, democracy originates in conflict under conditions where no actor can permanently dominate the other. But the question remains: what if such balance does not exist? What if the state remains overwhelmingly powerful? Here, a different explanatory framework becomes relevant: elite *incentives* theory.

As developed by Dan Slater and Joseph Wong<sup>18</sup>, democratization can occur not from weakness alone but from strength. Authoritarian ruling parties may initiate democratic reforms preemptively, while still politically dominant and resource-rich, to manage gradual decline and secure their long-term survival. Rather than waiting for collapse, they “concede to thrive.” Their comparative work on East and Southeast Asia shows that economic development can paradoxically generate democratic openings. Sustained growth creates new middle classes, expands education, and diversifies social interests. Ruling elites may calculate that, given their record of economic performance and organizational capacity, they can compete successfully under electoral rules. In such cases, democratization becomes a strategic adaptation rather than a capitulation. This incentive-based perspective reframes democratization as a product not only of contestation but also of calculation.

Key elements of the incentive theory of democracy include:

- *Conceding to thrive*: Authoritarian elites democratize from a position of relative strength to institutionalize advantages and prevent revolutionary rupture.
- *Development as catalyst*: Economic growth reshapes social structures and increases demands for participation, altering elite cost-benefit calculations.
- *Strategic legitimation*: Leaders adopt democratic reforms to renew legitimacy, manage succession, or attract international support.
- *Learning to lose*: Over time, repeated electoral competition socializes ruling parties into accepting uncertainty and alternation in power.

In this framework, democratization is neither purely structural nor purely normative; it is strategic. Elites may take the risk of democratization when they believe they can win under its rules, particularly after sustained delivery of public goods under authoritarian governance.

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<sup>18</sup> Dan Slater and Joseph Wong (2022). *From Development to Democracy: The Transformations of Modern Asia*. Princeton University Press.

### 1.3 Institutional Forms of Democracy

By and large, democracy assumes two principal institutional forms: *majoritarian* and *consociational*. Majoritarian democracy is most commonly associated with the First Past the Post (FPTP) or winner-takes-all electoral system. This model was first developed in seventeenth-century England, and it later spread to the American colonies, giving rise to what is often termed the Anglo-American democratic tradition. In mainstream Western political thought, particularly in the writings of John Stuart Mill, democracy came to mean “majority rule with respect for minority rights.” For Mill, democracy rests on two interrelated principles: who rules and how rule is exercised. The majority governs, but it must do so with due regard for the rights and interests of those outvoted.

Majority rule, therefore, is not unrestrained dominance; it is a decision-making procedure embedded within constitutional and moral limits<sup>19</sup>. The normative foundation of majority rule was further reinforced by Thomas Jefferson’s assertion that “all men are created equal,” a principle that underpins the democratic maxim of “one person, one vote.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Abraham Lincoln conceived democracy as a government grounded in public opinion, reflecting the inherent political equality of citizens. If three votes outweigh two, it is because democratic legitimacy derives from equal participation in collective decision-making<sup>21</sup>.

Yet, majority rule contains an inherent tension. Without safeguards, it risks devolving into majoritarian tyranny, where numerical superiority overrides minority protections. For this reason, majority rule must be inseparable from legal and political guarantees of minority rights. The meaningful control of government by the governed also depends on the dispersion of power beyond the state – across political parties, interest groups, civil society organizations, and independent institutions. Taken together, majoritarian democracy can endure only within a constitutional framework that limits authority and protects pluralism. Its survival ultimately depends not merely on electoral arithmetic but on a deeply rooted democratic political culture that values restraint, tolerance, and the rule of law.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Duff Spafford (1985). “Mill’s Majority Principle.” *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 599–608

<sup>20</sup> <https://time.com/5783989/thomas-jefferson-all-men-created-equal/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/lincoln-and-democracy>

<sup>22</sup> W B Vosloo (2023). *The Majority Principle in Democratic Ideology*. August 2023, Wollongong, Australia.

Consociationalism, by contrast, is a model of democracy that minimizes simple majority domination and seeks, as far as possible, to ground political decisions in broad-based consensus. Rather than allowing 50 percent plus one to govern unilaterally, it aims to ensure that all significant segments of society participate meaningfully in decision-making. The intellectual origins of consociational thought date to the 1960s, and the model is most closely associated with Arend Lijphart,<sup>23</sup> who argued that majority rule functions effectively only under two conditions. First, minorities must have a realistic opportunity to become future majorities through shifting coalitions or electoral realignment. Second, society must be relatively homogeneous, or at least not deeply fragmented along rigid and enduring cleavages.

Where these conditions are absent, particularly in societies divided by entrenched ethnic, religious, linguistic, or ideological differences, majority rule may aggravate tensions rather than facilitate alternation in power. In sharply divided societies, minorities often lack any credible prospect of converting themselves into governing majorities. Electoral defeat can therefore mean long-term exclusion from power, while consensus-based arrangements are seen as more likely to generate stability and inclusion. For this reason, consociational democracy is frequently recommended in contexts where Rustow's "single background condition" of national unity is weak or incomplete. Instead of presuming social cohesion, it institutionalizes accommodation across divisions.

The classic design in consociational democracy rests on four core pillars:

- *Grand coalitions*: executive power-sharing among leaders of all major societal segments.
- *Mutual veto*: minority veto rights to protect vital group interests.
- *Proportionality*: proportional representation in elections, public offices, and allocation of state resources.
- *Segmental (or communal) autonomy*: delegation of decision-making authority to distinct social groups in matters affecting their internal affairs.

Through these mechanisms, consociationalism seeks to transform deep societal cleavages from the sources of destabilizing conflict into structured channels of negotiation and cooperation, thereby fostering a more inclusive, if more complex, democratic order.

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<sup>23</sup> Arend Lijphart, *supra* note 6.

While consociational scholars contend that majority rule is ill-suited to deeply divided societies, this model faces serious structural challenges. Donald Horowitz identifies three core problems: adoption, degradation, and immobilization. Because institutional preferences are asymmetric - “majorities want majority rule; minorities want guarantees”<sup>24</sup> - power-sharing arrangements are rarely adopted voluntarily and often emerge only after a crisis, remaining fragile once power balances shift. Even when established, cooperative mechanisms may erode through the manipulation of electoral rules or the weakening of coalition norms. Veto provisions intended to prevent domination can also produce chronic deadlock, fuel frustration and demands for revision.

Critics further argue that consociationalism entrenches group identities by institutionalizing ethnic categories, and successful exits from such systems (as in the Netherlands or Austria) have depended on cleavages that later declined –conditions uncommon in more deeply divided societies. Still, in post-conflict contexts such as Kenya after 2007, selective power-sharing has stabilized fragile transitions, suggesting that consociationalism may serve less as an ideal model than as a pragmatic alternative to destabilizing majoritarianism.

At the same time, consociationalism has demonstrated practical utility in specific contexts, particularly in post-conflict environments. Power-sharing arrangements have often functioned as mechanisms for ending civil wars or stabilizing fragile transitions. For these reasons, some scholars advocate a selective or context-sensitive adoption of consociational elements. Proportional representation, limited veto provisions, or inclusive executive coalitions may be tailored to country-specific conditions. Ultimately, the limitations of consociational democracy are best understood relationally. In deeply divided societies, pure majoritarianism may intensify exclusion and exacerbate conflict. Consociationalism may therefore represent not an ideal solution, but a pragmatic “lesser evil” framework that prioritizes negotiated accommodation over zero-sum competition where the latter would likely deepen societal fragmentation rather than foster compromise<sup>25</sup>.

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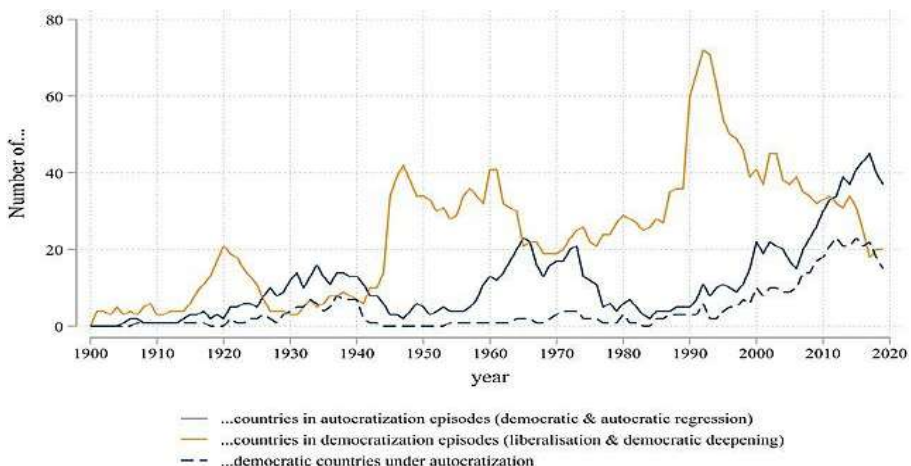
<sup>24</sup> Donald L. Horowitz (2007). “Approaches to Inter-Ethnic Accommodation”, in Abdul Rahman Embong, ed., *Rethinking Ethnicity and Nation Building: Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Fiji in Comparative Perspective* (Chapter 1, 20-37) p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Nenad Stojanović (2020). “Democracy, Ethnoicracy and Consociational Democracy.” *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique*, vol. 41, no. 1, 30–43.

## 1.4 Democracy - From Hegemony to Recession?

The history of democracy has evolved from direct citizen participation in ancient Athens (5th century B.C.E.) to the foundational rights of the Magna Carta (1215) and modern representative systems (18th Century – Present). Democracy as a hegemonic form of political order has a relatively short and episodic history, unfolding in discernible waves. The first wave, often called *Jacksonian democracy*, emerged in the early 19th century in the United States, marked by the gradual extension of suffrage to the white male majority, and lasted until approximately 1926.

The second wave followed the Allied victory in World War II, during which democracy spread to 29 countries, reflecting both geopolitical shifts and the postwar international order. The third wave of democracy began with the 1974 Carnation Revolution in Portugal and the late-1970s transition to democracy in Spain. At the outset of this wave, only about 30 percent of the world's independent states met the criteria for electoral democracy. Over the subsequent three decades (roughly 1975–2007), democracy expanded dramatically on a global scale<sup>26</sup>. This expansion was accompanied by a parallel and sustained increase in political rights and civil liberties, as illustrated in Figure 1.<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 1.** Number of countries experiencing authorization and democratization since 1900.

Source: Vanessa A. Boese, Staffan I. Lindberg & Anna Lührmann (2021). "Waves of autocratization and democratization: a rejoinder". *Democratization*, p.5

<sup>26</sup> <https://polsci.institute//political-theory/origins-of-democracy-ancient-greece-modern-times/>

<sup>27</sup> Vanessa A. Boese, Staffan I. Lindberg & Anna Lührmann (2021). "Waves of autocratization and democratization: a rejoinder". *Democratization*. Vol. 28, Issue 6

These waves highlight that the spread of democracy has been neither linear nor inevitable. Each wave reflects specific historical, social, and geopolitical circumstances, suggesting that democracy's global dominance is contingent and subject to reversal, raising questions about potential democratic recession in the contemporary era.

Jay Steinmetz offers three justifications for why democracy is considered a preferred mode of governance.<sup>28</sup> First, it is aggregative, providing an effective mechanism for aggregating diverse political preferences. Second, it is deliberative, valuing self-rule by creating a space for discussion, compromise, and consensus. Third, it is radical, granting individuals the power to hold government accountable and ensure it responds to citizens' needs. These features have underpinned the globalization of democracy and the spread of majority-rule systems, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition.

Yet democratic expansion has faced criticism, especially in non-Western societies where the structural and cultural conditions that Rustow identified as essential may be absent. Among the most forceful critiques of liberal democracy anchored in *one person, one vote* and majority rule comes from Tongdong Bai, a contemporary Chinese political philosopher who critiques modern liberal democracy, specifically the “one person, one vote” system, arguing it leads to short-sighted, demagogue-prone, and unsustainable governance. Instead, he advocates for a hybrid, Confucian-inspired meritocracy; a “humanistic” regime that blends democratic local elections with a meritocratic upper house composed of qualified leaders<sup>29</sup>. Daniel Bell has further refined this concept into what he calls the “China model,”<sup>30</sup> highlighting meritocratic governance as an alternative to conventional liberal democracy. Bai's skepticism about the rationality of mass voters, however, is not novel; it echoes the critique advanced by Plato in *The Republic*, where he warned that unbridled democracy risks fostering ignorance, hysteria, and ultimately, tyranny.

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<sup>28</sup> Jay Steinmetz (2019). “Theories of Democracy” in *Politics, Power and Purpose: An Orientation to Political Science* (Chapter 5) Available at: <https://fhsu.pressbooks.pub/orientationpolisci/chapter/chapter-5/>

<sup>29</sup> Tongdong Bai (2008). “A mencian version of limited democracy”. *Res Publica* 14 (1):19-34. <https://philpapers.org/rec/BAIAMV>

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Bell (2015). *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

The literature on political meritocracy, particularly the Chinese-style model, argues that the rise of populist leaders and right-wing parties through democratic elections can introduce undemocratic risks into the electoral process. Yet, political meritocracy need not be understood as a replacement for, or a dilution of, democratic freedoms. Rather, it can enrich the democratic project, especially a conception of “democracy for the people,” even if not strictly “by the people.” It is important, however, not to construct a binary opposition between political meritocracy and Western-style liberal democracy.

Meritocratic elements are already embedded in modern democratic systems, particularly within bureaucracies and administrative structures. In a well-functioning democracy, political freedom enables popular consent in government formation, while meritocracy ensures competent and professional administration. At its best, democracy can integrate both freedom and meritocracy: political freedom shapes policymaking and collective choice, while meritocratic governance underpins implementation and effective delivery. Recognizing this complementarity allows for a more nuanced understanding of democratic legitimacy, one that balances the intrinsic value of liberties with the practical capacity of the state to serve its citizens.

Disillusionment with electoral democracy, stemming from the persistent delivery gap and its exploitation by autocrats, has led some scholars to advocate for “benevolent” dictatorship as an alternative. This model envisions “a government in which an authoritarian leader exercises absolute political power over the state but is perceived to do so with the population’s welfare in mind,” contrasting sharply with the traditional image of a self-interested, malevolent dictator<sup>31</sup>.

In her 2009 book *Dead Aid*<sup>32</sup>, prominent Zambian-born economist Dambisa Moyo argued that “what poor countries at the lowest rungs of economic development need is not a multi-party democracy, but a decisive benevolent dictator to push through the reforms required to get the economy moving.” She further contended that “democracy can hamper development, as democratic regimes struggle to enact economically beneficial legislation amid rival parties and competing interests.” This perspective shifts attention from democracy as a purely procedural exercise, focused on elections and political liberties, to a substantive

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<sup>31</sup> <http://encyclopedia.uia.org/en/problem/240584>

<sup>32</sup> Dambisa Moyo (2009). *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

understanding of democracy, emphasizing outcomes and the delivery of public goods. When states effectively meet citizens' basic needs, they generate legitimacy, even in regimes that may not be fully democratic in the procedural sense, as evidenced by high popular approval.

Benevolent dictators may permit certain civil liberties or limited democratic mechanisms, such as public referendums or elected representatives with constrained powers, and may even prepare for a transition to full democracy during or after their tenure. This leadership style is typically marked by a strong commitment to economic development, political stability, social progress, and effective governance, often reinforced through anti-corruption measures. Accordingly, some academics and policy experts have promoted benevolent dictatorship as a pragmatic alternative to liberal democracy, particularly in parts of the Global South where foundational conditions for democracy, such as economic development, political stability, and social cohesion, are weak or fragmented.

President Paul Kagame is often cited as a paradigmatic example of a benevolent dictator who helped transform post-genocide Rwanda into a stable and effective state. Under Kagame, Rwanda experienced political stability, remarkable economic growth, significant investments in education and infrastructure, and gender equality. These achievements, reinforced by official narratives of success across political and social spheres, have contributed to high popular support for Kagame and the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front, who are widely regarded by many Rwandans as legitimate<sup>33</sup>.

However, this governance model has come at the cost of political freedoms, as dissent is not tolerated. Benevolent dictatorships can deliver rapid development, but often at the expense of individual rights and human liberties. By contrast, democracy, though slower and messier, offers accountability, safeguards human rights, and ensures the inclusion of diverse voices in decision-making. Evaluating the relative merits of each system depends on societal values, priorities, and context, thereby raising fundamental questions about what citizens want and which form of government best serves their needs.

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<sup>33</sup> Rwanda's Paul Kagame - is he just another dictator? <https://www.ft.com/content/678b2d31-cbe2-447a-8774-639087dfb863>

One of the central problems with the idea of a “benevolent” dictatorship is the *selection problem*: there is no reliable way to know in advance whether a ruler will truly govern in the public interest. At best, this judgment can only be made in hindsight. Many leaders have claimed to act for the good of society. Yet, in practice, such claims have often proven hollow. Supporters of benevolent dictatorship tend to focus on the few cases that appear successful, overlooking the many more that produced repression, corruption, or state failure. Even in the cases often cited as successes, outcomes were shaped by favorable structural conditions rather than leadership alone. For example, several East Asian economies benefited from strong external support during the Cold War, including preferential access to markets in the United States as part of broader efforts to contain communism. Economic growth in these contexts cannot thus be attributed solely to authoritarian leadership.

Another key factor is *national cohesion*. In societies with deep social or ethnic divisions, dictatorships often struggle to maintain legitimacy because the ruler is likely to be perceived as advancing the interests of their own group. This helps explain why relatively few countries without long traditions of statehood or national unity have produced what might be considered “benevolent” authoritarian rule. The case of Rwanda under Paul Kagame illustrates these complexities. Kagame is widely credited with restoring political stability and delivering significant economic progress after the Rwandan Genocide. At the same time, Rwanda’s long-term trajectory remains uncertain. A key question is whether the current system can manage a credible political transition in the future. Without such a transition, the stability achieved so far could prove difficult to sustain.

The global decline of democracy since the “third wave” has prompted concerns about a “democratic recession” and “democracy in crisis.” Even mature Western democracies have faced challenges, as populist and right-wing movements gained power through elections, exemplified by the Trump presidency in the United States, which Bai attributes to “irrational voters.” Such developments have prompted some to question democracy’s viability and search for alternative governance models. Democracy scholars, however, argue that these crises reflect democracy’s resilience rather than its failure.

Helene Landemore contends that perceived “crises” signal democracy’s vitality.<sup>34</sup> She argues that Brexit and Trumpism are not rejections of democracy itself, but of elitist political systems that fail to deliver their promises. The problem lies in an overly elitist democratic paradigm incapable of fulfilling citizens’ expectations. Landemore proposes reforms to reinvigorate democracy through direct participation, grounded in five institutional principles: participatory rights, deliberation, majority rule, democratic representation, and transparency. Central to this vision is the creation of “open mini-publics”, large, randomly selected citizen bodies tasked with agenda-setting, lawmaking, or deliberating on specific issues, connected to the broader public through various mechanisms.

Africa’s first wave of democratization in the 1960s sparked debate over whether Anglo-American majoritarianism suited deeply divided postcolonial societies. W. Arthur Lewis warned that winner-takes-all systems would marginalize minorities and fuel instability, advocating instead a power-sharing model later theorized by Arend Lijphart as consociationalism. In contrast, leaders such as Julius Nyerere defended one-party rule as compatible with African traditions of consensus, though in practice, such systems often entrenched authoritarian control.

The second wave in the 1990s embraced electoral democracy largely in majoritarian form, emphasizing access to power rather than constraints on its exercise. In the Horn of Africa, first-past-the-post systems were introduced in deeply divided societies marked by ethnic cleavages and strong state dominance. Ruling parties in Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Sudan, and Djibouti repeatedly secured overwhelming victories, yet majoritarian democracy delivered limited inclusion. These outcomes underscore a persistent tension: democratization in Africa and the Horn has often prioritized electoral form over the deeper challenges of state-building and power distribution inherited from colonial rule.

Consequently, much public debate in Africa revolves around what Adem Kasse calls “pre-democracy issues,” including national identity, symbols, and administrative structure. By contrast, in Western democracies, the type of democracy reflects historical experience and social struggle, as described by Dankwart Rustow. Electoral competition in the UK, US, and continental Europe varies considerably: the Anglo-American “winner-takes-all” model gives significant stakes to winning or losing, whereas in much of continental Europe, elections redistribute

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<sup>34</sup> Hélène Landemore (2020). *Open Democracy: Reinventing Popular Rule for the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton University Press) <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10crczs>

power more proportionally. African countries, however, have largely adopted the Anglo-American system, often in contexts ill-suited to it. As Adem Kasse further observes:

Winner-takes-all frameworks might work in liberal democracies, but not in non-democracies with a mere electoral façade. Whoever is in power takes everything, but they are not democratic. It is important to create a system where power does not become extremely concentrated in whoever wins. Consociational democracy might be a better fit, but country contexts must be taken seriously. Elections should not become winner-takes-all, as this is likely to generate conflict.<sup>35</sup>

The message for the Horn and beyond is clear: even under free and fair elections, winner-takes-all systems exacerbate stakes and destabilize democracy. European experience shows that democracy emerged after *rule of law* and *autonomous administration* were established; political competition focused on policy and oversight, not capturing the bureaucracy. In much of Africa, by contrast, competition encompasses control over administrative structures, procurement, and state-mediated resources. Thus, elections often become contests for material control rather than ideological or policy debates. Reforms are needed to translate elections as enablers of inclusive systems, rather than to determine “winners” and “losers”: all significant political forces should receive representation and access to resources proportional to their electoral performance. Executive and cabinet appointments should be inclusive, while the bureaucracy must remain relatively autonomous and the state decentralized. Only by reshaping the translation of electoral victories into political power can African democracies achieve stability and equitable governance.

## **1.5 Theorizing Democratization in the Horn of Africa**

Democratization theory rests on two principal pathways. First, as articulated by Rustow, democracy emerges through sustained contestation between those controlling the state and societal forces within a context of national unity. Through negotiation and conflict, the ruling elite is gradually compelled to constrain its power and institutionalize political rights. Second, as Dan Slater and Joseph Wong argue, democracy may emerge through incentive structures: regimes concede political

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Dr. Adem Kassie, Senior Adviser, IDEA - Constitution-Building Processes, Interview on December 18, 2023.

liberalization when it becomes strategically advantageous. In several East Asian cases, authoritarian governments initially liberalized under external pressure but eventually “learned to lose” once they calculated that they could compete electorally, often after fostering a supportive middle class. Both pathways are structurally obstructed in the Horn of Africa. The crisis of nationhood, entrenched power asymmetries, geopolitical competition, and chronic economic fragility undermine the conditions necessary for either contestation-driven or incentive-driven democratization.

#### *Contested Nationhood and Ethnic Dominance in The Horn*

Rustow’s model presupposes a minimal level of national unity within which contestation can occur. As the subsequent case study chapters illustrate, state legitimacy in the Horn is frequently contested along ethnic or clan lines. In countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan, and Somalia, political authority is deeply intertwined with ethnic dominance or clan-based structures. In Ethiopia and Sudan, attempts at core-group nation-building provoked ethnic backlash, intensifying conflict rather than fostering inclusive political competition. While less pronounced, ethnicity – or clan identity (in some contexts such as Somalia) – functions as the primary organizing principle of political life in virtually all the countries in the Horn. These dynamics undermine the contestation pathway because political struggle is framed not as institutional competition within a shared polity, but as existential conflict over state ownership. Where the nation itself is contested, democratic bargaining becomes difficult, and violent confrontation often replaces institutional negotiation.

#### *Imbalance of Power and the Nature of Contestation*

Democratization through contestation requires a relative balance of power between state and societal forces. In the Horn, however, deep-seated autocratic traditions have produced enduring power asymmetries that favor authoritarian durability. As Semir Yusuf argues<sup>36</sup>, democratization depends not only on the balance of power but also on the nature of contestation, whether it is peaceful or violent. Where the state overwhelmingly dominates society, and contestation turns coercive, a democratic transition becomes unlikely. Ethiopia illustrates this dynamic. The state’s coercive and administrative strength was historically consolidated with limited societal resistance, creating path-dependent

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<sup>36</sup> Semir Yusuf (2022). “Ethiopia’s democratic predicaments: state–society dynamics and the balance of power”. *Institute for Security Studies* (Monograph 209, Nov 2022). <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/mono209-2.pdf>

authoritarian institutions. Once established, these institutions reproduced themselves, normalizing autocratic governance and raising the costs of democratic change. Even when reformist intentions emerge at the center, entrenched local actors often preserve authoritarian practices.

Armed resistance has not resolved this dilemma. Although insurgent movements have sometimes overthrown regimes, they frequently inherit and replicate the coercive state apparatus. Armed struggle tends to erode civil society, weaken the middle class, and eliminate alternative political actors, precisely the social infrastructure necessary for democratic competition. Thus, violent contestation often reproduces authoritarianism rather than dismantling it. As Christopher Clapham observed, rebels in Ethiopia did not dismantle the authoritarian state; they assumed control of it. Violent contestation thus tends to erode civil society and eliminate alternative political actors, reproducing rather than resolving authoritarian rule.

#### *Geopolitical Competition and External Meddling*

The Horn's strategic location, along the Red Sea corridor and adjacent to key maritime trade routes, intensifies authoritarian durability. Global and regional powers, including China, Russia, Turkey and states from the Middle East such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, compete for military access, political influence, and economic footholds. Through infrastructure financing, arms transfers, security cooperation, and direct budgetary support, these external actors often seek to strengthen incumbent regimes. This external backing lowers the political cost of repression and reduces rulers' dependence on domestic constituencies. Regimes that can rely on foreign security assistance or financial inflows are less compelled to negotiate with opposition forces or broaden political participation.

Unlike contexts where oil revenues internally sustain authoritarianism, in the Horn, except Sudan before 2011 and South Sudan (post-2011), it is geopolitical competition itself that performs this function. Where external rents substitute domestic legitimacy, geopolitical patronage undermines both democratization pathways. It weakens the contestation mechanism by insulating regimes from internal pressure, and it diminishes incentive-based democratization by reducing the strategic need for rulers to risk electoral competition. Authoritarian durability in the Horn is therefore not only domestically produced but internationally reinforced.

*Economic crisis and the absence of incentive-based democratization*

The incentive pathway assumes that regimes may liberalize when economic development generates new social coalitions or when rulers calculate that democratization will not threaten their survival and fortunes. In the Horn, persistent economic crises complicate this process. Economic fragility fuels unrest but does not produce the stable middle-class constituencies that, in East Asia, made electoral competition less threatening to incumbent elites. The Horn has also failed to produce durable “developmental autocracies” capable of sustaining growth and later transitioning to democracy. Some leaders (such as Meles Zenawi of Ethiopia, Isayas Afewerki of Eritrea and Museveni of Uganda) initially projected developmental ambitions, and were initially hailed as “new breeds of African leaders”. Yet, these efforts deteriorated into corruption and/or evolved into entrenched authoritarianism. Moreover, many regimes originated as rebel movements and struggled to transition from “movement governments” to institutionalized democratic rule. Without sustained economic performance or institutionalized party systems, rulers lack credible incentives to risk competitive elections. Instead, economic vulnerability reinforces authoritarian survival strategies.

*The Horn: Navigating between autocracy and democracy*

Democratization in the Horn is impeded by the simultaneous failure of both contestation and incentive mechanisms. Deeply contested nationhood prevents institutionalized bargaining; entrenched power asymmetries favor authoritarian durability; geopolitical competition shields regimes from domestic accountability; and economic fragility undermines incentive-based liberalization. Together, these structural dynamics create a political environment in which democratic transitions remain exceptionally difficult.

Notwithstanding the structural impediments to democratization, public opinion surveys in the Horn indicate a stronger popular preference to a democratic political order. For instance, Afrobarometer’s 2021 survey across 34 African countries, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan and Uganda, found that “for the most part, Africans remain committed to democracy,” and that “despite efforts to undermine democratic norms and freedoms, citizens continue to adhere to them.”<sup>37</sup> Respondents articulated concrete expectations for democracy: the military should stay out of

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PP85-PAP20-Africans-want-more-democracy-but-leaders-arent-listening>

politics, political parties should compete freely, elections, though imperfect, are essential, and long-serving leaders should step aside.

In the specific context of the Horn of Africa, and in deeply divided societies more broadly, pure majority rule as an electoral system is often problematic. Where societies are fragmented along ethnic, religious, or regional lines, strict winner-takes-all outcomes can heighten perceptions of exclusion and intensify political tensions. In such contexts, electoral arrangements that incorporate power-sharing or broader forms of representation may be better suited to maintaining political stability and inclusion. Alternatives such as benevolent dictatorship are largely non-starters. Rwanda's widely cited "success story" is often invoked as a model, but it is an exception rather than the rule. Statistically, attempts at authoritarian development across more than twenty countries have produced far more failures than successes<sup>38</sup>. The question of whether benevolent dictatorship works is secondary and largely retrospective: even if one were to agree that Kagame is a benevolent dictator, he gained the characterization only after consolidating power through choreographed elections and by building a relatively capable state and functional service delivery. Prior to that, there was no way to know if Kagame - or any leader - would evolve into a benevolent ruler. The Horn of Africa cannot simply replicate Rwanda's experience. A regional expert underscores the empirical limits of authoritarian rule as a model for governance for the Horn:

I think democracy is desirable and feasible in the Horn, as elsewhere. In this part of the world, the authoritarian model has simply not worked. You can go from Siad Barre to Mengistu to Haile Selassie to Isayas and Museveni - it is the same story. In principle, you can find benevolent dictators, but this region does not have them. Even in cases such as Kagame, let us see where Rwanda goes - whether its success outlives him. That would be the real test of an authoritarian experiment. Can it reproduce its success once a particular leader leaves the scene? Was this not the challenge for Ethiopia? The EPRDF [claimed to have] brought an economic miracle, but we know what happened after Meles Zenawi died. On the other hand, the democratic proposition has never been

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<sup>38</sup> Interview with Dr. Michael Woldemariam, Director of the African Studies Center and an associate professor of International Relations at Boston University's Pardee School of Global Studies, a leading academic on the Horn of Africa region, December 21, 2023.

properly tested in this region. Where did we have a genuine democratic experiment, perhaps except in Kenya? Somalia had a brief parliamentary democracy, quickly short-circuited. Ethiopia experienced limited political liberalization, also short-lived. Eritrea and Sudan had episodes of democratic experiment, but these rarely lasted more than a few years before being overturned by authoritarian actors.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, the central question for the Horn is not whether democracy is desirable - it clearly is - but how to address the structural and contextual impediments that prevent the emergence and effective functioning of a free and fair governance architecture. There is a pressing need to rethink the type of democracy inherited from the West. Majoritarian democracy, as practiced in much of Africa, concentrates excessive power in the incumbent and lacks sufficient checks and balances to constrain it. To make democracy work in the Horn, it is necessary to design systems that incorporate institutional safeguards, proportional representation, and inclusive mechanisms appropriate to the region's social, political, and historical context.

There is also a need for a regional deliberative space among intellectuals and policymakers to develop democratic models that better reflect local realities. As it stands, the form of democracy currently practiced in the Horn is not simply imperfect - it has, in many ways, become part of the problem. Reforming democratic structures to suit the region is therefore not only desirable but also essential for stability, development, and accountable governance.

Building on the theoretical and comparative insights outlined in this chapter, the following chapters examine the historical trajectories of democratic development in the Horn of Africa. They explore the challenges and prospects for meaningful democratic transitions both at the regional level and within selected country cases, including Ethiopia, Kenya, Somaliland, South Sudan, and Sudan. Together, these case studies provide a closer look at the region's diverse political experiences and the factors shaping the possibilities for democratic change.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

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## Chapter 2

# Challenges and Prospects of Democratization in the Horn: Context Overview

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### Introduction

Democratization in the Horn of Africa remains a complex and contested process shaped by historical legacies, state fragility, and deeply rooted social and political divisions. Across the region, efforts to establish democratic governance are constrained by weak institutions, protracted conflicts, elite capture, and persistent ethnic or clan-based fragmentation. At the same time, emerging civic movements, locally adapted political systems, and selective international support provide glimmers of hope for more participatory and accountable governance.

The chapter examines the structural and contextual challenges to democratization, including the struggle to balance state-building with nation-building, the legacies of militarized political culture, and the limitations of conventional, externally driven democratization models. It also explores prospects for democratic consolidation, highlighting innovations such as hybrid political systems, consensus-based governance, and participatory processes that accommodate local realities while gradually expanding political inclusivity. By situating democratization within the Horn's unique political, social, and historical contexts, this chapter seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the obstacles and the opportunities for building resilient, locally grounded democratic institutions in the region.

Following this introduction, Section 2.1 sets the regional context, highlighting entrenched autocratic rule and persistent conflict. The Horn is one of the world's most conflict-prone regions, where domestic crises often spill across borders, creating regional security complexes and contributing to state collapse, fragility, and the emergence of new states. Unlike elsewhere in Africa, colonial borders in the Horn are frequently contested, leading to the creation of Eritrea, South Sudan, and the de facto state of Somaliland, alongside numerous liberation movements with cross-border aspirations. These dynamics, combined with autocracy and violence, have resulted in weak democratic performance, with the

exception of Kenya and Somaliland that stand out for maintaining functional institutions and periodic and relatively free elections.

Section 2.2 identifies and examines key obstacles to democratization in the Horn. A central challenge is the nation-building crisis. Rustow's "single background condition" for democracy, national unity, is largely absent in most of the countries in the Horn. Ethiopia and Sudan are facing tensions between core and peripheral regions, while ethnic and clan divisions undermine cohesion in Kenya, Uganda, Djibouti, Somalia, and South Sudan, creating perceptions of illegitimacy and exclusion. Power imbalances between the state and society compound the problem. Autocratic legacies in Ethiopia and Sudan entrenched coercive states; Uganda and South Sudan's liberation movements created vanguardist regimes; Kenya's political dynasties and economic elites dominate politics; Eritrea remains fully autocratic. Temporary liberalizations often reflect regime vulnerability rather than genuine democratic transition.

Electoral systems exacerbate divisions. Winner-takes-all rules concentrate power, privilege, and resources, and marginalize minorities, highlighting the need for inclusive mechanisms such as proportional representation and inter-ethnic power-sharing. The resource curse further entrenches autocracy. Strategic resources like oil and gold fund patronage networks, incentivizing power monopolies and the exclusion of rivals, as in Sudan and South Sudan. External actors reinforce authoritarianism. Regional bodies such as the Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) and the African Union (AU) have limited influence, while external powers, including Western, Chinese, Russian, Gulf, and Turkish actors, prioritize transactional security or economic interests over democratic governance.

These factors are mutually reinforcing. Weak nation-building fuels state-society imbalances, which provoke conflict, economic instability, and coercive governance. This weakens national cohesion and creates a cyclical barrier to democratization. A shift toward inclusive, consensus-based governance, addressing resource-driven patronage, and strengthening both domestic and regional democratic institutions are essential steps for breaking this cycle.

Section 2.3 discusses the prospect of democratization in the Horn. Despite significant challenges, the Horn shows some positive democratic developments. Countries have gradually adopted more inclusive governance structures, including federalism in Ethiopia and Somalia, devolution in Kenya, and decentralization in Uganda. Political

liberalization, such as Ethiopia's 2018 reforms, has created democratic institutions and opened civic spaces, though full transitions remain limited. National processes, including peace agreements, national dialogues, and transitional justice initiatives, offer opportunities for political settlement and more inclusive nation-building. Economic growth, urbanization, the rise of middle classes, and active social movements both on the streets and online (with due caveat against polarized social media hate scripts and fake news) further create conditions conducive to gradual democratization and social transformation in the Horn.

## **2.1 Democratization in the Horn: The Regional Context**

### **2.1.1 The pervasiveness of conflict in the Horn**

Conflict has long defined the political landscape of the Horn. Since decolonization, the region has experienced an exceptionally high incidence of both inter-state and intra-state conflicts, perhaps more than much of the rest of the continent. Its turbulent history has produced two *de jure* independent states, Eritrea and South Sudan, following protracted civil wars; one *de facto* state, Somaliland; several territories under insurgent control; and vast areas only nominally governed by central authorities.

Since 1991, Somalia has been emblematic of state collapse, marked by chronic instability and fragmented sovereignty. Meanwhile, South Sudan, the world's newest state, descended into a devastating civil war barely two years after achieving independence. Ethiopia, often noted for having avoided formal colonization, has nonetheless struggled to construct a post-imperial political order acceptable to its diverse communities. This difficulty has generated numerous liberation movements and culminated in the devastating (2020-2022) Tigray conflict, one of the bloodiest conflicts in contemporary Africa.

Sudan, after the failure of a promising pro-democracy uprising that ended one of the continent's longest-serving autocracies, has descended into violent confrontation within its own military establishment, pushing the country toward state collapse. The only countries in the region to have achieved relative political stability are Kenya, Djibouti, Eritrea and Uganda, though this stability has come at the cost of entrenched authoritarian rule.

Although most conflicts in the Horn are domestic, inter-state tensions have also been frequent. Border clashes have occurred between Ethiopia and Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan, Sudan and South Sudan, and Eritrea and Djibouti, while Kenya and Somalia have disputed their maritime boundary.

A new round of diplomatic crisis emerged between Ethiopia and Somalia following a Memorandum of Understanding signed on January 1, 2024, between Ethiopia and Somaliland, under which Somaliland agreed to lease coastal access to Ethiopia for commercial and military purposes in exchange for prospective recognition as a state. This development has heightened regional tensions, contributing to emerging alignments among Somalia, Eritrea, and Egypt.

Domestic and inter-state conflicts in the Horn are deeply intertwined, producing a tightly knit regional security complex in which instability in one country frequently spills across borders, and often involves participation of neighboring countries. This pervasive conflict environment forms the critical backdrop in any discussion of democratization in the Horn.

### **2.1.2 Status and ranking of the Horn across Democracy Indices**

A pronounced democratic deficit lies at the core of both intra-state and inter-state conflicts in the Horn. Authoritarian governance has been repeatedly attempted in the region. At the same time, the democratic project has scarcely been given a sustained or genuine opportunity to take root. Nor has the much-cited model of “benevolent dictatorship” (associated within Africa with Rwanda under Paul Kagame) proven replicable or transformative beyond its specific national context.

Former liberation movements in countries such as Uganda and Eritrea have, over time, consolidated into entrenched authoritarian regimes. In Ethiopia, the developmental authoritarianism associated with the late Meles Zenawi appeared to deliver economic gains, but the post-Meles trajectory has underscored the fragility and limited institutionalization of that model. Without durable checks and balances or inclusive political institutions, governance systems built around dominant parties or charismatic leaders have struggled to sustain stability, especially once leadership transitions occur.

Unsurprisingly, the Horn consistently ranks near the bottom of major global and continental democracy indices, above only the Central African region. Comparative assessments of democracy, rule of law, and perception of corruption repeatedly highlight weak institutional constraints, limited political pluralism, constrained civil liberties, and high levels of executive dominance across much of the region. Tables 1–3 (below) illustrate this pattern, underscoring the structural governance challenges that continue to impede democratic consolidation in the Horn.

These rankings are not merely abstract measurements; they reflect institutional fragilities that feed cycles of conflict, elite contestation, and state capture. The persistence of low democratic performance across indices reinforces the urgency of rethinking both the design and practice of democracy in the Horn, moving beyond electoral formalities toward accountable, inclusive, and institutionally grounded governance.

**Table 1.** *Democracy Indices of the Horn—Freedom House reports, 2023/2024*

Country	Political rights/40	Civil liberties/60	Total/100%		Rank in the Horn
			2023	2024	
Kenya	24	30	52	48	1
Somaliland	18	26	49	44	2
Uganda	11	24	35	34	3
Djibouti	5	19	24	24	4
Ethiopia	10	11	21	23	5
Sudan	0	10	10	10	6
Eritrea	1	2	3	3	7
South Sudan	-3	4	1	1	8

Kenya has traveled a considerable distance from its prolonged experience as a de facto one-party state under Jomo Kenyatta and later Daniel arap Moi, who formalized one-party rule between 1982 and 1992. The reintroduction of multiparty politics in the early 1990s culminated in the landmark 2002 elections, when the opposition ended the long dominance of KANU, which had governed since independence in 1963. Since then, Kenya has undergone significant democratic transformation, regularly conducted competitive multiparty elections and experienced peaceful transfers of power. However, several electoral cycles, most notably in 2007–2008, have been marred by episodes of violence, exposing the fragility of political competition in a highly polarized environment<sup>1</sup>. Kenya today maintains regular elections and a formally pluralistic political system. Yet, as discussed in Chapter 3, persistent challenges remain, including pervasive corruption and recurring allegations of excessive force by security agencies. The country’s media and civil society sectors are among the most vibrant in the region, playing an active watchdog role, while at the same time, journalists and human rights defenders continue to face restrictive legislation, harassment, and intimidation.

<sup>1</sup> Karuti Kanyinga (2014). *Kenya Democracy and Political Participation*. Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), March 2014.

According to the 2024 *State of Democracy in Africa* report by International IDEA<sup>2</sup>, Kenya recorded notable improvements on the continent in democratic indices among the 173 countries evaluated. Its ranking indicated 87/173 in representation, 99/173 (rights), 87/173 (rule of law), and 66/173 (in participation). This mixed trajectory, marked by institutional progress alongside enduring governance deficits, illustrates both the advances and the ongoing constraints shaping Kenya’s democratic consolidation.

**Table 2.** Overall Governance Scores of Horn Countries, 2024

Country	Total Score/100	Rank in Africa /54	Trend (2014-2023)
Kenya	60.3	10	+2.5
Uganda	49.1	26	-1.8
Ethiopia	48.4.	29	+2.5
Djibouti	43.1	38	+3.9
Sudan	29.6	51	-0.4
Eritrea	27.5	52	+1.9
Somalia	25.5	53	+6.8
South Sudan	19	54	-0.8

Source: 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance 2024.  
[https://assets.iiag.online/ /2024/2024-IIAG-country-scorecards\\_EN.pdf](https://assets.iiag.online/ /2024/2024-IIAG-country-scorecards_EN.pdf)

**Table 3.** Corruption Perception Index 2024

Country	Score/100	Rank in the World (182 countries)
Ethiopia	38	96
Djibouti	31	124
Kenya	30	130
Uganda	26	140
Sudan	14	175
Eritrea	13	177
South Sudan	9	181
Somalia	9	181

Source: Compiled from Transparency International for Horn of Africa countries.  
<https://www.transparency.org/en/news/cpi-2024-sub-saharan-africa-weak-anti-corruption-measures-undermine-climate-action>

<sup>2</sup> IDEA (2023). The State of Democracy in Africa,  
<https://www.idea.int/gsod/2023/chapters/africa/>

Kenya is ranked among the top 50 global performers in participation, civic engagement, and human rights indicators. Within the Horn, it stands out for relatively strong domestic countervailing institutions that constrain executive power, most notably an assertive judiciary and for maintaining a significant degree of electoral integrity. The Supreme Court’s handling of the 2022 presidential election dispute reaffirmed the judiciary’s central role in upholding constitutional order and electoral accountability<sup>3</sup>. Judicial independence has also been evident in high-profile public interest litigation. In November 2023, the High Court in Nairobi declared unconstitutional a controversial housing levy introduced by President William Ruto, ruling that the tax measure was discriminatory and violated constitutional provisions. The decision represented a significant setback for the executive and demonstrated the practical operation of checks and balances. Such assertiveness of the courts, citizens suing the government and prevailing, remains rare elsewhere in the region. In this respect, Kenya represents an exceptional case within the Horn, offering an example of how rule-of-law institutions can function even amid broader governance challenges<sup>4</sup>.

Somaliland follows Kenya in several regional democratic assessments. Since declaring independence from Somalia in 1991, it has conducted successive presidential and parliamentary elections that enabled peaceful transfers of power. Its political order emerged from a uniquely homegrown, negotiated settlement in the 1990s among the Somali National Movement (SNM) and other societal actors, including clan elders, business leaders, and religious authorities. This negotiated foundation facilitated the transition from a war-torn region to a relatively stable, self-declared state, often described as a “hybrid democracy”.

The institutionalization of the *Guurti*, the council of clan elders, into the upper legislative chamber (the House of Elders) reflects this synthesis. Members of the *Guurti* are selected by clans, while the lower House of Representatives is chosen through popular elections. This hybrid arrangement represents an innovative democratic experiment, particularly remarkable given Somaliland’s lack of international recognition and exclusion from major international financial institutions. However, recent developments have raised concerns about democratic backsliding. Reports

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<sup>3</sup> <https://supremecourt.judiciary.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/SUPREME-COURT-AT-12-YEARS-REFLECTION.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Stephen Kirimi, LPI Horn of Africa Regional Project coordinator. December 3, 2023.

point to shrinking civic space, pressure on journalists and opposition figures, marginalization of minority clans, and persistent gender-based violence. These trends underscore the fragility of Somaliland’s experiment and highlight the broader regional challenge: sustaining democratic gains in the absence of strong institutional safeguards and external support<sup>5</sup>.

Uganda under President Yoweri Museveni, in power since 1986, has long been characterized as a “hybrid regime,” situated at the intersection of democratization and authoritarian consolidation. In both academic and policy circles, governance in Uganda has often been described as a “two-level game.” On one level, the regime exhibits clear authoritarian tendencies, systemic corruption, coercion, electoral manipulation, and a progressively shrinking political space. On the other hand, it has permitted selective liberalization, including periods of relative press freedom, an active civil society, and sustained macroeconomic reforms that earned international support<sup>6</sup>.

This dual character helps explain why Uganda has frequently ranked third within the Horn on various democratic indices, trailing Kenya and Somaliland. Since 1986, the country has been governed by the National Resistance Movement (NRM), which initially positioned itself as a reformist force restoring order after years of turmoil. Over time, however, the regime has exhibited increasing authoritarian drift, particularly as it has confronted more assertive electoral challenges from opposition movements. The NRM has maintained power through extensive patronage networks, intimidation, and the politicization of legal institutions, including prosecutions targeting opposition leaders. Civil society organizations and media outlets face mounting legal restrictions, surveillance, harassment, and at times, direct state violence. As in Eritrea, autocratic entrenchment in Uganda has deepened to the point where political transition appears fraught with uncertainty and risk.

A commentary by a civil society practitioner captures the subdued public mood and anxieties surrounding succession:

On the one hand, young politicians such as Bobi Wine are offering an alternative vision for the country. But the question is whether the country will be safer under Bobi Wine or anyone outside of the establishment. The answer is no, because government institutions

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Mark Bradbury, RVI Executive Director. December 5, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Sabiti Makara and Vibeke Wang (2023), Uganda: A Story of Persistent Autocratic Rule. In: Leonardo Arriola, Lise Ranker and Nicolas Van de Walle. *Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention*. Oxford.

have been converted into a security state. Anyone with a civilian mindset will have challenges governing Uganda. We are not ready for a civilian government to take over.<sup>7</sup>

This assessment underscores a deeper structural dilemma: beyond leadership change, Uganda's challenge lies in demilitarizing and depoliticizing state institutions so that political competition does not threaten regime survival. Without institutional reform, succession risks becoming destabilizing rather than democratizing. President Yoweri Museveni has been re-elected to a seventh term in January 2026.

Djibouti was governed as a de facto single-party state until the promulgation of a new constitution in 1992 formally introduced multiparty politics. Despite this constitutional shift, political power has remained highly centralized. Since 1999, the country has been ruled by President Ismail Omar Guelleh, whose tenure has been extended through constitutional amendments removing term limits. Although Djibouti officially operates a multiparty system, the ruling Union for a Presidential Majority (UMP) maintains dominance through restrictive and coercive practices. Opposition parties face significant obstacles in organizing and campaigning, while journalists, activists, and critics of the president or the ruling coalition are frequently subjected to harassment, intimidation, and arrest. Elections are regularly held but lack genuine competitiveness, reinforcing executive entrenchment rather than enabling meaningful political alternation. In October 2025, Djibouti's parliament unanimously approved constitutional amendments removing the 75-year age limit for presidential candidates, allowing 78-year-old President Ismail Omar Guelleh to run for a sixth term in April 2026. Guelleh confirmed his candidacy on November 8, 2025<sup>8</sup>.

Ethnic dynamics further shape the political landscape. Tensions persist between the country's two largest communities –the Issa Somalis and the Afar. Political authority and key economic sectors have been disproportionately concentrated among elites from the Issa Somali community, contributing to perceptions of exclusion and marginalization among Afar constituencies. Taken together, these dynamics have produced a tightly controlled political order in which formal multiparty structures

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Martha Kiiza Bakwesegha, LPI Senior Global Peacebuilding Policy Advisor and Focal Point to the Horn of Africa Regional Programme. November 12, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> <https://constitutionnet.org/news/voices/djiboutis-new-constitution-between-longevity-power-and-beginnings-socio-political-instability>

coexist with entrenched executive dominance, limited political pluralism, and constrained civic space<sup>9</sup>.

Ethiopia has generally performed better than most countries in the Horn of Africa in the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), though its score still places it in the lower half globally. Ethiopia's score was also above the Sub-Saharan Africa average (~33). Overall, Ethiopia's comparatively better performance reflects relatively stronger formal institutions than some of its neighbors, but persistent governance and accountability challenges continue to affect its standing. However, Ethiopia continues to grapple with the challenge of constructing a stable post-imperial state, having undergone two revolutions and major political reforms over the past five decades. The 1974 Revolution toppled the imperial regime and ushered in a military dictatorship under the Derg. The 1991 revolution, in turn, replaced military rule with a dominant-party system led by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

The EPRDF pursued two ambitious state-building projects: ethnic federalism and (later on) the developmental state. Both contained limited democratic elements but were conceived primarily as illiberal state-making ventures. Drawing on its Marxist-Leninist roots during a 17-year armed struggle, the EPRDF sought to institutionalize ethno-cultural justice through a federal arrangement designed to dismantle the historically centralized, unitary state. At the same time, the developmental state model prioritized rapid economic growth and the expansion of socioeconomic rights, viewed as foundational to any meaningful democratic project in a context of widespread poverty<sup>10</sup>. Yet the EPRDF's conception of democracy, framed as "revolutionary democracy", stood in explicit tension with liberal democratic principles such as political pluralism, robust opposition, and independent institutions. While elections were regularly held, political space remained tightly controlled, and state and party structures were deeply intertwined.

The rise of Abiy Ahmed in 2018 marked an initially auspicious turning point. Early reforms included the release of political prisoners, the return of exiled opposition groups, and expanded media freedoms, generating broad domestic and international optimism. However, political liberalization did not culminate in a stable democratic transition. Instead,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.arts4refugees.com/p/djibouti's-hidden-war-ethnic-tensions>

<sup>10</sup> S. Vaughan (2011). Revolutionary democratic state-building: party, state and people in the EPRDF's Ethiopia. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4)

unresolved structural tensions, particularly around federalism, identity, and power distribution, intensified, culminating in violent conflict and institutional fragility. Today, Ethiopia stands at a critical juncture. Sustainable stability appears contingent on a comprehensive peace process and an inclusive, credible national dialogue capable of addressing foundational constitutional and state-building questions. Without such a recalibration, the country risks remaining trapped between incomplete reform and recurrent conflict, with democratization deferred rather than consolidated.

Somalia continues to struggle with the long aftermath of state collapse while confronting the persistent insurgency of Al-Shabaab. Despite profound fragility, the country has made incremental but noteworthy gains in recent years. A fragile semblance of order has emerged, and the authority of the Federal Government has gained increasing acceptance among the Federal Member States (FMSs), although it is uneven and starting from a low base. Negotiations between the Federal Government and FMSs, particularly with Puntland, have displayed embryonic democratic features, even if it remains elusive as a breakthrough. Contentious debates over constitutional arrangements, resource-sharing, and electoral processes reflect not merely elite bargaining but the gradual institutionalization of political contestation.

The controversy surrounding former President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (Farmaajo) and his attempted term extension, and the strong domestic backlash it provoked, illustrates this dynamic. His effort to prolong his mandate met significant resistance from political actors and segments of the public, ultimately constraining executive overreach. In effect, Farmaajo lost public support and was unable to secure re-election through coercive leverage or patronage. Somalia's political reality remains such that no single actor can command sufficient coercive power to override the imperative of negotiation and compromise<sup>11</sup>.

Progress is also evident in ongoing discussions around fiscal federalism, which mark a significant evolution from the early years of state reconstruction beginning in 2012. Local governance initiatives further signal incremental institutional development. The formation of district councils in several regions reflects attempts to broaden representation and formalize authority at the grassroots level. Cooperation between federal forces and local militias has likewise improved, with some local actors

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Aaron Stanley, PhD candidate, political legitimacy in Somalia. Addis Ababa. October 12, 2023.

increasingly viewing the federal government as a legitimate partner rather than an external imposition. Encouraging signs also emerge in efforts to foster more inclusive political processes and to strengthen judicial practices. Grassroots women’s organizations have become vocal advocates for participation and accountability, while Somalia’s media environment, though extremely dangerous for journalists, remains comparatively open and resilient. Reporting often entails grave personal risk, yet it contributes to public scrutiny and political debate<sup>12</sup>.

The Federal government under President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud pushed for a universal suffrage in 2024, replacing the indirect clan-based electoral model with a one-person, one-vote system – an ambitious step toward electoral democracy. Although implementation has faced delays and political contestation, the very articulation of this goal signals democratic aspiration. In 2025, for the first time in decades, Somalia formally abandoned its clan-based political system and allowed residents of Mogadishu to choose local representatives directly under the “one-person, one-vote” principle. Meanwhile, Puntland conducted a peaceful election in January 2024, demonstrating that competitive and orderly political processes are possible within Somalia’s federal framework<sup>13</sup>. Taken together, although these developments do not suggest a consolidated democracy, they show a gradual, iterative process of governance-building. In a context long defined by fragmentation and violence, such incremental institutional advances represent meaningful steps toward a more functional and participatory political order.

Eritrea remains one of the most tightly controlled and militarized authoritarian states in the world. Since achieving independence from Ethiopia in 1993, it has not held a national election. Political power is monopolized by the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ), led by President Isaias Afwerki, the country’s sole legal political authority. Arbitrary detention, indefinite national service, and pervasive surveillance are defining features of the system. National service, initially introduced as a temporary program, has, in practice, become open-ended, binding many citizens to military or state-directed labor for much of their working lives. Independent media outlets were shuttered in 2001, and no

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/ar/Somalia-womens-leadership-in-peace-processes-evidenced-growing>

<sup>13</sup> Discussions with Somalia experts Aden Abdi, Africa Department Director, Conciliation Recourse, and Aaron Stanley, Global Policy Director, the Life and Peace Institute, December 4, 2023.

autonomous press has operated in the country since. Civil society organizations are virtually nonexistent, and political dissent is met with swift repression.

Eritrea's authoritarianism is not merely entrenched but also systemic. The regime has constructed a highly centralized and securitized political order in which institutions are deeply personalized and fused with executive authority. As a specialist on Eritrean politics observed:

The challenge in Eritrea is that there's no way to moderate a system that has gone so deep into totalitarianism –unlike the semi-authoritarianism of Uganda, where there is at least some middle ground. That is impossible for Isaias, given the nature of the system he has constructed. He has given Eritrean society radiation therapy, effectively eradicating almost every element of dynamism.<sup>14</sup>

This assessment underscores a paradox: the very rigidity that has preserved regime survival also renders gradual reform exceedingly difficult. In such a context, even a sudden opening of civic space could destabilize not only the ruling elite but the broader political order, given the absence of institutional buffers, independent organizations, or a culture of pluralistic engagement. Eritrea thus represents the most extreme case of authoritarian entrenchment in the Horn of Africa, where the prospects for incremental democratization remain profoundly constrained.

Sudan and South Sudan have experimented with violent forms of kleptocracy, where control over state resources and political power has fueled conflict rather than stability. After the 2019 pro-democracy movement that ousted long-time President Omar al-Bashir and his National Congress Party, Sudan entered a transitional phase in which military and civilian leaders shared power with the promise of eventual elections. Early reforms expanded civic space and allowed limited exercise of civil liberties. However, the transition was abruptly derailed in 2021 when the military dissolved the transitional government in a coup, violently suppressing subsequent pro-democracy protests. Throughout this period, persistent violence among security forces, rival armed groups, and ethnically aligned militias has undermined governance, leaving the anticipated democratic transition unrealized. The ongoing civil war between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) threatens the very survival of the Sudanese state<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Mikeal Woldegebriel. December 6, 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with an expert at the UN Secretariat in Addis Ababa focusing on the Sudan and Ethiopia. December 12, 2023.

South Sudan has similarly struggled to translate its decades-long liberation struggle into effective governance. Barely two years after achieving independence in 2011, civil war erupted in 2013 following a political rift between President Salva Kiir and then Vice President Riek Machar, mobilizing ethnically divided militias. Despite the 2018 peace agreement, elections have repeatedly been delayed, and power-sharing arrangements among elites remain precarious. Rampant corruption, economic collapse, and systematic targeting of civilians, journalists, and aid workers by the dominant Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) continue to undermine state legitimacy. Preparations for South Sudan's first national elections since independence are underway, but critical prerequisites –including a permanent constitution and unified security forces– remain incomplete, highlighting the fragility of the nascent state<sup>16</sup>.

Sudan and South Sudan underscore the dangers of elite-driven governance in the context of weak institutions, deep ethnic divisions, and contested control over resources. Unlike Djibouti or Somaliland, where oligarchic or hybrid arrangements maintain relative stability, these two states demonstrate how violent kleptocracy and unresolved power struggles can threaten both democratic progress and state survival.

## 2.2 Critical Challenges

### 2.2.1 Nation-building crisis

A central impediment to democratization in the Horn is the absence of what Dankwart Rustow termed the “single background condition” for democratic transition: *national unity*.<sup>17</sup> In most parts of the region, a shared sense of political community remains fragile or contested. Building on Rustow's framework, Kidane Mengisteab<sup>18</sup> identifies two interrelated dimensions of this missing background condition in the Horn and other transitional African contexts. The first is the fragmentation of societies along primordial ethnic and religious lines, manifested in chronic state–identity conflicts and persistent crises of nation-building. Diversity management has often been weak or coercive, leading to recurring tensions over belonging, representation, and sovereignty.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Professor Jok Madut Jok, December 5, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Rustow, Dankwart A. (1970). “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model”. *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 337– 363. <https://doi.org/10.2307/421307>

<sup>18</sup> Kidane Mengisteab (ed.) (2020). *The Crisis of Democratization in the Greater Horn of Africa: Towards Building Institutional Foundations*. Boydell & Brewer,

The second-dimension concerns the fragmentation of economic and institutional systems. In many countries of the Horn, citizens operate within parallel spheres: a state-sanctioned formal economy with relatively advanced capitalist structures, and an informal, largely subsistence-based traditional economy. These economic sub-systems are accompanied by distinct institutional arrangements –divergent property rights regimes, separate decision-making mechanisms, and different judicial and conflict-resolution practices. As Mengisteab observes, these parallel systems generate institutional incoherence and weaken state legitimacy.

Given that the Horn remains predominantly rural, most citizens live within informal traditional systems that are only partially integrated into formal state structures. As state institutions expand into these spaces without meaningful functional integration, tensions intensify. The fragmentation of economic and institutional systems significantly constrains democratic participation: the rural majority, which constitutes the largest voting bloc of the electorate, is often structurally marginalized or incorporated only nominally into formal political processes.

Mismanagement of diversity, especially through homogenizing nation-state projects, has been a defining feature of the Horn’s political history. State-building efforts frequently pursued cultural assimilation and political centralization rather than accommodation and pluralism. This approach was particularly pronounced in Ethiopia and Sudan. Ethiopian emperors sought to build a nation through a linguistic and cultural imposition, and a similar project was implemented in Sudan through the imposition of the Arabic language and Islam.

In both cases, so-called “core groups” were positioned as foundational to the national project. They were, respectively, the northern highlands in Ethiopia and the riverine Arab communities of central Sudan, including the Ja’alin, Sha’agiya, and Danagla. State formation structured around a core–periphery dynamic generated sustained ethnonationalist mobilization in peripheral regions. Yet the “center” itself has rarely been cohesive; it has often been marked by hegemonic rivalries and internal contestation, producing varying and unstable degrees of political “centerness.”<sup>19</sup> The result is a persistent nation-building crisis: weak shared identity, fragmented institutional orders, and contested state legitimacy. In such conditions, democratization becomes exceedingly difficult, as elections alone cannot be substitutes for the foundational work of forging an inclusive political community and an integrated institutional framework.

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<sup>19</sup> Interviews with Sudanese CSOs and academics. December 20, 2023.

Comparable patterns of contested nation-building are evident across other countries of the Horn, though often in more subtle forms. In Djibouti, the national project has largely coalesced around the political and economic dominance of the Issa Somali elite, while the Afar community has faced persistent marginalization in representation and resource distribution. This imbalance has periodically fueled Afar resistance movements and deepened perceptions of exclusion from the national compact<sup>20</sup>.

In South Sudan, nation-building has been undermined by the hegemonic aspirations of segments of the Dinka political elite. Efforts to consolidate authority in a context of profound ethnic diversity have generated distrust and recurrent violent contestation, weakening prospects for a cohesive national identity<sup>21</sup>. In Uganda, the historic North-South divide –reinforced during British colonial rule– has shaped post-independence political cleavages. The protracted insurgency of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which drew heavily on grievances among segments of the Acholi population, reflected a deeper sense of exclusion from the Ugandan national project<sup>22</sup>.

Eritrea followed a distinct trajectory. Echoing Charles Tilly's dictum that "war makes states and states make war," three decades of armed struggle fostered a powerful sense of national cohesion, grounded in the collective memory of defeating one of Africa's largest armies. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) was notably cohesive compared to other liberation movements, such as the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Yet this cohesion was achieved in part through the systematic suppression of internal dissent. Wary of Ethiopia's experiment with ethnic federalism, perceived as a potential catalyst for fragmentation, the EPLF deliberately relegated ethnicity to the cultural sphere, denying it formal political relevance. Nevertheless, demographic realities have shaped political dominance: Tigrinya-speaking highlanders, who formed the backbone of the liberation movement, have occupied central positions in state power. This imbalance has contributed to peripheral grievances, including among Afar communities within Eritrea.

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<sup>20</sup> Samson A. Bezabeh (2011). Citizenship and the logic of sovereignty in Djibouti, *African Affairs*, Volume 110, No. 441, pp. 587-606. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adr045>

<sup>21</sup> Interviews with South Sudan think tanks and academics. December 12 2023.

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/commentary/tribe-the-hidden-story-of-uganda-s-state-formation-and-nation-building-1837046#google\\_vignette](https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/commentary/tribe-the-hidden-story-of-uganda-s-state-formation-and-nation-building-1837046#google_vignette)

In Somalia, often cited for its relative ethnic and religious homogeneity, political competition has instead crystallized along clan lines. Historically, Hawiye clans have exercised disproportionate influence in national politics, while minority groups collectively labeled as “Bantu” in southern Somalia have experienced political exclusion and social discrimination. Even in Somaliland, where a negotiated settlement fostered relative stability, the political predominance of the Isaaq clan has generated discontent among other clans, particularly the Dhulbahante. Grievances in the Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn (SSC) regions have recently escalated into armed confrontation, underscoring the fragility of clan-based power balances.

Across the Horn, therefore, nation-building remains deeply entangled with unresolved questions of identity, representation, and resource distribution. Whether expressed through ethnic, regional, or clan cleavages, the failure to construct inclusive national compacts continues to undermine both state legitimacy and democratic consolidation.

The crisis of nation-building in Kenya is closely linked to a foundational policy choice made by its early postcolonial leadership, most notably the (in)famous Sessional Paper No. 10, “*African Socialism and Its Application to Planning in Kenya*” (1965). Championed under President Jomo Kenyatta, the document rejected the state-led socialist models then dominant across much of Africa and instead advanced a market-oriented development strategy. While this approach helped lay the groundwork for Kenya’s relatively robust economy, it also carried long-term implications for national cohesion. The policy’s emphasis on investing in already “productive” regions, based on a trickle-down logic, further marginalized less-developed areas, deepening regional inequalities and fueling feelings of exclusion from the national project.<sup>23</sup>

The Kenyan case illustrates a broader lesson for the Horn: nation-building requires more than aggregate economic growth. It demands distributive justice, inclusion, and a shared sense of belonging. The crisis of nationhood in the region stems not only from ethnic capture of the state or policy-induced regional disparities, but also from the inability of governments to cultivate national pride grounded in tangible collective achievements –whether through equitable management of natural resources (such as channeling oil revenues into broad-based development) or through sustained socioeconomic transformation.

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<sup>23</sup> Stephen Kirimi, peacebuilding CSO project manager, interviewed on December 11, 2023.

Even where powerful unifying symbols exist, they are not always mobilized effectively. In Ethiopia, for example, the historic victory at the Battle of Adwa, long celebrated as a pan-African triumph against colonialism, could have served as a durable foundation for shared national identity. Yet the increasing ethnicization of Adwa's legacy, reduced to debates over which group contributed most to the victory, reflects the fragility of common narratives. If consensus cannot be sustained around such a foundational moment, the question becomes unavoidable: what, ultimately, anchors a shared Ethiopian identity? Across the Horn, therefore, the nation-building crisis is as much about contested meaning and uneven development as it is about formal political arrangements. Without inclusive economic policies and integrative historical narratives, democratic institutions alone cannot sustain national cohesion.

The nation-building crisis bears directly on the prospects for democratization in the Horn. Where the foundational project of state formation has been exclusionary or incoherent, the very identity of the state remains contested. Politics is reduced to existential questions, whether the state will survive at all, and on whose terms. In such contexts, democratic competition easily becomes a zero-sum struggle over state control rather than a regulated contest within a shared national framework. Therefore, an inclusive national identity and integrative state practices are prerequisites for democratic consolidation. As Dankwart Rustow argued, national unity constitutes a critical background condition for democratization. Without a basic consensus on political community, democratic institutions lack the legitimacy and stability necessary to function. In deeply divided societies such as those of the Horn, the challenge is not simply to introduce elections, but to identify institutional models capable of managing diversity while mitigating conflict<sup>24</sup>.

Comparative experience points to several democratic innovations designed for divided societies: concordance (or power-sharing) arrangements that include all significant groups in executive decision-making; robust local representation tailored to national contexts; federal structures that devolve authority territorially; and forms of cultural autonomy that protect group identities. Among these, federalism is often viewed as a particularly promising mechanism for transforming ethnic conflict by constitutionally recognizing diversity within a unified state.

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<sup>24</sup> Arend Lijphart (2002). "The wave of power-sharing democracy". In *Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional design, conflict management, and democracy*. Andrew Reynolds, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nowhere are these dilemmas more pronounced than in the Horn. Ethiopia continues to grapple with redefining itself as a post-imperial polity, struggling to reconcile diversity with a legitimate and widely accepted central authority. Sudan has fractured along a deeply entrenched center–periphery fault line, while South Sudan risks reproducing similar integrative failures through perceptions of Dinka-dominated statehood. In Djibouti, an oligarchic regime intertwined with Issa Somali dominance continues to marginalize Afar communities. A parallel dynamic is observable in Somalia, though structured primarily along clan rather than ethnic lines.

Across the region, the absence of an inclusive national compact remains the central obstacle. Without resolving the nation-building question, democratization efforts will thus continue to rest on fragile foundations.

### **2.2.2 The imbalance between state and societal forces**

In Dankwart Rustow’s dynamic model of democratization, the “preparatory phase” is triggered by a prolonged and inconclusive struggle between state authorities and organized societal forces. Democracy, in this view, does not emerge from benevolent rulers or a pre-existing democratic culture, but from negotiated compromises forged through sustained contestation. This preparatory phase has largely been absent in the Horn, and, more broadly, across much of Africa, because ruling elites have historically restricted political space, preventing autonomous societal actors from organizing and bargaining on equal footing with the state.

Semir Yusuf, a leading scholar of democracy in the region, offers a structural explanation for this democratic blockage. Using Ethiopia as a paradigmatic case, with parallels in Sudan, he argues that a fundamental obstacle to democratization in the Horn is the deep power asymmetry between state and society<sup>25</sup>. In European history, by contrast, democracy evolved through negotiated limitations on state authority. A symbolic example is the Magna Carta, in which King John of England conceded constraints on royal power after bargaining with rebellious barons and church leaders in 1215. The barons were not driven by democratic ideals but by self-interest, resisting excessive taxation to fund foreign wars. Yet their negotiated settlement laid the groundwork for constitutionalism, rule of law, and the principle that rights are claimed through bargaining, not

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<sup>25</sup> Interview, January 12, 2024.

See also his work: “Ethiopia’s democratic predicaments State–society dynamics and the balance of power”. Institute for Security Studies, ISS Monograph 209. November 2022.

granted at the ruler's discretion. Over time, other social groups followed this precedent, incrementally expanding rights through contestation<sup>26</sup>.

In Africa, however, state formation was largely a colonial enterprise, constructed through coercion and centralized administrative control. Postcolonial governments inherited these repressive instruments. Where rights exist, they are often superficial or treated as privileges dispensed by executive authority rather than entitlements secured through institutionalized negotiation. Even in Ethiopia, which avoided formal colonization, modern state formation in the late nineteenth century centered on rapid centralization. This consolidation of authority was not accompanied by bargaining with societal forces. As a result, autocratic rules became historically embedded rather than episodic.

According to Semir Yusuf, this structural imbalance has left societal forces with only two viable avenues for political change: protest (peaceful contestation) or armed resistance. Protest movements, constrained by repression and weak organization, have often succeeded only in replacing one autocratic regime with another. Armed movements, by contrast, build organizational capacity outside the state's reach. Yet liberation struggles and prolonged warfare cultivate hierarchical, militarized structures that are then transferred to the post-conflict state. This dynamic helps explain why many former rebel movements struggle to democratize once in power. Autocracy becomes self-reinforcing, as new rulers draw on entrenched repertoires of centralized control.

Sudan presents a parallel trajectory because the military has evolved into the dominant political institution – stronger than civilian forces and imbued with a self-ascribed mandate to “guard the nation.” This sense of guardianship has repeatedly justified coups against elected or transitional governments, further entrenching the imbalance between state and society. Across the Horn, then, democratization is impeded not merely by poor leadership or weak institutions, but by historically constructed asymmetries of power. Until societal forces can organize autonomously and negotiate durable limits on state authority, the preparatory phase envisioned by Rustow will remain incomplete, and democratic transitions will continue to falter.

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<sup>26</sup> K. Worcester (2010). “The Meaning and Legacy of the Magna Carta”. *Political Science & Politics*. 43(3): 451-456.

Although Kenya is often praised for its comparatively strong democratic credentials, i.e., an assertive judiciary, vibrant media, and active civil society, it too exhibits a pronounced power asymmetry between entrenched political dynasties, emerging elites, and ordinary citizens. At the center of this dynamic stand two families associated with the icons of the anti-colonial struggle: Jomo Kenyatta and Oginga Odinga. What began as a partnership at independence, with Kenyatta as president and Odinga as vice president, soon devolved into adversarial politics, frequently framed along ethnic lines. Over time, this rivalry hardened into an intergenerational contest, most visibly embodied in the competition between Uhuru Kenyatta and the late Raila Odinga. As observers have noted, Kenyan elections at times resembled dynastic successions more than open democratic contests. Both families accumulated immense wealth and came to symbolize powerful economic as well as political elites, to the extent that Kenya's democratic trajectory became deeply intertwined with their rivalry. The polarization it generated contributed to the deadly 2007–2008 post-election violence, which claimed over a thousand lives<sup>27</sup>.

The 2022 election, however, appeared to signal a potential shift. William Ruto successfully reframed political competition from ethnic allegiance to class struggle, casting the contest as one between “hustlers” and “dynasties.” Positioning himself as the champion of ordinary citizens against elite families, despite his own considerable wealth, Ruto adopted the popular moniker “hustler-in-chief.”<sup>28</sup> This rhetorical pivot suggested a movement away from identity-based mobilization toward socioeconomic grievance. Yet whether this shift translates into substantive redistribution and reduced elite dominance remains uncertain<sup>29</sup>.

Kenya's experience illustrates that even relatively institutionalized democracies in the Horn grapple with entrenched elite capture. For democratic norms to take firmer root across the greater Horn, a fundamental rebalancing of power between state-linked elites and broader societal forces is imperative. Without narrowing this asymmetry, elections risk becoming arenas for elite rotation rather than mechanisms of genuine popular accountability.

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<sup>27</sup> Tad Montesano. *Dynasty politics in democracy: Kenyattas, Odingas and democratic erosion in Kenya*. <https://www.democratic-erosion.com/2020/12/09/dynasty-politics-in-democracy-kenyattas-odingas-and-democratic-erosion-in-kenya/>

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Steven Kirimi. December 13, 2023.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*

On the other hand, some scholarship suggests that repeated elections can gradually contribute to democratization, even when they initially take place in systems dominated by dynastic, hegemonic, or semi-authoritarian elites. Over time, electoral competition can help shift the balance between the state and society by opening political space, strengthening expectations of participation, and creating opportunities for new actors to emerge. In the early stages, elections may primarily function as mechanisms for elite circulation or rotation, a pattern that is not uncommon even in more established democracies. For this reason, the value of elections should not be dismissed outright. Even when electoral processes fall short of being fully fair, reasonably free elections can still play a meaningful role in expanding political contestation and gradually strengthening democratic practices<sup>30</sup>.

### **2.2.3 The limits of winners-take-all electoral democracy**

The post-Cold War “third wave” of democratization reshaped African politics in the 1990s. As democracy acquired global normative dominance, many autocratic regimes adapted rather than disappeared. In a logic reminiscent of “if you cannot beat them, join them,” incumbents adopted democratic façades, most notably regular multiparty elections, while retaining substantive control. Across the Horn, this frequently took the form of winner-takes-all electoral systems, often based on first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral systems.

In deeply divided societies, however, majoritarianism can be destabilizing. Where state power is highly centralized and often ethnically captured, losing an election carries existential risks. Winners control vast state resources and can marginalize or punish rival communities. Under such conditions, elections cease to be routine mechanisms of alternation in power and instead become zero-sum struggles. The combination of a strong state and winner-takes-all rules thus heightens polarization and encourages exclusionary politics.

However, the main challenge is not necessarily the FPTP system itself. In contexts where identity groups are geographically concentrated and politically mobilized, FPTP can sometimes produce outcomes that are relatively proportional in practice. Constituency-based representation may allow different groups to secure parliamentary seats in the areas where they

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<sup>30</sup> Sarah Birch (2016). “The Electoral Tango: The Evolution of Electoral Integrity in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes”. Max Weber Lecture Series, Max Weber Lecture No. 2016/02, Max Weber Programme.  
<https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstreams/458d5474-af82-5129-b776-0fb83496e99c/download>

form local majorities. The deeper problem often lies elsewhere: the presence of dominant ruling parties that claim cross-group representation while using their control over state institutions, particularly electoral management bodies and the bureaucracy, to secure nationwide victories. In such cases, the major determining factor relates to the integrity of the electoral process, including the risk of manipulation or rigging, and to some extent it can depend on the electoral formula.

Proportional representation (PR) systems can be somewhat harder to manipulate and may still allow opposition parties to gain representation even when elections are imperfect. However, electoral rules alone are not sufficient to prevent winner-takes-all outcomes. As emphasized by Arend Lijphart in his work on consociational democracy, proportional electoral systems are most effective when they are combined with broader power-sharing arrangements, especially grand coalitions in the executive that include major political forces. It is important to distinguish between the legislature and the executive. FPTP primarily shapes parliamentary representation, while the most centralizing and winner-takes-all dynamics in many political systems are concentrated in the executive or presidency. As a result, debates about political inclusion often hinge less on parliamentary electoral rules and more on how executive power is structured and shared.<sup>31</sup>

Addressing these structural tensions requires creative constitutional design beyond simple majoritarian formulas. Scholars and practitioners differ on the precise institutional configuration best suited to the region, but an emerging consensus points toward some form of consociational or power-sharing arrangement, carefully tailored to national contexts. Consociational democracy seeks to stabilize divided societies through grand coalitions, proportional representation, segmental autonomy, and minority veto rights. By guaranteeing inclusion of major identity groups in executive power, it lowers the stakes of competition and mitigates fears of permanent exclusion. Normatively, as Semir Yusuf argues, such arrangements can enhance justice and legitimacy by ensuring meaningful participation of marginalized communities in governance.

The main challenge lies in translating such arrangements into practice. Power-sharing systems based on group representation can unintentionally reinforce identity-based divisions, particularly when they operate alongside institutional structures that already organize politics along ethnic lines, such as exclusive ethnic regions within a federal system. In these

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Dr. Adem Kasse, January 19, 2024.

contexts, formalizing group representation risks hardening the very cleavages it seeks to manage. To address this concern, some scholars have proposed the idea of “liberal consociationalism,” associated with the work of Arend Lijphart. This approach emphasizes broad inclusion in governance rather than rigid representation of predefined identity groups, allowing political coalitions to form more flexibly while still ensuring that diverse segments of society have meaningful access to power.

Identifying consociationalism as normatively appealing is far easier than putting it into practice. The central question is why entrenched state actors would voluntarily accept institutional constraints on their authority. By design, consociational arrangements curb executive dominance through power-sharing, mutual vetoes, and proportional representation, features that incumbents are unlikely to embrace unless they are compelled by crisis or persuaded under the expectation that compromise serves their strategic survival. Across much of the Horn of Africa, particularly in Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda, and, to a lesser extent, Kenya, a pronounced asymmetry persists between dominant state elites and comparatively weak societal forces. This imbalance reduces incentives for ruling elites to negotiate meaningful power-sharing arrangements. Somalia presents a partial exception because prolonged state collapse and fragmented sovereignty have reshaped the state–society balance, thereby creating conditions in which elite bargaining and negotiated settlements became more structurally necessary rather than purely voluntary concessions.

At the same time, societal forces often lack the capacity to impose a democratic settlement. Protest movements are frequently fragmented and vulnerable to repression. Moreover, armed struggles, as seen in Ethiopia and the Sudan, may succeed in toppling regimes but tend to reproduce militarized and centralized rule rather than democratic orders. If cycles of protest and rebellion have failed to yield durable democratization, alternative pathways must be explored. Drawing on comparative insights from scholars such as Dan Slater and Joseph Wong<sup>32</sup>, Semir Yusuf proposes a less trodden path: negotiated democratization driven by incentives rather than sheer contestation. Historical experience in parts of East Asia suggests that regimes may liberalize when they perceive electoral competition as winnable, especially after achieving

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<sup>32</sup> See for instance, Dan Slater and Joseph Wong (2013). ‘The Strength to Concede: Ruling Parties and Democratization in Developmental’. *American Political Science Association*.

developmental success that generates broad legitimacy and a growing middle class. In such cases, democratization becomes a strategic concession rather than a forced capitulation.

The experience of East Asia is often seen as distinctive. Many countries in the region have long histories of statehood and relatively strong traditions of national identity. This has helped reduce fundamental disputes over the idea of the nation itself. In such contexts, ruling groups have sometimes been more cohesive and better able to pursue long-term policy visions and coordinated development strategies<sup>33</sup>. In much of the Horn of Africa, however, the situation has been different. Politics has frequently been highly personalized, and ruling coalitions have often been fragmented, even in periods of relatively strong central leadership, such as under Meles Zenawi in Ethiopia.

As a result, governing groups may have been strong enough to maintain control and suppress opposition, but not necessarily cohesive or broadly legitimate enough to articulate shared national visions or sustain inclusive development strategies. This dynamic complicates the argument that democratization can emerge gradually from strong, development-oriented authoritarian states, a thesis often associated with some East Asian experiences. In many parts of the Horn, the absence of broad national cohesion and stable governing coalitions renders such pathways more difficult, suggesting that democratization processes may follow different trajectories. While commenting on the challenges of democratic transition in Ethiopia through the developmental state pathway, Francis Fukuyama said:

Ethiopia's developmental state project faces a fundamental challenge: the need to balance diversity, national unity, and political openness. Highly diverse societies, as Ethiopia is, often require decentralization and local autonomy, but this must be accompanied by a shared sense of national identity and common purpose. Without such cohesion, it becomes difficult to sustain collective political and economic projects. Ethiopia also needs greater democratic openness. A key drawback of the developmental state model is its heavy concentration of power in the executive. While such centralization may initially support rapid development, over time it can become counterproductive by

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<sup>33</sup> Aurel Croissant. "Democratization, National Identity, and Foreign Policy in Southeast Asia". *The Asian Forum*. November - December 2025

suppressing social and political forces that seek greater participation. Pressures that are contained for long periods rarely disappear; they tend to resurface eventually, even in systems that appear stable in the short term such as China<sup>34</sup>.

What incentives for democracy might operate in the Horn depends on country-specific dynamics. They could include a ruling party seeking to convert developmental achievements into electoral capital or initiating a credible national dialogue that establishes consensual democratic rules of engagement. Alternatively, sustained but calibrated pressure from armed or civic actors, short of violent overthrow, could produce a “Magna Carta moment,” rebalancing relations between state and society through negotiated constraints. Ultimately, overcoming the limits of winners-take-all electoral system in the Horn requires more than electoral reform. It demands a recalibration of power, transforming zero-sum competition into structured inclusion and replacing coercive dominance with negotiated constitutionalism.

#### **2.2.4 The resource curse - The Horn’s oily kleptocracies**

The states of the Horn of Africa are widely regarded as a new frontier for hydrocarbon exploration. Significant deposits of oil, gold, and copper have expanded the region’s extractive sector, particularly in Sudan and South Sudan, where oil was discovered in the 1980s. Sudan began exporting oil in 1999. Following independence in 2011, South Sudan inherited roughly 75 percent of the formerly unified country’s oil reserves<sup>35</sup>. Kenya discovered commercially viable oil in Turkana in 2012 and commenced limited exports in 2019<sup>36</sup>. Uganda, where oil was discovered in 2006, is expected to begin production soon, with projected annual revenues in the billions of dollars<sup>37</sup>. Ethiopia and Somalia remain at the exploration stage, but in 2025, Ethiopia inaugurated the initial stages of a multibillion-dollar Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) Project in the Somali Region, linked to a

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<sup>34</sup> Francis Fukuyama (2019). Keynote at the Conference on ‘Democracy and the Future of Ethiopia’s Developmental State Conference’. Centre for International Private Enterprise, June 11-14, 2019, Addis Ababa.

<sup>35</sup> ICG. 2021/ Oil or nothing. Dealing with South Sudan’s bleeding finances. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/305-oil-or-nothing-dealing-south-sudans-bleeding-finances>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/8/26/kenya-joins-ranks-of-oil-exporting-countries>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad645-blessing-or-curse-for-many-ugandans-costs-outweigh-benefits-of-natural-resource-extraction/>

major fertilizer company<sup>38</sup>. Beyond hydrocarbons, gold has become increasingly important –most notably at Jebel Amer in Sudan’s Darfur region, the Bisha gold and copper mine in Eritrea, and the Lega Dembi Mine in Ethiopia.

Given the Horn’s low human development indicators and recurrent humanitarian crises, such resource wealth might be expected to catalyze broad-based development. Instead, the region has largely followed the trajectory of the “resource curse” –a paradox in which countries rich in natural resources experience economic underperformance and governance deterioration. Overreliance on extractive industries distorts economies, concentrates capital and labor in narrow sectors, and increases vulnerability to commodity price shocks<sup>39</sup>.

Even worse, resource wealth in weakly institutionalized settings has reinforced authoritarianism. A substantial body of research links oil rents to regime durability. Lucas I. González, for example, demonstrates how large oil revenues enable rentier governments to expand patronage networks, buy political loyalty, and strengthen repressive apparatuses. Oil reduces rulers’ dependence on taxation and, by extension, on citizen consent. As a result, the fiscal foundations of accountability erode<sup>40</sup>.

The case of South Sudan clearly illustrates this dynamic. Oil revenues have fueled what Alex de Waal describes as a “political marketplace,”<sup>41</sup> in which loyalty is monetized and state offices become instruments of patronage distribution. Rather than investing in social services or accountable governance, elites allocate oil rents to secure military and political allegiance. The absence of institutional checks prior to oil discovery has entrenched this rentier’s logic.

However, it is to be noted that Oil wealth does not inevitably produce authoritarianism. In countries such as Norway and Canada, strong institutions converted resource revenues into public goods and long-term prosperity. The difference thus lies in governance architecture. Where democratic institutions constrain executive power, resource revenues are

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.ebc.et/english/Home/NewsDetails?NewsId=2025>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/r/resource-curse.asp>

<sup>40</sup> L. I. González (2018). Oil rents and patronage: the fiscal effects of oil booms in the Argentine provinces. *Comparative Politics*, 51(1), 101-126.

<sup>41</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08962ed915d622c0001b7/JSRP-Brief-2.pdf>

more likely to be transparently managed, and where such constraints are absent, extractive wealth becomes a tool of elite entrenchment<sup>42</sup>.

In Eritrea, for instance, revenues from the Bisha mine reportedly doubled GDP between 2011 and 2015, yet the allocation of these funds remains opaque. Observers note that proceeds largely strengthened patronage networks centered on military elites, reinforcing President Isaias Afwerki's resilient autocracy.<sup>43</sup>

Resource windfalls may also intensify militarization. In Sudan, the onset of oil exports coincided with significant arms imports, contributing to the escalation of civil war. In Uganda, the centralization of control over oil governance and President Museveni's personalization of the sector signal the risk of future rent consolidation even before large-scale production begins<sup>44</sup>. Even in Kenya, where institutions are comparatively stronger, oil discoveries have already generated governance challenges. Anticipated rents have spurred intra-elite competition over licensing and regulatory control, while local communities in Turkana have raised concerns about environmental degradation, inequitable benefit-sharing, and communal conflict<sup>45</sup>.

Across the Horn, therefore, extractive wealth has too often reinforced executive dominance, militarization, and patronage politics rather than inclusive development. Without robust democratic institutions, transparent fiscal regimes, parliamentary oversight, an independent judiciary, and empowered civil society, the region's natural resources are likely to remain political curses rather than developmental blessings.

## **2.2.5 Weak countries, weak subregional entities**

The Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD), established in 1986, gradually expanded its scope and mandate, culminating in its transformation into the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in 1996. IGAD continues to face the challenge of

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<sup>42</sup> John C. Anyanwu and Andrew E. O. Erhijakpor. Does Oil Wealth Affect Democracy in Africa? Working Paper. No 184 – November 2013 <https://www.afdb.org/>

<sup>43</sup> Interview with an expert on Eritrea, December 12, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/7/15/oil-drilling-continues-in-ugandan-park-despite-threat>

<sup>45</sup> Matthew Tyce (2020). "Competition, Fragmentation and 'Resource Factionalism': The Politics of Governing Oil and Gas in Kenya". *ESID Working Paper No 140*. Manchester: Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre, The University of Manchester. 4 September 2020. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3661541](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3661541)

addressing an increasingly broad regional agenda. In comparative terms, IGAD remains one of the weakest regional economic communities (RECs) in Africa. Its relative strength lies in peace and security, particularly through mediation efforts in conflict-affected countries such as Sudan (e.g., the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement) and South Sudan (e.g., the 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement). However, these interventions are rarely anchored in a coherent governance reform agenda, despite limited initiatives such as the IGAD Governance Forum (IGF), which provides platforms for human rights institutions, youth, and women's organizations.

Several structural and contextual challenges further weaken IGAD. Chief among these is the persistent crisis of statehood and political instability across the region. Four of the eight member states - Ethiopia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Somalia - are currently experiencing active conflicts. Political tension is rising in Uganda due to blocked political transitions under President Museveni's extended rule, while Eritrea's authoritarian regime, though resilient, remains fragile, raising concerns about instability in a post-Isaias Afwerki era. Even Kenya, widely regarded as a relatively more democratic country in the region, has faced political unrest linked to electoral violence. While inter-state tensions exist, the predominant form of conflict in the region is domestic, largely stemming from governance deficits. Without meaningful national political stability, pursuing a regional democratization agenda remains difficult. Democracy in the IGAD region is likely to emerge only through genuine national processes, such as inclusive dialogue and the establishment of new social contracts.

There seems to be tension between IGAD's founding objectives, member state interests, donor dependence, and continental expectations that encourage the organization to emulate other African RECs. Although IGAD has adopted many of the institutional forms associated with regional integration, it largely operates through ad hoc processes, relying heavily on the personalized involvement of Heads of State and exhibiting few systematic, institutionalized mechanisms to address regional common interests<sup>46</sup>. This creates a persistent tension between the structural logic of regional integration and the practical realities of conflict and political fragmentation, which continue to undermine IGAD's effectiveness.

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<sup>46</sup> Bruce Byiers (2016). *The Political Economy of Regional Integration in Africa*. Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Report. <http://ecdpm.org/peria/igad>

The primary obstacle that undermines economic and political integration in the IGAD region, thereby preventing it from emerging as a strong REC, is the prevalence of protracted conflicts, most of which are domestic, although inter-state tensions also play a role. Another significant challenge is the absence of a stable and powerful country capable of serving as a center of predominant influence in the region, akin to Nigeria in West Africa, South Africa in Southern Africa, or Egypt in North Africa.

Ethiopia and Kenya come closer to fulfilling this role in the Horn of Africa. Kenya is politically stable with the strongest economy in the region. On the other hand, Ethiopia borders all IGAD member states except Uganda, and it is the continent's second most populous country, with a population of over 120 million. Its rapid economic growth and strategic landlocked location that necessitates access to the sea through win-win options, and abundant energy resources, give Ethiopia substantial potential to drive regional integration. Yet, there seems to be a preference for bilateral engagement over multilateral cooperation. Various factors, including the geo-political interests and interventions (highlighted in Section 2.2.6) that strive to polarize the countries in the Horn, have constrained IGAD's collective capacity. The region's political instability further exacerbates this situation, creating a leadership vacuum. These factors limit the promotion of shared growth and democratization and inhibit the spillover of democratic norms across borders.

At any rate, the idea of a single hegemon driving democratization in Africa's subregions is questionable. Regional dynamics are more fragmented, and external influence or domestic constraints often limit the ability of even the most powerful states to act as consistent champions of democratic change. Even regions with a discernible hegemon are not as cohesive. North Africa is far from a unified political bloc, and West Africa faces its own challenges, partly because Nigeria, despite its regional prominence, has been reluctant or at times unable to assert consistent leadership across the subregion. As a result, smaller states often look elsewhere for support, including external powers like Russia in the Sahel. Similarly, South Africa has been slow to actively promote democratization, particularly in neighboring countries such as Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Eswatini.

The role of regional organizations in the democratization of countries in the Horn, such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), remains highly constrained. Many member states are politically unstable, economically fragile, or affected by ongoing conflicts, which

limits their ability to contribute effectively to regional initiatives. As a result, IGAD functions as a fragile regional economic community, often struggling to assert authority or enforce its policies across the subregion. This fragility is compounded by structural dependence on external donors, who provide much of the organization's operational and financial capacity. While donor support enables IGAD to maintain basic programs and mediation efforts, it also restricts the organization's autonomy and can create incentives to prioritize donor agendas over local needs. Consequently, IGAD's influence on promoting democracy, resolving conflicts, or stabilizing member states is often reactive and limited, rather than proactive or transformative.

Ultimately, the combination of weak member states, ongoing insecurity, and reliance on external financing underscores the institutional limitations of IGAD, highlighting the need for deeper domestic reforms and stronger regional commitment if it is to play a meaningful role in shaping governance and stability in the Horn of Africa. An IGAD staff member has highlighted these challenges:

An entity that is 90% donor-dependent cannot drive a strategic agenda, such as stabilizing countries in the region to enable democratization. Member States' investment in IGAD is largely limited to the Secretariat. While donor funding allows for activities through platforms like the Governance Forum, these initiatives are neither reliable nor sustainable. For IGAD to be viable, Member States must demonstrate ownership. The problem is not the mandate; like other RECs, IGAD could champion inclusive governance, but without political will, most planned activities remain declarations of intent, dependent on donor benevolence. Membership fees are often paid late, if at all. When interests are incompatible, a common house cannot be built. That is the reality in IGAD, where countries prioritize national interests and bilateral engagements over regional cooperation.<sup>47</sup>

The weakness of IGAD reflects the broader incapacity of regional and continental entities to entrench democratic norms. Member states in the region are burdened by protracted domestic conflicts, often stemming from autocratic rule and ongoing nation-building crises. Loyalty to IGAD is further fragmented: Kenya, for example, prioritizes the East African Community (EAC) over IGAD, which it perceives as Ethiopia's domain. Half of the Horn of Africa countries, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, and

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<sup>47</sup> Interview January 06, 2024

Sudan, are not members of the EAC, while Somalia joined only recently. This has fostered divided loyalties and an unofficial division of labor, with IGAD focusing on peace and security, and the EAC on trade. Moreover, the EAC is more advanced in promoting democratic norms and building regional institutions, as reflected in the regional parliament and the East African Court of Justice<sup>48</sup>.

The central challenge for weak regional entities is the persistence of entrenched and/or unstable autocracies. Genuine regional integration requires democracy, or at a minimum, legitimate governments willing and able to live by agreed rules. Democracies are more likely to honor international commitments, whereas autocrats resist ceding authority, both downward to citizens and upward to supranational organizations. In this regard, the EAC has stronger potential to support democratization. However, it faces its own limitations: its membership includes relatively democratic countries, such as Kenya, alongside entrenched autocracies like Uganda and Rwanda. Even though the EAC's primary mandate is economic, its objectives cannot be fully realized without democratic governance and respect for the rule of law because economic integration requires the rule of law and institutional trust as its baseline enablers.

A coordinated approach between IGAD and the EAC could help address some of these challenges. A formal division of labor, anchored in a memorandum of understanding, could assign IGAD the lead on peace and security and the EAC the lead on trade. Such a framework would not only advance their respective mandates but also create opportunities to promote governance reform across the wider East African region<sup>49</sup>.

The African Union (AU) has a comprehensive mandate to establish, maintain, and advance democracy across its Member States. Since 2000, the AU has steadily expanded its efforts to promote democratic governance on the continent, introducing innovative measures to prevent unconstitutional regime changes and strengthen democratic institutions. This mandate extends both through its own initiatives and via support to regional economic communities (RECs). Agenda 2063 envisions an Africa characterized by a universal culture of good governance, democratic values, gender equality, and respect for human rights, justice, and the rule of law.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.eac.int/about-eac>

Despite this broad mandate, the AU's effectiveness as a norm-setting institution and continental arbiter of democracy is constrained by its intergovernmental structure and the tension between the principles of democratic governance and the concept of elections as a sovereign prerogative of Member States. A study indicates that, in practice, the AU often prioritizes the maintenance of short-term peace over deeper democratic consolidation: "The tendency is for the AU to choose to posture around securing momentary peace. This has undermined democratic consolidation and progress on the continent despite the significant investment the AU has made in electoral and democratic governance institutions and processes over the past two decades".<sup>50</sup>

As a result, Africa continues to experience contested elections, as seen in Kenya and Uganda; popular uprisings, as in Ethiopia and Sudan; and attempts to extend presidential term limits unconstitutionally, as in Djibouti and Uganda. These developments illustrate the persistent gap between the AU's normative ambitions and its capacity to enforce democratic governance across the continent.

### **2.2.6 Strong external interference**

The Horn occupies a key strategic geographic location, attracting intense interest from both allies and adversaries. The region overlooks the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb strait, a crucial chokepoint connecting the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the northeastern Indian Ocean. These waterways are among the world's most important shipping lanes, carrying commercial goods as well as oil and gas shipments from West Asia to Europe and the Americas via the Suez Canal.

The Horn's geostrategic importance is further amplified by its proximity to the volatile Middle East and by its control of key natural resources. Notably, it is the source of the Blue Nile, which provides vital water supplies to Sudan and Egypt, while Ethiopia increasingly asserts its claims to equitable utilization. These factors have made the Horn one of the most intensely contested regions in Africa, drawing sustained external interference that has significantly influenced domestic politics, security, and development trajectories.

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Gerenge (2023). "The role of the African Union in tackling democratic recession in Africa". *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 30:3, 569-584

Historically, the region was a major Cold War battleground. Later, it became a key security focus for the West's Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), particularly with the rise of political Islam in Sudan and Somalia. In recent years, the Horn has also become a theater for Gulf States' hegemonic competition, reflecting the continued global significance of the region in both strategic and economic terms.

Countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, and Kenya have been regarded by the United States as key security partners in the post-9/11 era. This security focus has led to the securitization of development aid, often sidelining democracy and human rights agendas. Ethiopia and Uganda leveraged their geopolitical significance to shield democratic deficits and poor human rights records, thereby using the aid strategically to maintain autocratic rule while sustaining a modicum of political stability. For autocratic governments in the region, this presented an opportunity to gain international legitimacy and secure much-needed development assistance.

Despite the authoritarian nature of these governments, Western enthusiasm for supporting, training, and arming the military and security services of these states has grown unabated. Consequently, "illiberal states are emerging and consolidating in Africa, supported by securitization and the prioritization of security over democratic governance."<sup>51</sup>

Over the past two decades, China has emerged as a major partner for Africa, offering investment, finance (loans and grants), technology, trade, market access, and capacity-building support. The Horn is a key focus of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), exemplified by flagship projects such as the Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway and the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway. China has become the largest bilateral lender in the Horn; in Ethiopia, for example, approximately 50% of its \$28 billion external debt is owed to China. Governments in the region have been impressed by China's non-democratic path to rapid economic development, finding in it a model to justify autocratic practices in the name of "development."<sup>52</sup>

China's growing presence has also intensified Western geostrategic interest in the region. This has drawn the Horn into a broader US–China hegemonic rivalry, evident in the establishment of military bases in Djibouti by both powers. Djibouti now hosts military facilities from eight countries, creating one of the highest concentrations of foreign bases in

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<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Fischer and David M. Anderson. (2015). "Authoritarianism and the securitization of development in Africa". *International Affairs* 91(1), 131-151

<sup>52</sup> <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/01/ethiopia-defaults-amid-financial-strains-from-war-debt-to-china/>

Africa. The country's autocratic government has leveraged this geopolitical competition to generate rent that sustains patronage networks and consolidates domestic authority.

In recent years, the most significant external interference in the Horn of Africa has come from Gulf countries, expressed through multiple channels. One major dimension is the region's hegemonic struggles, particularly the tension between Qatar and Iran on one side, and the Saudi-UAE alliance on the other, often framed around support for political Islam, which Qatar champions. Both camps have found willing local clients, lured by financial inducements, enabling Gulf powers to influence domestic politics. Somalia and Sudan have been the most affected in this regard.

The war in Yemen, between the Iran-backed Houthis and the Saudi-UAE coalition, has further intensified Gulf influence in the Horn. The conflict created a lucrative market for mercenaries, with thousands of soldiers recruited to fight on behalf of Gulf States facing manpower shortages. At the peak of the war in 2016-2017, Sudanese troop deployments reportedly exceeded 40,000, supporting the Saudi-UAE coalition<sup>53</sup>. Sudan's autocratic ruler at the time, Omar al-Bashir, and his protégé Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) reportedly received substantial payments for their support. Hemedti himself confirmed the scale of Sudanese involvement. While serving as deputy head of Sudan's ruling military council in 2019, Hemedti stated that "as many as 30,000 Sudanese soldiers are fighting alongside the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen."<sup>54</sup>

The separate deployment of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), coupled with the differential financial rewards from their Gulf sponsors, has been a key factor in fracturing Sudan's military. This dynamic also underpinned Hemedti's rise to prominence, illustrating how Gulf interference in the Horn not only shapes regional conflicts but also reshapes domestic power structures.

The current competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE represents the latest, and perhaps most impactful, hegemonic rivalry in the Horn. Following the partial withdrawal of the United States from the region, the UAE, under the ambitious leadership of Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ), has sought to punch above its weight and challenge its much larger neighbor, Saudi Arabia. The UAE's interests in the region are diverse, ranging from

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<sup>53</sup> <https://apnews.com/general-news-d5705f44afea4f0b91ec14bbadefae62>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/30-000-sudanese-forces-fighting-in-yemen-official/1512989>

the acquisition of strategic ports along the Red Sea (and secure military bases) to investments in gold and commercial agriculture to ensure food security. More importantly, the UAE pursues a client-state strategy: its preferred geopolitical approach is to act through proxies, which is cost-effective and allows the pursuit of multiple objectives simultaneously. As a UN expert on the region observes:

The UAE has commercial, economic, and military interests in the Horn of Africa. But these are not the primary drivers. Its main goal is to construct regional power through proxies. This approach has been evident in Libya, Yemen, and Sudan. A proxy is often more valuable than direct interests because it enables the achievement of multiple strategic objectives.<sup>55</sup>

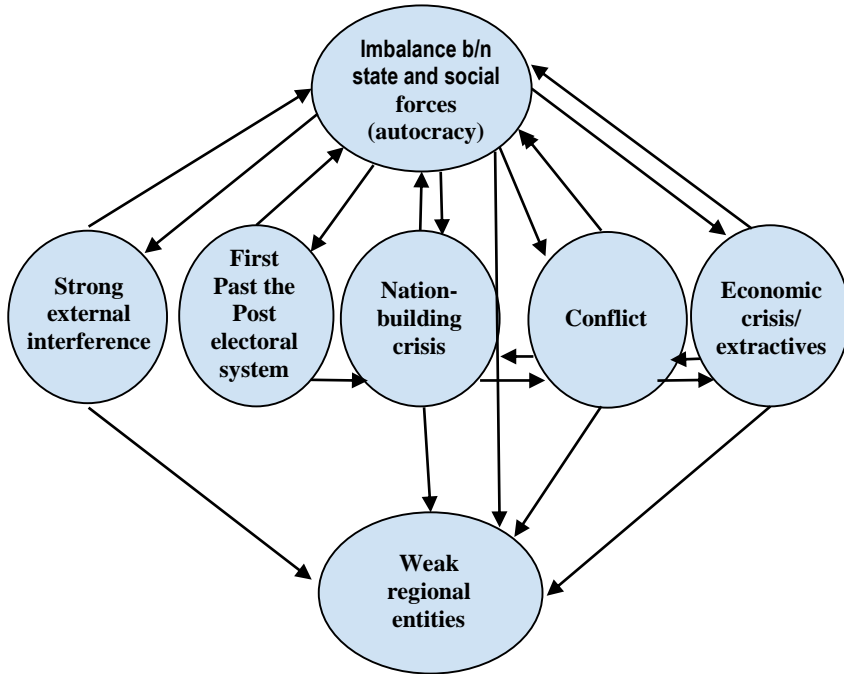
The various impediments to democratization in the GHoA are deeply interrelated, and they include: nation-building crises, power asymmetries between state and societal forces, winner-takes-all electoral systems, resource dependence, weak regional entities, and strong external interference. For instance, when power is heavily skewed in favor of the state, nation-building crises are exacerbated as governments employ coercive measures against societal actors. This often enforces a narrow political settlement, creating large populations of aggrieved ethnic groups and deepening societal divisions. These groups, in turn, resist state power, prompting further coercion and generating a vicious cycle of conflict. In the Horn of Africa, such struggles rarely occur in peaceful contexts, as external actors often exacerbate local divisions and inject violence.

Conflict is closely linked to economic crises, which themselves reinforce instability. Autocratic governance amplifies the so-called resource curse, as extractive industries consolidate elite power and entrench authoritarian rule. This dynamic is reinforced by external actors: the Horn's geostrategic significance attracts global and emerging powers, who often prefer to engage authoritarian governments perceived as reliable proxies for securing resources and strategic influence. Autocracies respond effectively to this "geopolitical marketplace," leveraging rents from external patrons to consolidate power further.

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with Yousuf Belel, Advisor to the UN Secretariat, Addis Ababa, November 12, 2023.

The following diagram illustrates this complex interplay among structural, domestic, and external factors that collectively impede democratization in the GHoA region.



**Figure 2.** *The Positive Feedback Loop Circuit among Democracy-Impeding Factors in the GHoA*

**Source:** Author’s conceptualization based on the analysis

Based on the framework depicted in the preceding diagram, the most fundamental obstacle appears to be the profound power imbalance between state and societal forces. This imbalance obstructs the emergence of peaceful political negotiation and constrains meaningful democratization. Yet, it is also the most difficult factor to address, and historically, little has been done to tackle it. Progress may require a combination of sustained pressure from multiple stakeholders and carefully designed incentives that encourage political regimes to concede in selected areas, thereby creating openings for democratic processes to take root. Over time, such measures could catalyze broader political reform and help break the vicious cycle that has long impeded democratization in the region. Across the region, authoritarian governance has persisted despite ideological differences, from monarchy and military rule to electoral authoritarianism.

## 2.3 Prospects for Democratization in the Horn

Despite the entrenchment of autocratic rule, persistent conflicts, and sustained external interference in the region, there have been pockets of progress toward democratization. In Ethiopia, for example, state-society relations have gradually become more inclusive of historically marginalized groups over the past five decades. This trend is particularly notable when viewed in historical context, compared with the social and political landscape before the 1974 revolution. A key manifestation of this inclusiveness is decentralization and self-rule. From a liberal democratic perspective, however, Ethiopia's overall trajectory has regressed; political liberalization has been fleeting and not resulted in a full democratic transition. Nonetheless, these reforms have facilitated the development of nascent democratic institutions. A notable example is the establishment of the Human Rights Commission, which increasingly engages in government human rights violations while seeking to promote a culture of rights through initiatives such as the annual Human Rights Festivals.

Most countries in the region have introduced gender reforms aimed at improving women's political representation. In Ethiopia, early efforts to elevate women to prominent leadership positions such as the Office of the President; Federal Supreme Court and Election Board led some observers to describe the moment as an aspirational "feminist Ethiopia."<sup>56</sup> However, women's political representation has declined in subsequent years. These earlier appointments were largely discretionary, reflecting the preferences of the executive rather than institutionalized reforms. This experience highlights the limits of vanguardist approaches and forms of "state feminism" that rely primarily on top-down political will rather than durable institutional guarantees.<sup>57</sup>

A more organic example of progress is found in South Sudan, where women's movements successfully secured representation at peace negotiation tables in 2018, ensuring that women's voices were included in critical political processes. These developments suggest that, even amid structural challenges and entrenched authoritarianism, there are emerging

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<sup>56</sup> Zemdna Abebe. A "Feminist" Ethiopia? What's Really behind the Country's Recent Reforms? <https://www.boell.de/en/2019/10/29/feminist-ethiopia-whats-really-behind-countrys-recent-reforms>

<sup>57</sup> Dereje Feyissa (2026). "Vanguardism: the limits of Ethiopia's state feminism in combating violence against women". In Adam Moe Fejerskov, Lars Engberg-Pedersen, Meron Zeleke and Dereje Feyissa (eds.). *Norms and Violence Against Women in Ethiopia: We Were Never Global*. Elgar.

footholds for democratization, driven by inclusive institutional reforms and active civil society engagement<sup>58</sup>. In Sudan, women played a central role in the pro-democracy protests of 2018–2019. Alaa Salah, a 22-year-old student clad in white, became an iconic figure for her exciting speeches during the sit-ins, widely regarded as embodying Sudan’s recent democratic movement<sup>59</sup>.

Kenya provides a progressive example through its democratically configured judiciary, which has strengthened public confidence in the rule of law. A recent illustration of this is the November 2023 High Court ruling against the controversial housing levy introduced by President Ruto. The court declared the levy unconstitutional and discriminatory, marking a major setback for the government. This ruling followed widespread violent protests in July 2023 against the levy, underscoring the judiciary’s role in protecting citizens’ rights<sup>60</sup>.

Arguably, the implementation of diversity-friendly governance reforms is another positive development in the region. Examples include Kenya’s devolution, Uganda’s decentralization, and the federal restructuring of the state in Ethiopia and Somalia. Yet in Ethiopia and Somalia, discussions persist with regard to adjusting the political frameworks to temper identity-based politics. Federalism has also gained political traction in Sudan and South Sudan, reflected in peace agreements that incorporate decentralized governance provisions. Beyond better managing ethnic and regional diversity, these decentralized structures have brought government closer to citizens, improving responsiveness and accountability.

Ongoing national processes across the Horn of Africa could also contribute to democratization, particularly peace processes. In South Sudan, a civil war that claimed over 400,000 lives was settled as a result of the 2020 Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity. Similarly, in Ethiopia, the 2022 Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) ended two years of devastating conflict in Tigray and the broader northern Ethiopia, which displaced millions and cost thousands of lives. Although full implementation of the agreement remains incomplete and tensions persist, the Agreement has at least silenced the

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<sup>58</sup> “Women’s Representation Vital to Realizing South Sudan Revitalized Agreement, Peacekeeping Chief Tells Security Council”. <https://press.un.org/en/2018/sc13585.doc.htm>

<sup>59</sup> Hala alKarib (2021). “Sudanese women on the front lines of the resistance”. <https://sihanet.org/sudanese-women-on-the-front-lines-of-the-resistance/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.pulse.co.ke/story/court-of-appeal-suspends-collection-of-affordable-housing-levy-2024072915422695757>

guns, thereby giving political processes an opportunity to address the root causes.

National dialogues have also contributed to democratization efforts. Kenya, for example, convened the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation (KNDR) forum following the 2007 post-election violence which resulted in over a thousand deaths and displaced hundreds of thousands. The KNDR sought to achieve sustainable peace, stability, and justice through the rule of law and respect for human rights. Similar dialogue processes are underway or have been implemented in other Horn countries, reflecting an emerging recognition that inclusive, participatory political processes are critical to stability and democratization.

Kenya's first experiment with a power-sharing arrangement between the incumbent and opposition parties post 2007 and the adoption of the 2010 Constitution emerged directly from the national dialogue process. This produced a new constitutional order that restored constitutional democracy in Kenya. Similarly, both Sudan and South Sudan (2018-2020) implemented national dialogue processes, though with mixed outcomes. In Sudan, despite an extensive consultative process, ostensible dialogue processes largely resulted in the co-optation of moderate opponents. In South Sudan, the process lacked a concrete implementation plan, and the president has deferred many recommendations for "future implementation." Nevertheless, the South Sudanese dialogue was significant in identifying core governance problems. The Dialogue Commission notably recommended that the leaders of the two main rival factions step down and abstain from electoral competition, recognizing them as the primary drivers of the protracted conflict and political crisis in the country<sup>61</sup>.

Ethiopia is currently undertaking a national dialogue process. Despite early challenges related to legitimacy and transparency, it is widely seen as the only viable avenue for achieving a much-needed political settlement. Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan have also considered transitional justice mechanisms at various points. While these processes face potential challenges, they remain critical components of the democratization project in the region<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/south-sudans-people-have-spoken-peace-anyone-listening>

<sup>62</sup> Mersha Zenebe (2024). The 2022 Ethiopia's first-ever national dialogue formation: analyzing challenges and prospects. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1)

Some progress has been made in bridging the duality between informal traditional governance structures and formal state institutions. Yet, there is the need for caution against undermining popular civic participation, particularly because the region remains largely rural, while democratic politics is often concentrated in urban centers. In Somaliland, for instance, clan elders played a central role in the 1991–1993 settlement, contributing significantly to political stability. Their continued participation in governance has created what is often described as a hybrid democracy. In Ethiopia, democratization has been advanced through legal pluralism enabled by the federal system. Customary courts are constitutionally recognized, at least for civil matters, and efforts are underway to integrate them more formally into the criminal justice system with stronger links to state courts. Moreover, the Ministry of Peace conducted a comprehensive study on local institutions, documenting and categorizing them according to their relevance for conflict resolution and human rights. This highlights the potential of local governance structures to support democratic processes.

Traditional modes of governance in the Horn can also nurture meritocratic leadership, except in systems that are strictly based on hereditary rule. Among the Nuer of Ethiopia and South Sudan, for example, leaders emerge organically based on demonstrated ability to lead during both peace and conflict<sup>63</sup>. Governance in many local communities is participatory, with deliberations on vital community issues often taking place under the palaver tree—a practice sometimes likened to a traditional parliament. As Fidèle Ingiyimbere observes:

African culture has developed the practice of palaver as a way of dealing with social and political questions of the community. Usually held under a tree, the palaver is the African version of deliberative democracy. It is equivalent to Rawls’ concept of public reason—a mechanism for citizens to discuss matters of common interest.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Dereje Feyissa (2011). *Playing different games: The paradox of the identification strategies of the Anywaa and the Nuer in the Gambella region, Western Ethiopia*. Berghahn books.

<sup>64</sup> Fidèle Ingiyimbere (2024). “Public reason under the tree: Rawls and the African palaver”. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. 50 (2):281-298

Modern democratic governance would do well to learn from, and establish a sensible partnership with these traditional governance practices. Yet, the prevailing trend has been either neglect or co-option, which ultimately undermines their legitimacy as alternative bases of authority.

With regard to economic growth, East Africa, is projected to be the fastest-growing economic region globally over the next two decades, with a GDP compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.1% in real terms. Meanwhile, there are challenges such as high inflation, global supply chain disruptions, and the impact of wars and violent conflicts<sup>65</sup>. Ethiopia's recent push to increase agricultural productivity, particularly in the wheat sector, offers a promising step toward enhancing food security in a region marked by low human development indicators, civil wars, and widespread displacement.

## **2.4 Conclusion: Prospective Avenues of the Horn's Focus**

Commensurate with the challenges and prospects in the Horn's democratization process discussed in the preceding sections of this chapter, pursuits of economic development, stability, shared democratic space, coordinated public action and viable measures against the challenges in the Horn have direct implications for democratization. Numerous studies have demonstrated a positive association between economic development and democracy, even if the relationship is not strictly causal. Accordingly, if economic development in the region is sustained, it can create more favorable conditions for democratic institutions and practices to take root, thereby providing citizens with the material security and civic space that are necessary for meaningful engagement in governance.

The fragility or resilience of democracy ultimately depends on its ability to deliver stability and development. Countries that successfully transitioned to democracy in Asia did so largely because their regimes were able to provide sustained economic growth. A similar growth trajectory in the Horn of Africa could be reinforced if governments leverage the extractive sector for public benefit, turning a potential resource curse into a developmental blessing.

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<sup>65</sup> <https://www.euromonitor.com/article/east-africa---the-rising-economic-jewel-of-sub-saharan-africa#:~:text=>

Urbanization may also play a pivotal role in democratization. Africa remains the least urbanized continent, with only about 45% of its population living in urban areas, yet it has one of the fastest rates of urban growth globally. In Ethiopia, for example, urban coverage is currently below 20%, but the urban population is increasing at an annual rate of 4.63%.<sup>66</sup> While no direct causal link exists between urbanization and democracy, studies suggest that cities can facilitate coordinated public action, strengthen the effectiveness of civic mobilization, increase demand for democratic governance relative to authoritarian rule, and foster the development of “civic capital,” enabling citizens to shape and improve institutions<sup>67</sup>. More research is needed to evaluate these dynamics in the Horn specifically.

The proliferation of pro-democracy social movements, both offline and online, in cities and towns across the region offers further cause for optimism. These movements are generating new social actors capable of negotiating shared democratic space with state authorities. At the institutional level, there are calls for reform within the Regional Economic Communities (RECs), particularly IGAD.

In July 2023, IGAD adopted a new treaty to bring its operations in line with other RECs, replacing the original 1996 agreement. Key reforms include: (i) A predictable chairpersonship on a one-year rotational basis, with member states assuming office alphabetically; (ii) Mandates for the council to resolve disputes through negotiation; (iii) Provisions granting IGAD the authority to impose sanctions; and (iv) Defined annual schedules for meetings across all policy organs, including quarterly, biannual, and annual gatherings.

This new treaty, combined with active and connected leadership, provides a promising framework for IGAD to engage meaningfully with democratization efforts. By establishing clear institutional rules and mechanisms, IGAD can be better positioned to influence political stability and support democratic reforms in the region. In the course of these envisaged democratic reforms, the country case studies discussed in the following chapters (Chapter 3 to Chapter 7) can serve as baseline indicators because careful analysis of ‘where we are’ can serve as one of

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<sup>66</sup> Solomon Benti *et al* (2022). “Implications of overlooked drivers in Ethiopia's urbanization: curbing the curse of spontaneous urban development for future emerging towns”. *Heliyon*. 8(10).

<sup>67</sup> Edward L. Glaeser & Bryce M Steinberg (2016). *Transforming Cities: Does Urbanization Promote Democratic Change?* NBER Working Paper No. 22860

the core foundations in pursuits towards addressing the challenges in the democratization of the Horn.

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## Chapter 3

# Kenya: From Imperial Presidency to Multiparty Democracy

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### Introduction

This chapter explores Kenya's democratic journey and the challenges that continue to shape it. The discussion is organized into six sections and a conclusion. Section 3.1 traces the historical roots of autocracy in Kenya, from the colonial period through the postcolonial era. It shows how coercive governance practices and repeated constitutional changes created a dominant executive expressed in the form of an "imperial presidency." Over time, the executive accumulated significant power, often undermining democratic institutions. State agencies, including the police, were frequently used to monitor and control political space, helping incumbents secure electoral victories.

Section 3.2 examines the emergence of multiparty politics since the 1990s, driven by both domestic pressure and international influence. Although multiparty elections were introduced, the discussion in the section shows how President Daniel arap Moi used them to maintain an authoritarian system through manipulation, repression, and ethnic mobilization. A major turning point came in 2002 when the opposition coalition NARC (the National Rainbow Coalition) defeated the ruling party, opening new space for democratic reforms. Civil society became more influential, the judiciary grew more independent, and constitutional reform gained momentum, although the 2005 constitutional referendum ultimately failed.

Kenya's democratic trajectory faced its most severe test after the disputed 2007 election, which triggered widespread ethnic violence. An African Union–brokered power-sharing agreement helped restore stability and eventually led to the transformative 2010 Constitution. Elections since then have shown mixed progress: the 2013 and 2017 polls were relatively peaceful but (as highlighted in the discussion) they were marked by corruption and growing authoritarian tendencies, with disputes increasingly settled through the courts rather than violence. The 2022 election was the most peaceful and competitive in Kenya's history, signaling a potential shift from ethnic to class-based politics, reflected in

William Ruto’s “hustler” narrative against political “dynasties.” However, this progress was challenged in 2024 by youth-led protests against the Finance Bill, highlighting the rise of a digitally mobilized Generation Z and new forms of political activism.

Section 3.3 reviews Kenya’s performance in international democracy indices. Compared with many countries in the region, Kenya performs relatively well and is often rated “partly free.” Competitive elections, an active civil society, and an increasingly assertive judiciary have helped check executive power. Notable examples include the nullification of the 2017 presidential election, the blocking of the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) in 2021, the push back against the 2024 Finance Bill, and the suspension of a major U.S. health aid agreement over data privacy concerns in 2025. Despite these achievements, systemic corruption, often tied to presidential power and patronage networks, continues to undermine democratic and developmental progress.

Section 3.4 outlines key challenges to democratization. These include the continued dominance of the imperial presidency, persistent ethnic politicization and marginalization, particularly in the Northeast and coastal regions, flaws in the electoral system such as the winner-takes-all model, and deep social and economic inequalities. These inequalities limit meaningful political participation, reinforce patronage politics, and contribute to electoral tensions. Growing frustration among young people, combined with government responses perceived as inadequate, pose an additional challenge to democratic consolidation.

Sections 3.5 and 3.6 consider Kenya’s democratic prospects and show important foundations for optimism despite ongoing difficulties. The 2010 Constitution, stronger institutions, and the devolution of power to county governments have helped redistribute authority and resources. The judiciary, independent oversight bodies, and civil society have also played a role in reducing electoral violence and promoting legal solutions to political disputes. At the same time, emerging forms of political mobilization (particularly among young people and around socio-economic issues) suggest the possibility of more inclusive politics. To deepen democracy, the conclusion (Section 3.7) notes that Kenya’s democratization is a work in progress that needs to address various challenges, while the attainments offer important insights for its neighbors in the Horn.

### 3.1 The Historical Construction of Autocracy in Kenya

Kenya was a British colony, initially established as the British East Africa Protectorate in 1894 and later transformed into a British Crown Colony in 1920. Echoing a similar continental pattern, the Kenyan colonial state consolidated more than forty previously independent communities into a single territorial entity<sup>1</sup>. Kenya's major ethnic groups include the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luhya, Luo, and Kamba, who together account for approximately 65 percent of the population. Both the colonial and post-colonial states struggled to transform this multi-ethnic polity into a coherent nation-state. During the colonial and much of the post-colonial period, authoritarian and coercive state structures were used to hold together Kenya's diverse communities.

One of the most contentious aspects of colonial rule in Kenya was settler colonialism and the associated alienation of land. The so-called White Highlands, Kenya's central uplands, were officially reserved for the exclusive use of Europeans, a policy that fueled widespread resentment and ultimately gave rise to the anti-colonial Mau Mau rebellion (1952–1960), waged by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) against British authorities<sup>2</sup>. In their efforts to suppress the rebellion, the British committed widespread atrocities, including the mass relocation and detention of local populations, particularly the Kikuyu, who were most actively involved in the resistance<sup>3</sup>.

By the early 1960s, armed resistance had given way to peaceful political struggle with the emergence of nationalist parties. The Kenya African National Union (KANU), led by Jomo Kenyatta, advocated a strong centralized government, while the Kenya African Democratic Union (KADU), led by Ronald Ngala and Daniel arap Moi, argued that ethnic interests would be better protected through a decentralized political system. KADU was also motivated by concerns over potential Kikuyu dominance, given their status as Kenya's largest ethnic group<sup>4</sup>. In 1962, the two parties formed a coalition government under colonial rule, and following elections in May 1963, Kenyatta became prime minister under a

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<sup>1</sup> B. A. Ogot & W. R. Ochieng (Eds.) (2000) Kenya: *The Making of a Nation: A Hundred Years of Kenya's History (1895-1995)*. Maseno University, Institute of Research and Postgraduate Studies

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/the-pursuit-of-justice-against-colonial-repression-by-the-mau-mau-in-kenya>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.britannica.com//place/Kenya/World-War-II-to-independence>

constitution granting Kenya self-government. After further constitutional negotiations in London, Kenya attained full independence on 12 December 1963, with Kenyatta as its first president and Oginga Odinga as vice president<sup>5</sup>.

Following independence, Kenya briefly experimented with a multiparty system and remained formally multiparty until 1964. The Independence Constitution, commonly known as the Lancaster Constitution, was negotiated by Kenyan nationalists in London in the lead-up to independence in 1963. It provided for a multiparty system, parliamentary democracy, and a federal (regional) structure of government. The constitution established mechanisms for the separation of powers, a bicameral legislature comprising the Senate and the House of Representatives, and a dual executive in which the British monarch served as head of state, represented by a governor-general, while executive authority rested with a prime minister as head of government<sup>6</sup>.

Multipartyism was effectively terminated in 1964 when KADU and the African People's Party (APP) merged with the ruling KANU, transforming Kenya into a single-party state<sup>7</sup>. Although this merger was initially presented as a coalition arrangement, it marked the beginning of the systematic consolidation of power under KANU. Central to this process was President Jomo Kenyatta's crafting of a powerful 'imperial presidency' through a series of constitutional amendments. The first amendment, enacted barely a year after independence, transformed Kenya into a republic, abolished the office of the governor-general, and created an executive presidency. It transferred the powers of both the head of state and the head of government to the president, thereby eliminating the office of the prime minister. The authority of the six regional governments was simultaneously curtailed through centralized control over financial disbursements, effectively hollowing out the federal structure<sup>8</sup>.

During his fifteen years in power (1963–1978), Kenyatta oversaw sixteen constitutional amendments, all of which contributed to the concentration of power in the presidency<sup>9</sup>. Kenya briefly reverted to

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Stephen Kirimi, project manager, peacebuilding CSO working in the Horn, December 11, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> [https://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/1963\\_Constitution.pdf](https://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/1963_Constitution.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/1963\\_Constitution.pdf](https://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/1963_Constitution.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Rok Ajulu (2021). *Kenyatta and the Making of an Authoritarian State, 1969-1978*. Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/broken-promise-kenyattas-love-abusive-imperial-presidency-nyawa>

multiparty politics between 1966 and 1969 following a political fallout between Kenyatta and Vice President Odinga Odinga, who went on to establish the Kenya People's Union (KPU). This split reflected deep ideological differences: Kenyatta favored a capitalist economic model aligned with colonial-era structures, while Odinga espoused a more left-leaning, pro-poor political orientation with socialist tendencies. By the end of the 1960s, Kenyatta had consolidated an increasingly autocratic state intolerant of dissent. In 1969, Odinga and other senior KPU leaders were arrested, the KPU was banned, and Kenya became a de facto one-party state until 1982<sup>10</sup>.

Daniel arap Moi succeeded Kenyatta upon his death in 1978 and ruled the country until 2002. Like his predecessor, Moi relied heavily on constitutional engineering to entrench executive dominance, overseeing fourteen constitutional amendments during his twenty-four years in office. The most consequential of these was the introduction of Section 2A of the Constitution in 1982, which transformed Kenya from a de facto into a de jure one-party state by constitutionally entrenching KANU's monopoly on political power. Section 2A eliminated the legal space for alternative political parties and restructured nomination procedures for elections to ensure exclusive control by the ruling party. In this sense, the authoritarian project initiated under Kenyatta was consummated under Moi, culminating in a presidency largely devoid of institutional checks and balances<sup>11</sup>.

These developments occurred against the backdrop of heightened political insecurity. In 1982, Odinga's attempt to register a socialist opposition party, combined with a failed coup attempt by the Kenya Air Force, provided Moi with the pretext to intensify repression. The regime launched a broad campaign against perceived disloyalty, particularly targeting intellectuals, students, and opposition figures. As was the practice under colonial rule and the Kenyatta presidency, the police and security apparatus were deployed as primary instruments of control. Widespread detentions without trial, forced exile, and the systematic suppression of dissent became hallmarks of Moi's rule, further reinforcing the centralized and coercive nature of the state<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000010159/kenyatta-s-mistrust-for-odinga-that-led-to-his-detention>

<sup>11</sup> Jennifer A. Widner (1993). *The Rise of a Party-State in Kenya. From "Harambee!" to "Nyayo!"* University of California Press.

<sup>12</sup> <https://nation.africa/kenya/nation-prime/how-ochuka-coup-attempt-changed-kenya-1910656>

Moi vehemently opposed political liberalization, arguing that multiparty politics would inevitably lead to ethnic conflict and political instability. He justified the one-party state as uniquely suited to Kenya, claiming it reflected ‘traditional African’ modes of governance based on consensus rather than competition. This discourse echoed earlier defenses of single-party rule advanced by first-generation African leaders such as Tanzania’s Julius Nyerere, who argued that the one-party state was rooted in precolonial African political traditions<sup>13</sup>. However, unlike Nyerere, who was broadly committed to forging a cohesive national identity, both Kenyatta and Moi entrenched ethnicized patronage networks that tied political power to their respective ethnic constituencies, thereby deepening, rather than transcending, ethnic divisions in Kenyan politics.

### **3.2 The Re-emergence /Advent of Multiparty Democracy (Since 1992)**

Under mounting internal and external pressure, President Daniel arap Moi accepted the repeal of Section 2A of the Constitution in December 1991, thereby reconstituting Kenya as a multiparty state and paving the way for the first multiparty elections in 1992. Crucially, the amendment included a two-term limit on presidents, which would prove decisive in the country’s first peaceful alternation of power in 2002. Despite this formal political opening, Moi, still ruling through KANU, remained in power after orchestrating victory in the 1992 and 1997 elections, both of which were marred by extensive irregularities, intimidation, and violence, and fell far short of accepted standards of free and fair elections. The state continued to harass opposition actors, while electoral manipulation and coercion became central strategies for regime survival<sup>14</sup>.

Most notably, the Moi regime instrumentalized the police and other coercive institutions to facilitate and manage ‘ethnic’ violence, particularly in the Rift Valley, to weaken opposition support. The periods preceding the 1992 and 1997 elections were characterized by orchestrated interethnic violence aimed at undermining opposition electoral prospects. In the aftermath of the 1992 elections, more than 1,500 people were killed, and

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<sup>13</sup> Angelique Haugerud (1995). *The culture of politics in Kenya*. Cambridge University Press, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Korwa Adar & Isaac M Munyae (2001). “Human Rights Abuse in Kenya under Daniel Arap Moi, 1978-2001”. *African Studies Quarterly*, Volume 5, Issue 1.

over 300,000 were internally displaced, while the 1997 elections resulted in at least 100 deaths and the displacement of more than 100,000 people<sup>15</sup>.

At the same time, the opening provided important impetus to a nascent civil society sector as well as businesses and other entities with relative autonomy from the state. Opposition political parties also grew more organized and resilient. When the 2002 elections approached, Moi was no longer eligible to run due to the two-term limit. He went on to endorse a relatively inexperienced Uhuru Kenyatta –son of Jome Kenyatta– as the ruling party’s flag bearer.

The 2002 general election marked Kenya’s first genuinely competitive multiparty contest. Opposition parties coalesced to form the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), which decisively defeated KANU’s candidate, Uhuru Kenyatta. Ineligible to run for re-election, Moi did not seem to have the incentives to deploy the full force of the state to rig the elections to favor a successor. Mwai Kibaki, a former vice president under Moi and the NARC candidate, won 62.2 percent of the vote, compared to 31.3 percent for Kenyatta and 5.89 percent for FORD–People candidate Simeon Nyachae<sup>16</sup>. For the first time since independence, the ruling party conceded defeat and transferred power peacefully.

However, the NARC coalition proved short-lived. Disputes over power-sharing arrangements and disputes over a promised comprehensive constitutional reform led Raila Odinga, son of Kenya’s first Vice President, to break away and form the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). After the government undermined a relatively inclusive constitution-making process that led to the “Bomas” Draft Constitution of Kenya in 2004, and pursued a government-controlled process, ODM opposed Kibaki’s attempt to introduce a new constitution that, among other things, retained key aspects of the imperial presidency. In the constitutional referendum on what became commonly known as the “Wako Draft” in 2005, most Kenyans voted against the proposed constitution. While the referendum represented an important moment of popular resistance to executive overreach, the mobilization campaign was also marked by the deployment of anti-Kikuyu rhetoric. ODM’s grassroots messaging framed the contest as one of “forty-one tribes against one” and

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<sup>15</sup> Mwangi Kagwanja (1998). *Killing the vote: State Sponsored Violence and Flawed Elections in Kenya*. Nairobi: Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Mwangi Kagwanja (2006). ‘Power to *Uhuru*’: Youth Identity and Generational Politics in Kenya’s 2002 Elections, *African Affairs*, Volume 105, Issue 418, January 2006, Pages 51–75.

“Kenya against the Kikuyu,” portraying Kikuyu dominance in state power and key economic sectors as the source of broader marginalization<sup>17</sup>.

In the run-up to the 2007 general election, Kenya’s political landscape became increasingly polarized. Odinga emerged as the ODM candidate, while Uhuru Kenyatta – himself also a Kikuyu – shifted allegiance and joined Kibaki’s newly formed Party of National Unity (PNU). Having suffered defeat in the 2005 referendum, Kibaki increasingly relied on coercive state institutions, particularly the National Police Service, to manage political dissent. The instrumentalization of the police as a political tool became especially evident in the period between the referendum and the election.

The ethnic based political mobilizations intensified the context within which the elections were organized. Electoral violence erupted on 30 December 2007 following the announcement by the Electoral Commission of Kenya that Kibaki had won the presidency with 47% of the vote, compared to Odinga’s 44% (despite his early lead) and Kalonzo Musyoka’s 9%. The disputed results triggered one of the worst episodes of political violence in Kenya’s history. What began as an electoral dispute rapidly escalated into widespread ‘ethnic’ violence involving killings, sexual violence, and large-scale destruction of property. More than 1,000 people were killed, over 600,000 were displaced, and economic losses were estimated at over US\$1.5 billion. The crisis brought Kenya perilously close to state collapse, and several senior political figures, including future president Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto, were later indicted by the International Criminal Court’s Pre-Trial Chamber II on 8 March 2011 on charges of crimes against humanity for their alleged roles in the post-election violence, but both were subsequently acquitted<sup>18</sup>.

The violence was eventually halted through a power-sharing agreement brokered in April 2008 by an African Union-led mediation team. The resulting “grand coalition government” between Kibaki and Odinga, famously called “the Handshake”, institutionalized elite power-sharing across major ethnic blocs, albeit at the cost of an unwieldy 40-member cabinet, the largest in Kenya’s history. “Handshakes”, a shorthand for elite pacts, are a recurring feature of Kenyan politics, often deployed to defuse intense political tensions and avert post-election violence. Handshakes

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<sup>17</sup> M. Chege (2008). “Kenya: back from the brink?” *Journal of Democracy*, 19, no. 4: 12539

<sup>18</sup> Rok Ajulu (2008). “Kenya’s 2007 elections: Derailing democracy through ethno-regional violence.” *Journal of African Elections*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 33-51.

have colonial roots. Jomo Kenyatta was the first to enter into such a pact with the British colonial establishment<sup>19</sup>. Critics, however, contend that these agreements amount to self-serving “backdoor deals” among political elites to share power and economic rents, ultimately undermining democratic institutions and public accountability. Raila Odinga struck “handshakes” with three Presidents –Mwai Kibaki in 2008, Uhuru Kenyatta in 2018 and William Ruto in 2025.

More importantly, beyond the transitional power-sharing arrangement, the 2008 National Accord served as a catalyst for far-reaching institutional reforms, culminating in the adoption of Kenya’s 2010 Constitution, which significantly reconfigured the political system and strengthened constitutionalism<sup>20</sup>. In addition to the legislative intent to tame the imperial presidency and to establish a robust decentralization framework, the Constitution, in view of the low popular confidence in Kenya’s judiciary, established a new and powerful Supreme Court.

The 2013 general election, the first under the 2010 constitutional framework, pitted the Jubilee Alliance, led by Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto, against the Coalition for Reform and Democracy (CORD) headed by Raila Odinga. The constant reformation of political parties by contenders in the events leading to a new election is one of the key features of Kenya’s political landscape, and Odinga, as a “long-distance” runner was very emblematic of this feature. Jubilee secured a narrow victory with 50.5% of the vote, and Odinga’s CORD secured 43.7%. Unlike the post-election violence in 2007, the opposition challenged the outcome through legal channels rather than mass mobilization. The Supreme Court dismissed the petition and upheld Kenyatta’s election, marking an important, if contested, moment for judicialized electoral dispute resolution.<sup>21</sup>

The 2017 election again pitted Kenyatta against Odinga and was similarly contested. Odinga had by then formed the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Research links party instability to political violence in Kenya: while voters are aware of the violent nature of party conflicts and tend to reject violence-wielding politicians, frequent party replacement and shifting coalitions undermine accountability, enabling politicians across

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/3/21/kenyas-handshake-politics-elite-self-preservation-disguised-as-compromise>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.eisa.orgstorage/2023/05/2019-journal-of-african-elections-v18n1-electoral-violence-kenya-2007-2008-vernacular-radio-eisa.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.mpg.de/11436923/elections-kenya>

parties to repeatedly organize and sponsor violence<sup>22</sup>. In a landmark decision, the Supreme Court annulled Kenyatta's initial official victory with 54% of the votes and ordered a fresh election, citing irregularities in the electoral process. Odinga demanded fundamental reforms, including a reconstitution of the election commission, before a rerun of the elections. When his demands were not met, he boycotted the rerun and instead declared himself the "People's President," allowing Kenyatta to secure a largely uncontested victory with 98% of the vote<sup>23</sup>.

In 2018, Kenyatta and Odinga entered a "Handshake". The agreement reshaped Kenya's political alignments ahead of the 2022 elections and led to the formation of the Azimio la Umoja (Declaration of Unity) Alliance, chaired by Kenyatta with Odinga as its presidential candidate. Then Vice President William Ruto, deeply opposed to this realignment, broke away to form the Kenya Kwanza Alliance. The Handshake also gave rise to the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), including the establishment of a presidential task force in May 2018 to propose constitutional and institutional reforms. Among its key proposals was the reintroduction of a prime ministerial position and the creation of a more inclusive executive structure that would allow power-sharing among different political actors. The BBI Constitutional Amendment Bill (2020) was ultimately halted in May 2021 when the High Court, and on appeal the Supreme Court, ruled that the process violated constitutional requirements reaffirming judicial independence and the principle of constitutionalism<sup>24</sup>.

Kenya's 2022 general election was the most peaceful in the country's history, though not without controversy. Reflecting Kenya's comparatively strong democratic credentials in the region, President Uhuru Kenyatta was constitutionally barred from seeking a third term. The contest pitted William Ruto of the Kenya Kwanza coalition ("Kenya First") against Raila Odinga of the Azimio la Umoja coalition (Declaration of Unity). Ruto ultimately won the presidency by a narrow margin, 50.49% percent to Odinga's 48.85%, despite Kenyatta's endorsement of Odinga and the apparent consolidation of dynastic political networks behind his candidacy. Ruto successfully reframed the electoral contest from ethnicity to class, casting Kenya as a "hustler nation" and presenting himself as a "hustler-in-chief." He emphasized his self-made background and lack of

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<sup>22</sup> Aditi Malik (2024). *Playing with fire: Parties and political violence in Kenya and India*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.mpg.de/11436923/elections-kenya>

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a head of a Peacebuilding CSO, Nairobi. December 13 2023.

elite lineage, thereby positioning himself as an outsider in contrast to Kenya's entrenched political dynasties.<sup>25</sup> The election results were contested by four of the seven commissioners of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), and Odinga filed a petition at the Supreme Court. The Court ultimately upheld Ruto's victory, a ruling that Odinga publicly accepted despite expressing disagreement.

In July 2023, the ruling Kenya Kwanza coalition and the Azimio la Umoja opposition agreed to establish a National Dialogue Committee (NADCO) to address electoral reforms, cost-of-living concerns, constitutional issues, and women's political representation. NADCO presented its recommendations in November 2023, including proposals for reviewing the 2022 election and reconstituting the IEBC selection panel<sup>26</sup>.

Ruto's narrow electoral mandate, combined with rising inflation and increasing costs of living, has posed significant challenges to governance. His efforts to expand the tax base to finance public spending have encountered strong resistance and sustained Gen-Z led public protests<sup>27</sup>. In March 2025, Ruto "shook hands" with Odinga in the wake of the Gen Z protest and the political instability associated with it. Furthermore, in what appears to be transactional politics, Ruto endorsed Odinga's unsuccessful bid for the African Union Commission chairmanship, perhaps also meant as a face-saving exit from Kenya's intensely competitive electoral politics after five unsuccessful presidential bids. Endorsing Raila for the AUC role was also partly meant to effectively sideline him from the Kenyan political scene for at least four years and thus significantly reduce the chances of Raila posing a serious challenge to Ruto in the next presidential election<sup>28</sup>.

The sudden death of Odinga in October 2025 could significantly change Kenya's opposition politics, particularly the long-standing reliance on elite power-sharing pacts as a mechanism for managing political conflict<sup>29</sup>. However, even prior to his death, Kenyan politics had begun to move beyond the familiar pattern of post-electoral "handshakes" among contending elites. In their place, new forms of political participation have emerged, driven largely by Kenya's Gen Z, who are increasingly

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<sup>25</sup> "Kenya's new president William Ruto explains why he is the "Hustler-In-Chief".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppArLjbI38k>

<sup>26</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kenya/freedom-world/2024>

<sup>27</sup> [https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/Spotlight\\_Have\\_the\\_tables\\_turned.pdf](https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/Spotlight_Have_the_tables_turned.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> <https://kenyanforeignpolicy.com/Documents/Policy%20Briefs/KFP%20POLICY%20BRIEF%20001.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/after-odinga--kenya-at-a-crossroads>

demanding a more responsive state, one capable of addressing the deepening social inequalities associated with the country's neoliberal economic trajectory. The youth-led protests against the 2024 Finance Bill, which unfolded largely outside the orbit of established opposition parties, signal that Kenya is entering an uncharted democratic territory, one marked by both heightened tensions and new possibilities for political renewal. In particular, the shifts may pose challenges to the already weak political culture of parties in Kenya in the realms of rational discourse and accommodation.

### **3.3 Kenya in Democratic Indices and Outlook**

Kenya has been relatively peaceful compared to many of its HoA neighbors that have experienced protracted internal conflicts, coups and full-scale civil or interstate wars. In this regard, President Daniel arap Moi promoted Kenya's image as "an oasis of peace in a turbulent region."<sup>30</sup>

Beyond being described as relatively peaceful and freer than its neighbors, Kenya is often portrayed as the most democratic country in the region, with a comparatively diversified and prosperous economy. This assessment rests not only on the regularity of elections, but also on their competitiveness. Kenya has held seven general elections since the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1992, and the electoral outcomes have often been closely contested, with candidates winning by narrow margins.

More importantly, Kenya is frequently praised for possessing relatively functional democratic institutions. In particular, the judiciary's role has become more pronounced since the adoption of the 2010 Constitution. The peaceful transfer of power on two occasions, and most notably the opposition victory in 2002, are widely cited as illustrations for the possibility of regime change through electoral means. In this regard, presidential term limits have played a crucial role in enabling regular change of government. In fact, alternations have happened so far only when the incumbent president was barred from running because of term limits. At the same time, while formal democratic institutions are broadly accepted as the primary pathway to political power, incumbents have

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<sup>30</sup> <https://theconversation.com/how-moi-put-foreign-policy-at-the-centre-of-his-presidency-134048>

repeatedly abused state resources and coercive authority, placing opposition actors at a structural disadvantage<sup>31</sup>.

Overall, Kenya has largely managed to democratize the entry to political power through elections. Nevertheless, even electoral processes continue to be characterized by systemic transgressions on all sides, posing questions as to their credibility and fairness, and a resulting challenge to government and state legitimacy. Indeed, all presidential election outcomes since the 2010 Constitution have been challenged in court, showing a lack of confidence in the integrity of elections. Moreover, the exercise of state power is yet to free itself from the country's authoritarian past, even as the country performs better in comparison with its HoA neighbors.

At the heart of Kenya's democratic gains lies the new constitutional order established in 2010. The Constitution addressed several long-standing obstacles to democratic consolidation. Most notably, it has curbed executive dominance by institutionalizing the mechanisms of checks and balances. It significantly strengthened the judiciary and enhanced parliamentary oversight, while reducing the discretionary powers of the presidency and enhancing the professionalism and autonomy of the civil service. For instance, presidential appointments now require parliamentary approval, and Article 255 requires a national referendum for constitutional amendments that affect the functions of the presidency, Parliament, or the independence of the judiciary. Such amendments require the support of at least 25% of registered voters in at least half of Kenya's 47 counties and secure a simple majority nationally<sup>32</sup>. These provisions make it considerably more difficult for incumbents to amend the Constitution in ways that concentrate power in the executive, as it had occurred under the Jomo Kenyatta and Moi administrations.

The Constitution guarantees the independence of both the judiciary and the legislature and establishes the Judicial Service Commission (JSC) to safeguard judicial autonomy while promoting accountability. Civil society organizations and oversight bodies, such as the now-defunct Commission for the Implementation of the Constitution (CIC), played a crucial role in ensuring that these constitutional gains were not reversed. Notably, when the executive attempted to bypass constitutional procedures in judicial appointments shortly after the promulgation of the Constitution, the move

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<sup>31</sup> Kamau Wairuri (2026). Riding the crest of the wave? The 2017 election and stagnation of Kenya's democratization process. *HAL Open Science*, HAL Id: hal-05520332 <https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-05520332/document>

<sup>32</sup> The 2010 Constitution.

triggered widespread public protests. The courts subsequently ruled that the president does not have the authority to make such appointments unilaterally, thereby forcing the withdrawal of the nominations<sup>33</sup>.

Several landmark judicial interventions illustrate the growing independence and assertiveness of Kenyan courts. Most notably, the Supreme Court annulled the results of the 2017 presidential election, citing extensive irregularities, despite the endorsement of the outcome by the electoral commission and international observers. This unprecedented decision demonstrated the judiciary's willingness to "speak truth to power" and underscored the deepening roots of constitutionalism. Similarly, in 2021, the courts blocked the proposed constitutional referendum under the Building Bridges Initiative (BBI), affirming that the authority to initiate constitutional amendments resides with the people rather than the president. More recently, courts have suspended elements of President Ruto's controversial finance legislation, including a proposed housing levy of 1.5% on workers' monthly income, pending judicial review<sup>34</sup>.

An appeals court had nullified the 2023 finance draft law, though the Supreme Court ultimately reversed the decision in 2024 that enabled its enactment as Finance Bill<sup>35</sup>. Ruto is also facing significant criticism and accusations that a \$2.5 billion health cooperation framework signed with the United States in December 2025 amounts to 'medical colonialism'. Critics primarily raise concerns over data privacy, national sovereignty, and the influence of American pharmaceutical companies. In response to the legal challenges, a Kenyan High Court judge has issued an interim order to suspend the implementation of the deal, specifically barring the transfer, sharing, or dissemination of medical data, pending a full hearing of the petitions in early 2026<sup>36</sup>. The fact that there is a legal course for politically sensitive disputes indicates that Kenya's democratic institutions are functioning.

Kenya also benefits from a relatively robust civil society sector that is actively engaged in service delivery, democratic governance, and human

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<sup>33</sup> [https://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2017-05/The\\_Constitution\\_of\\_Kenya\\_2010.pdf](https://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2017-05/The_Constitution_of_Kenya_2010.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> Pal Ahluwalia (2017). "The saga of the 2017 Kenyan elections: Can they really be free and fair?" *African Identities*, 15(4), p. 352.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2017.1385207>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/kenyas-supreme-court-quashes-ruling-that-voided-2023-finance-law-2024-10-29/>

<sup>36</sup> "Kenyan court suspends 'landmark' US health aid deal over data privacy concerns".  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce91degnelko>

rights advocacy. Prominent pro-democracy initiatives include the “Yellow Movement”, which emerged in opposition to the 2005 draft constitution amid concerns that it would re-entrench executive dominance. Although the courts ultimately allowed the referendum to proceed, civil society activism played a decisive role in shaping public debate and the eventual rejection of the draft<sup>37</sup>.

Likewise, Kenya’s mainstream media retain a comparatively strong capacity to hold government accountable, notwithstanding important constraints. Media institutions have often navigated competing pressures from the state, media ownership interests, and commercial actors, sustaining a sector that remains one of the most vibrant in the region. However, restrictive laws, sporadic harassment of journalists, weak investigations into abuses, and heavy dependence on advertising revenue have fostered self-censorship, particularly in reporting on corporate malpractice and high-level corruption. Proposals by the Kenya Editors Guild and the Media Council of Kenya for a media sustainability fund have generated debate, with critics warning that such a mechanism could expose the media to further political interference<sup>38</sup>.

In view of the above, the country has been widely regarded as comparatively more democratic than its regional counterparts. For example, in 2024, Freedom House classified Kenya as *Partly Free*, whereas most of its neighbors in the Horn of Africa are categorized as *Not Free*, with the partial exception of the de facto state of Somaliland. According to the 2024 Freedom House indicators, Kenya scored 52 out of 100, with political rights at 22 out of 40 and civil liberties at 30 out of 60<sup>39</sup>. At 60.3/100 Kenya also scored well in Mo Ibrahim’s Foundation’s overall quality of governance rating in 2023.<sup>40</sup>

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Election Assistance (IDEA), Kenya demonstrates mid-range performance across all four dimensions of the Global State of Democracy Framework.<sup>41</sup> The country ranks among the top 25% globally in judicial independence and freedom of the press. Over the past five years, Kenya has recorded notable improvements in elected government, freedom of expression, and judicial

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/2367-kenya-constitutional-documents.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk>

<sup>39</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kenya/freedom-world/2024>

<sup>40</sup> <https://iiag.online/>

</data.html?meas=GOVERNANCE&locZW&view=table&subview=score&range1from=2014&range1to=2023&range2from=2019&rang>

<sup>41</sup> The Global State of Democracy 2024 <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2024/countries/>

independence. In the Global State of Democracy Indices 2024, Kenya ranked 87th out of 173 countries in political representation (reflecting contested and inclusive elections for legislative and executive offices); 99th out of 173 in rights (covering liberal and social rights that underpin fair representation and vertical accountability); 87th out of 173 in the rule of law (the extent to which political power is subject to legal limits and ongoing scrutiny, enabling citizens to live without the threat of political violence); and 66th out of 173 in participation (the level of citizens' political engagement).

Other democracy measurement indices for 2024 also rate Kenya as performing moderately well by continental (and especially regional) standards despite signs of stagnation or decline. On the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index, Kenya scored 0.432, down from 0.457 in 2023, indicating a modest democratic regression<sup>42</sup>. In the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index, Kenya ranked 102nd out of 142 countries, with declining scores despite a relatively strong regional position (13th out of 34 in Sub-Saharan Africa). In Freedom House's Freedom in the World, Kenya scored 51 out of 100 and was classified as "Partly Free." Citizen perceptions echo these mixed assessments: the Afrobarometer survey reports low public confidence in key democratic guarantees, with only 44 per cent of respondents expressing confidence in freedom of speech and 43 per cent believing that members of parliament are elected through fair processes<sup>43</sup>.

Many research participants acknowledged Kenya's improvements on several democratic indicators, corruption being a notable exception, while also identifying persistent areas requiring further reform. This assessment is succinctly expressed in the following reflection by a human rights practitioner:

The 2010 Constitution is the foundation of the progress made in democracy and human rights. However, despite improvements in electoral processes, we are experiencing a democratic recession due to repeated attempts to violate the Constitution, as well as the persistence of corruption and impunity. The scale, depth, and complexity of corruption are undermining democratic gains and reversing hard-won progress. While the independence of the judiciary has been a cornerstone of Kenya's democratic project, it

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<sup>42</sup> [https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/ /Kenya/liberal\\_democracy\\_index/](https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/ /Kenya/liberal_democracy_index/)

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/AD1052-Kenyans-trust-in-institutions-and-leaders-is-on-a-downward-slide-Afrobarometer-25sept25.pdf>

too is increasingly threatened by corruption. More broadly, the legacies of authoritarianism continue to shape political institutions, human rights practices, electoral politics, political culture, and civil society in Kenya in multiple and enduring ways.<sup>44</sup>

Overall, key democracy indicators for Kenya are declining. The WJP noted a continued global decline, with Kenya seeing a decrease, particularly in areas such as fundamental rights and constraints on government power. Vibrant civil society exists, but concerns remain over restrictive laws, intimidation of journalists, and restrictions on digital expression, impacting freedoms of expression and assembly. Citizens expressed dissatisfaction with electoral fairness and political freedoms, even as some see potential in shifts in electoral outcomes.

Kenya has consistently performed poorly in corruption indices. International indices rank the country among the most corrupt globally. Transparency International data show that between 2012 and 2019, Kenya averaged a ranking of 140 out of 180 countries, with little variation during that period. In 2024, it scored 32 out of 100, a slight increase from 31 in 2023, ranking 121st out of 180 countries, indicating persistent public sector corruption despite marginal improvement. Its score remains below the Sub-Saharan African average (33) and the global average (43), with scores below 50 signaling serious corruption issues<sup>45</sup>.

Corruption has persisted despite relatively strong legal and institutional frameworks, largely because powerful political and economic actors benefit from entrenched rent-seeking networks and due to gaps in the political will and enforcement capacity of oversight institutions to hold them accountable. Although bodies such as the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC) have been established, their impact has remained limited<sup>46</sup>. During President Uhuru Kenyatta's tenure, particularly his first term, corruption intensified significantly. In 2016, the Auditor-General reported that substantial portions of funds raised through a Eurobond could not be accounted for<sup>47</sup>, prompting Kenyatta himself to publicly

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Irungu Houghton, Executive Director of Amnesty Kenya, Nairobi. December 15, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/kenya>

<sup>46</sup> <https://medium.com/@mbithig/why-corruption-persists-in-kenya-f676dc8cd9a9>

<sup>47</sup> Albert Gordon Omulo. Towards an assessment of the legacy of Kenya's Uhuru Kenyatta: Pan-Africanist or subtle Western lackey? *Cogent Social Sciences* (2023), 9: 222197000

acknowledge that approximately two billion Kenyan shillings were being lost daily to corruption<sup>48</sup>.

The flaunting of wealth by government officials is a significant and specific grievance that added fuel to the fire of the Gen Z-led protests, which initially began in opposition to the Finance Bill 2024. The public display of opulent lifestyles by politicians, particularly on social media, deeply angered the youth who are grappling with high unemployment, a rising cost of living, and new taxes. Protesters highlighted the stark wealth disparity, and perceived government corruption and a lack of accountability<sup>49</sup>. These challenges related to corruption continue to drag overall citizen confidence in the state and political institutions, potentially undermining relative progress in other areas, such as competitive elections.

### **3.4 The Limits of Nation-building as Critical Structural Challenges for Democratization**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the observations of Dankwart Rustow (1970) show that national unity constitutes a key background condition for democratization to take root. The prospects for democratic consolidation in Kenya would be considerably stronger had the country achieved a measurable degree of national cohesion among its diverse ethnic groups. Instead, nation-building has been persistently undermined by two interrelated dynamics: politicized ethnicity among dominant groups at the political center, and long-standing political and economic marginalization in peripheral regions, notably Northeastern and Coastal Kenya.

#### **3.4.1 Politicized ethnicity at the center**

Postcolonial state formation in Kenya did not involve a nation-state project rooted in the language, culture, or identity of a dominant sub-national group. Instead, nation-building relied on the colonial language (English) and an attempted pan-ethnic national identity, a pattern broadly consistent with much of postcolonial Africa. Neither the Kikuyu nor the Kalenjin, elite groups that dominated postcolonial Kenyan politics, sought to impose their culture or language on other ethnic communities. As a result, the cultural identity of the Kenyan state itself has rarely been contested and is

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<sup>48</sup> Brian Osweta (2021). "Fact check: Does Kenya really lose Sh2 billion to graft daily?" *Daily Nation*. 07 February 2021. <https://nation.africa/kenya/newsplex/fact-check-does-kenya-really-lose-sh2-billion-to-graft-daily--3282360>

<sup>49</sup> FCD with GenZ protest participants, Nairobi. June 16 2025.

generally viewed as legitimate, reinforced further by a relatively strong national economy.

However, the crisis of nation-building in Kenya does not manifest in cultural contestation, but in exclusionary power politics. Political competition has primarily been ethnicized around access to centralized state power and state-mediated resources, alongside demands for regional autonomy. This indicates there has been a demand both for equitable representation and rotation of power in the centre, and decentralisation (Majimbo).

Kenya lacks an ethnic majority: the largest group, the Kikuyu, constitutes only about 17 percent of the population. In such contexts, where no group is numerically dominant and no hegemonic nation-building project exists, Kymlicka argues that ethnic conflict tends to take the form of competition among “communal contenders” for access to state power, rather than ethno-nationalist struggles for self-rule<sup>50</sup>, and Ted Gurr<sup>51</sup> holds a similar view.

Although the Kenyan state appears formally neutral, and its symbols, language, and institutions are not explicitly tied to any single ethnic group, access to the state remains deeply ethnicized. Political parties, electoral coalitions, and patronage networks are largely organized along ethnic lines. Consequently, some groups enjoy privileged access to state resources while others are systematically excluded, reinforcing perceptions of inequality and grievance. Kenya exemplifies a polity in which communal contenders compete for a share of centralized power rather than merely aiming at autonomy.

Kenya has yet to de-ethnicize national political life. Ethnicity remains a decisive factor in electoral mobilization and elite competition, a legacy rooted in colonial governance. The colonial state incorporated different regions and communities unevenly, producing stark disparities in economic development and political inclusion. Central Kenya, home to the so-called White Highlands, benefited disproportionately from infrastructure investment and integration into global markets. Colonial ethnic stereotyping further entrenched divisions: Kikuyu were portrayed as “industrious,” Luo as “intellectual but aggressive.” These stereotypes

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<sup>50</sup> Will Kymlicka (2005). “Emerging Western Models of Multination Federalism: Are They Relevant for Africa?” in “Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective”, David Turon (ed), 2006. East African Studies.

<sup>51</sup> Ted R. Gur (2000) *Peoples versus States: Minorities at Risk in the New Century*. Unites States Institute of Peace.

that served divide-and-rule strategies were later adopted by postcolonial elites.

Politicized ethnicity was actively embraced by Kenya's post-independence leadership. Under Jomo Kenyatta, land redistribution in the former White Highlands became a key instrument of patronage, disproportionately benefiting regime loyalists and members of his ethnic network. This can be substantiated by the ownership of approximately 500,000 acres of land by the Kenyatta family alone. According to the Kenya Land Alliance, more than half of Kenya's arable land is controlled by just 20 percent of the population, while two-thirds of Kenyans own less than one acre per person, and 13 percent are entirely landless<sup>52</sup>.

Kenyatta also resettled landless Kikuyu in the Rift Valley on land historically occupied by Kalenjin communities, laying the foundations for enduring interethnic tensions. His successor, Daniel arap Moi, replicated and deepened these patterns, accumulating land for his family and political allies, predominantly from his Kalenjin community. The Ndungu Commission documented how both administrations systematically abused public authority to appropriate land as political reward, entrenching inequality and exclusion<sup>53</sup>. Moi went further by explicitly politicizing land and encouraging ethnic violence against Kikuyu communities in the Rift Valley during the struggle for multiparty democracy in the 1990s.<sup>54</sup>

Kenya's ethnic diversity, combined with a highly centralized executive, has made ethnicity the principal axis of political competition. According to the 2009 census, five ethnic groups (Kikuyu, Luhya, Kalenjin, Luo, and Kamba) together constitute about 64 percent of the population, with none of them was large enough to be a dominant ethnic group<sup>55</sup>. This demographic configuration incentivizes ethnic coalition-building under a first-past-the-post electoral system, where narrow pluralities can secure victory. Consequently, electoral arithmetic is translated into differential access to state resources<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2021/09/04/white-settlers-black-colonialists-and-the-landless-majority/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://repository.kippira.or.ke/bitstream/handle/123456789/2684/DP119.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/feb/07/kenya.chrismcgreal>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/b24bc86e-9fa4-4771-980d-0888a7871e60/kenya-democracy-political-participation-20140514.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> <https://statistics.knbs.or.ke/nada/index.php/catalog/68>

Public sector employment reflects this dynamic: Kikuyu, owing to their prolonged control of the presidency, remain disproportionately represented in state institutions, exceeding 30 percent in some ministries. Ethnic politics in Kenya is therefore not merely symbolic; it directly structures access to land, employment, and economic opportunity. Since independence, the presidency has rotated almost exclusively between Kikuyu and Kalenjin elites, 35 years under Kikuyu presidents and 24 years under Moi, followed by William Ruto since 2022, reinforcing perceptions of ethnic capture of the Kenyan state<sup>57</sup>.

This trajectory contrasts sharply with the anti-colonial period, when diverse groups temporarily coalesced around a shared nationalist project. Early cooperation between Jomo Kenyatta and Oginga Odinga symbolized this unity. Yet, as scholars note, within a decade of independence, national cohesion eroded dramatically, replaced by ethnicized patronage politics<sup>58</sup>. Political parties quickly assumed ethnic configurations, with Kenyatta consolidating power through a Kikuyu-dominated elite network and Moi later constructing a Kalenjin-centered ruling coalition.<sup>59</sup>

The reintroduction of multiparty democracy intensified ethnic politics. Both ruling and opposition elites mobilized ethnicity to advance divergent but overlapping projects of power acquisition. These ethnicized struggles converged rhetorically within the broader “Third Wave” democratization of the 1990s but lacked a shared national vision. As one research participant aptly observed, while “...Kenya built an effective state and economy, Tanzania built a nation”.<sup>60</sup> Kenya’s nation-building challenge, the participant argued, lies in its singular emphasis on economic growth. While the country has succeeded in constructing the strongest economy in the region, this achievement has come at the expense of forging a cohesive national identity. Indeed, Kenya and Tanzania followed sharply divergent trajectories: Kenya prioritized economic development without consolidating national unity, whereas Tanzania invested heavily in nation-building but with weaker economic outcomes.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Shadrack W. Nasong’o (2016) “Kenya at Fifty and the Betrayal of Nationalism: The Paradoxes of Two Family Dynasties,” in M.M. Kithinji, M.M. Koster, and J.P. Rotich, eds. *Kenya After 50: Reconfiguring Historical, Political, and Policy Milestones*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 165-187.

<sup>59</sup> Shilaho Westen Kwatembera (2008). “Ethnicity and Political Pluralism in Kenya”. *Journal of African Elections*, Volume 7 No 2

<sup>60</sup> Stephen Kirimi, *supra* note 5.

This contrast is particularly striking because even though Tanzania is home to more ethnic groups than Kenya, it exhibits lower levels of ethnic polarization. In Kenya, by contrast, social and political identification along ethnic lines remains deeply entrenched<sup>61</sup>. As numerous studies have shown, ethnic divisions and the absence of a shared national vision not only undermine democratization but can also allow democratic processes to exacerbate conflict in deeply divided societies.

### **3.4.2 Marginalization in Northeast and Coastal Kenya**

The nation-building crisis assumes a distinct form in Kenya's peripheries, particularly Northeastern and Coastal regions, where grievances have periodically taken the form of autonomy or secessionist claims. In these regions, the Kenyan state has long struggled to establish legitimacy due to exclusive and racialized constructions of national belonging. Northeastern Kenya is predominantly Somali-speaking, Muslim, and pastoralist, while the Coast is home to indigenous Muslim communities and Arabs, groups historically positioned at the margins of Kenya's national imagination.

In the colonial classification, urbanized "alien" Somalis were not considered "European", fully "Asian", nor clearly "African." They occupied an ambiguous space that did not fit neatly into these categories. During the colonial period, Somalis struggled to be recognized as "Asians" in the racial hierarchy, a categorization that laid the groundwork for framing all Kenyan Somalis as "non-native" Africans after independence. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Somali Members of Parliament referred to these structural exclusions as a policy of "apartheid" and "biological nationalism."<sup>62</sup>

Northeastern Kenya, largely inhabited by mobile pastoralists, served as a buffer against Somali migration from Italian Somaliland. Known as the Northern Frontier District (NFD), the region was administered separately from the Kenyan hinterland under a series of ordinances, including the 1926 Closed District Ordinance. These measures significantly curtailed individual and community freedoms, increased securitization, and disrupted pastoral livelihoods by restricting movement and trade, thereby contributing to persistent economic underdevelopment.

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<sup>61</sup> Edward Miguel (2004). "Tribe or Nation? Nation Building and Public Goods in Kenya versus Tanzania." *World Politics* 56 (3): 327-362. Miguel.

<sup>62</sup> Tabea Scharrer (2018). "Ambiguous Citizens": Kenyan Somalis and the Question of Belonging. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 12:3, 494-513

Since colonial times, Northeastern Kenya has experienced sporadic instability characterized by conflict and insecurity. Some scholars attribute this instability to structural weaknesses in state capacity, including limited monopoly over the use of force, poor border management, and ineffective law enforcement. Others argue that instability was deliberately created by the state: colonial authorities treated the NFD as a security buffer with minimal investment, while postcolonial governments continued this approach, carving the region out as a securitized zone to suppress insurgency rather than integrating it into the national polity<sup>63</sup>.

Within a month of independence in December 1963, Kenya's postcolonial government under Jomo Kenyatta declared a state of emergency in the Northern Frontier District (NFD) following attacks by militants linked to Somali secessionist movements. The conflict escalated into the Shifta War/ Gaf Daba (1963–1967), a low-intensity insurgency supported by Somalia and driven by the irredentist “Greater Somalia” project, which threatened Kenya's territorial integrity. The war ended after a bilateral agreement, and Kenya retained the NFD. However, it entrenched long-term grievances and the securitization of Somali populations,<sup>64</sup> legitimizing continued state violence, most starkly illustrated by the Wagalla massacre of 1984, when Kenyan security forces killed hundreds of Somali civilians near Wagalla airstrip in Wajir District during a disarmament operation. The state justified the operation on security grounds<sup>65</sup>, but it reinforced a perception of Kenyan Somalis as an “enemy within”, a classic example of what Kymlicka (2018)<sup>66</sup> calls the securitization of state-minority relations.

Initially imposed by the British colonial administration in December 1963, Kenya's Northeastern region and its Somali population remained under a continuous state of emergency until 2002. The original justification was the perceived threat posed by the irredentist Greater Somalia movement, which sought to unify all Somali-inhabited territories in the Horn of Africa. However, the prolonged enforcement of emergency rule reflected a broader pattern of systemic marginalization of Kenya's Somali population, including the suspension of civil and political rights, heavy-

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<sup>63</sup> <https://core.ac.uk/reader/145055100>

<sup>64</sup> Hannah Whittaker (2015). “The *Shifta* Conflict, 1963–68”. In: *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Kenya*. Brill.

<sup>65</sup> [www.knchr.org/Articles/ArtMID/2432/ArticleID/1024/Wagalla-Massacre](http://www.knchr.org/Articles/ArtMID/2432/ArticleID/1024/Wagalla-Massacre)

<sup>66</sup> Will Kymlicka (2018). “Liberal Multiculturalism as a Political Theory of State–Minority Relations”. *Political Theory*. Vol. 46, No. 1.

handed security operations, economic underdevelopment, and limited political representation<sup>67</sup>.

The Kibaki administration further reinforced an exclusive vision of the Kenyan nation. Its slogan for national unity, “*Kenya: A Working Nation*”<sup>68</sup>, was interpreted by some as divisive: “Since some work is thought to be morally superior to others, some Kenyans are more Kenyan than others.” In this framing, Kenyan identity was linked to land use, reflecting historical tensions between farming and herding. Those engaged in nomadic pastoralism, often ignoring formal national borders, were perceived as less loyal to the land. Religion further deepened these divisions: Islam distinguished Kenyan Somalis, coastal Arabs, and Swahili communities from the Christian majority among dominant ethnic groups. Their sense of marginalization –religious, economic, and political– derives partly from the historical loss of power under colonial rule, which was intensified after independence. At the same time, Islamic identity has been leveraged by some actors to claim entitlement to higher social and political positions in a state where political leadership remains largely framed around Christian elites.

Kenyan Somalis occupy a particularly precarious position as what scholars describe as “ambiguous citizens”<sup>69</sup> –legally Kenyan yet persistently treated as outsiders. Their belonging is questioned both racially and culturally, rendering them vulnerable to surveillance, detention, and deportation. The structural marginalization of Northeastern Kenyans has been formally recognized in the 2013 Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Report, which highlighted state-sanctioned discrimination against citizens of Somali descent, including the requirement to carry special passes<sup>70</sup>. This enduring marginalization underscores how colonial policies forged a distinct and exclusionary identity for Northeastern Kenyans, a legacy that has persisted well into the postcolonial period.<sup>71</sup>

Coastal Kenya constitutes a second Muslim belt within a predominantly Christian nation, and its history reflects a complex legal and political legacy. Like the Northeast, the Coast was administered separately by the

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<sup>67</sup> Peter K. Kirui (2019). “Being a Kenyan-Somali: A Security Threat or Neglected Citizen?” *International Journal of Business and Social Science*. 10(5).

<sup>68</sup> John Lonsdale (2008), “Soil, Work, Civilization, and Citizenship in Kenya.” *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2: 305–314.

<sup>69</sup> T. Scharrer, *supra* note 62.

<sup>70</sup> [www.knchr.org/Portals/0/Transitional%20Justice/kenya-tjrc-summary-report-aug-2013.pdf?ver=2018-06-08-100202-027](http://www.knchr.org/Portals/0/Transitional%20Justice/kenya-tjrc-summary-report-aug-2013.pdf?ver=2018-06-08-100202-027)

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/the-kenyan-states-fear-of-somali-identity/>

British colonial administration and, for much of its history as a political entity, remained under the nominal sovereignty of the Sultan of Zanzibar until 1963. When Kenya became a Crown Colony in 1920, the coastal strip remained a protectorate. Ahead of independence in 1963, a tripartite agreement between Britain, the Sultan of Zanzibar, and Kenyan leaders integrated the coastal strip into Kenya, ending the Sultan's rule and revoking earlier treaties<sup>72</sup>.

Following the reintroduction of multiparty politics in the 1990s, several autonomist and secessionist movements emerged, including the Mombasa Republican Council, the Coast People's Forum, and the Mijikenda Council of Elders, all invoking the region's distinct political history. These movements coalesced around an imagined political community known as *Wapwani* ("people of the Coast") in contrast to the broader Kenyan state, often expressed in the slogan *Pwani Si Kenya* ("The Coast is not Kenya")<sup>73</sup>.

The land issue is a major political issue in coastal Kenya. It stems from historical injustices, colonial policies favoring elites, and post-independence land grabbing, leaving many indigenous people landless on ancestral grounds, fueling poverty, conflict, and secessionist sentiment, with ongoing struggles over documentation, illegal allocations, and large development projects threatening livelihoods. The secessionist movement peaked in the run-up to the 2013 elections but soon fragmented, failing to articulate a shared vision that could bridge divisions among indigenous communities and Arabs. Perceptions of marginalization on the Coast are rooted not only in the limited national influence of Coastal politicians but also in enduring poverty and low socio-economic status among communities considered indigenous. Among the indigenous Mijikenda, marginalization is often framed around the loss of ancestral land to Arab settlers and up-country communities, reflecting historical patterns of dispossession and exclusion. For Coastal Arabs, marginalization is perceived in terms of encroachment on land by elites from the hinterland, diminished privileges acquired during the colonial era, and the perceived threat to Islamic institutions by a predominantly Christian up-country

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<sup>72</sup> James Brennan (2008). "Lowering the Sultan's Flag: Sovereignty and Decolonization in Coastal Kenya". *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 50(4). 831-861  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417508000364>

<sup>73</sup> [https://www.cairn-int.info//article-E\\_AFCCO\\_247\\_0087--the-grassroots-are-very-complicated.htm](https://www.cairn-int.info//article-E_AFCCO_247_0087--the-grassroots-are-very-complicated.htm)

elite<sup>74</sup>. These layered grievances have reinforced the sense that the Coast remains politically and economically peripheral, leading some observers to describe the region as the “least national” in terms of power, influence, and integration within Kenya’s broader nation-state<sup>75</sup>.

### 3.4.3 Marginalization and vulnerability to violent extremism

The failure of national integration in Northeastern and Coastal Kenya has heightened the vulnerability of these regions to violent extremism, particularly from the Somalia-based Islamist group Al Shabab, which maintains connections with global Islamic networks such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISS). Kenya has experienced a series of cross-border attacks by Al Shabab, prompting the 2011 military intervention in Somalia, *Operation Linda Nchi*. However, attacks by Al Shabab have persisted, and in some cases intensified, despite – perhaps because of – Kenya’s military involvement. High-profile attacks include the Westgate Mall siege in Nairobi, the Garissa University attack in the Northeast, and assaults on villages in the Mpeketoni area of the Coast<sup>76</sup>.

In response, Kenya has pursued a heavy-handed counterterrorism (CT) strategy. Civil society actors and human rights defenders have raised concerns that these measures have often prioritized political control over public safety, serving to stifle dissent, limit scrutiny, and shield state actors from accountability. Rather than creating an environment conducive to civic engagement and media oversight, the CT measures have contributed to the shrinking of civic spaces<sup>77</sup>.

A particularly illustrative example is *Operation Usalama Watch* in 2014. Under this directive, the Interior Cabinet Secretary ordered the closure of all urban refugee registration centers and required all refugees residing outside the designated camps of Kakuma and Dadaab to report immediately to those camps. The operation also deployed 500 police

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<sup>74</sup> Nidhi Mahajan (2023). “The Coast Is Not Kenya”: *Mwambao* in a “Moment of Danger” in Lamu, *Monsoon* 1(1): 92–106.

<https://doi.org/10.1215/2834698X-10346002>

See also <https://riftvalley.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Cultural-Identity-RVI-Rift-Valley-Forum-Meeting-Report-2017.pdf>

<sup>75</sup> Ngala Chome (2014). “The Grassroots Are Very Complicated”: Marginalization and the Emergence of Alternative Authority in the Kenyan Coast 2013 Elections. In: *Kenya’s Past as Prologue*, 245-262. <https://books.openedition.org/africae/1602>

<sup>76</sup> Dereje Feyissa (2021). *Compendium on preventing and countering violent extremism: Insights from the Horn*. The Life and Peace Institute.

<sup>77</sup> [https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Kenya\\_Country\\_Profile\\_Report.pdf](https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Kenya_Country_Profile_Report.pdf)

officers in Nairobi, later expanding to 6,000 security personnel across multiple towns, including Eastleigh, Mombasa, Nakuru, Thika, Eldoret, Lamu, Malindi, Garissa, Mandera, and Kitale<sup>78</sup>. While officially aimed at enhancing security, the operation relied heavily on ethnic and religious profiling, targeting Somali nationals and urban refugees under suspicion of terror-related activity<sup>79</sup>.

The securitization of minority groups under such operations has had multiple consequences. It has reinforced the perception of Somalis and Muslims in Kenya as inherently suspect or disloyal, undermining their human rights and social inclusion. It has also paradoxically increased the vulnerability of Northeastern and Coastal communities to violent extremism by fueling resentment, marginalization, and distrust of the state. In effect, Kenya's approach to countering violent extremism has at times exacerbated the very insecurities it seeks to address, particularly among its Muslim minority populations.

Kenya's democratic challenges are deeply rooted in unresolved nation-building deficits. While formal democratic institutions have strengthened since 2010, politicized ethnicity at the center and structural marginalization at the periphery continue to constrain democratic consolidation. Without a more inclusive national project, one that transcends ethnic patronage and addresses historical injustices in peripheral regions, Kenya's democratic experiment will remain vulnerable to recurrent crises.

### **3.5 The Imperial Presidency as a Challenge for Democratization**

In Kenya, one of the longstanding obstacles to democratization has been the "imperial presidency," historically constructed through a combination of constitutional amendments and the strategic deployment of coercive state power, particularly via the police.

At independence, Kenya's constitution established robust checks and balances among the executive, legislature, and judiciary, as well as a decentralized system. However, the independence constitution's equilibrium was progressively undermined as successive amendments

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<sup>78</sup> [https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Kenya\\_Country\\_Profile\\_Report.pdf](https://www.rightsandsecurity.org/assets/downloads/Kenya_Country_Profile_Report.pdf)

<sup>79</sup> Daniel Torbjörnsson & Michael Jonsson (2026). *Containment or Contagion? Countering al Shabaab Efforts to Sow Discord in Kenya*. Studies in African Security, June 2016.

concentrated power in the presidency, merging the roles of head of state and head of government. This centralization of authority diminished the independence of the legislature and judiciary and transformed the presidency into the dominant force in policymaking. Influential politicians wielded informal power that often subjugated government ministries and departments, while civil servants who questioned directives faced punitive measures. Policymaking became largely contingent on presidential approval, eroding the autonomy of state institutions<sup>80</sup>.

The imperial presidency is not merely a legal construct but also relies on the strategic use of coercive power. As Kamu Wairuri notes<sup>81</sup> successive regimes have leveraged the state police to maintain incumbency. The roots of this lie in the colonial period, when two police forces were established: the Kenya Police Force, tasked with pacifying the African population and securing colonial infrastructure, and the Administration Police, which supported chiefs in local governance. Post-independence, these forces underwent minimal reform, and their coercive capacities were preserved. The president retained unfettered authority to appoint the Police Commissioner, while the Administration Police were placed directly under the Office of the President, functioning as a parallel force serving the provincial administration. Moi, who had extensive experience as Minister for Home Affairs prior to his vice-presidency, utilized this system and cultivated loyal allies within the police<sup>82</sup>.

Successive regimes have consistently used the police to monitor and control political space, creating an uneven playing field that constrains opposition mobilization. Under Kibaki, the police were directly involved in manipulating elections and suppressing opposition after the controversial 2007 election. Under Uhuru Kenyatta, the technical and military capacity of the police was expanded, ostensibly to combat Al Shabab, but it also reinforced state power in the politically charged environment of the 2017 elections<sup>83</sup>.

Even after the 2010 constitutional reforms, which curtailed executive authority through stronger checks and balances and a decentralized system,

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<sup>80</sup> <https://democracyinafrica.org/kenya-imperiled-presidency/>

<sup>81</sup> Kamu Wairuri (2022). "The State Police and Kenya's Electoral Authoritarianism". In *Handbook on the Horn of Africa*, Routledge  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429426957-34>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2020-04-04-brutality-plagues-police-despite-years-of-reform/>

<sup>83</sup> Interview with a human rights activist, Nairobi. June 13, 2025.

the temptation to revive the imperial presidency remains. Without robust safeguards, there is a persistent risk that incumbents will exploit state institutions and security forces to consolidate power, undermining the democratic gains of the constitutional order.

### **3.5.1 Majoritarian democracy, politicized ethnicity, and electoral violence**

Elections are intended to produce legitimate governance that can implement policies and programs for the benefit of all citizens in a transparent and fair manner. The degree to which elections achieve these objectives partly depends on the electoral system. The two most widely used systems are majoritarian (First-Past-the-Post, FPTP) and proportional representation (PR). While PR allocates seats in proportion to votes received, FPTP concentrates all political and administrative power in the hands of the winner, often creating a zero-sum outcome. Globally, most Western European countries use proportional representation, with notable exceptions such as Britain and France, which retain majority-rule systems<sup>84</sup>.

Electoral systems play a central role in shaping governance, political participation and stability. While representative democracy emphasizes fair representation, pluralism prioritizes broad participation. Insights from *social choice theory* suggest that mixed electoral systems – particularly those incorporating elements of proportional representation (PR) – can help balance these goals.

Kenya adopted the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system at independence in 1963, following a model common among many Commonwealth countries. Under this system, voters select a single candidate, and the candidate who receives the most votes wins the seat, even if they do not obtain an absolute majority. This approach continues to govern parliamentary elections in Kenya. However, there have been important changes to the presidential electoral rules, particularly since the adoption of the 2010 Constitution and the elections beginning in 2013. Previously, a candidate could win the presidency without securing an outright majority. Today, a presidential candidate must obtain more than 50% of the national vote and at least 25 % of the vote in at least half of the counties. This rule aims to ensure that the winning candidate enjoys both majority support and a geographically broad mandate. For parliamentary elections,

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<sup>84</sup> David M. Farrell and Richard Sinnott (2017). The electoral system. In: *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*, 89-110

the FPTP system remains in place. In the Kenyan context, where many ethnic groups are geographically concentrated, this system can produce a form of localized representativeness. Electoral competition within constituencies often occurs among candidates from the same ethnic group, and this can enable territorially concentrated communities to secure parliamentary representation. From this perspective, FPTP may provide relatively fair ethnic representation in the legislature<sup>85</sup>.

The more significant challenge arises in how votes translate into power in the executive branch. Even with the majority requirement and the rule encouraging cross-county support, presidential elections largely retain a winner-takes-all dynamic. In practice, Kenya's presidents have so far come from only two major ethnic communities, reinforcing perceptions of ethnic dominance at the highest level of political power. If the objective is to increase diversity in executive leadership, changes to the electoral system alone may not be sufficient. Additional institutional mechanisms may need to be considered. One possibility could be a more targeted approach, such as formal or informal mechanisms encouraging broader ethnic inclusion in the presidency, to complement existing electoral rules and address the structural concentration of executive power.

The FPTP electoral system is problematic, especially in deeply divided societies, particularly those with presidential systems of government. It tends to advance regional disparities, political marginalization, and ethnic polarization. A hybrid system would close important representation gaps so that the composition of Parliament better reflects the general electoral trends of the voters. Many democracies, such as Germany and New Zealand, have effectively included PR to offset the shortcomings of majoritarian systems. FPTP tends to exacerbate divisions in Kenya. Campaigning under this system transforms citizens into "winners" or "losers," heightening tensions and creating a winner-takes-all mentality. As a research participant observed:

The electoral system of first-past-the-post in a divided society always raises risks. The ever-evolving deals and attempts to use social unrest to gain power or concessions from the winner are partly a result of the electoral system. Kenya urgently needs to

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<sup>85</sup> N. Cheeseman, K.Kanyinga, G. Lynch, M. Ruteere & J. Willis (2019). "Kenya's 2017 elections: winner-takes-all politics as usual?" *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 13(2), 215–234.

revise its system, preferably incorporating proportional representation, to reduce the stakes in presidential elections.<sup>86</sup>

By concentrating power in the hands of a single winner, the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system can intensify political competition if only one candidate secures the seat. This may strongly induce political elites to use every available strategy, including, at times, violence or intimidation, to secure victory or contest unfavorable outcomes. Historical evidence from Kenyan elections illustrates how high-stakes contests can contribute to tensions and electoral violence. During the 1990s, President Moi mobilized ethnic militias in the Rift Valley to intimidate, displace, and kill opposition supporters.<sup>87</sup>

By 2002, this extra-state violence had become less centralized under state control, allowing coalitions of elites and gangs to exploit it for political gain. The 2007 post-election violence was particularly severe, with Human Rights Watch noting that it was “often meticulously organized by local leaders.” The International Criminal Court later implicated both opposition and state elites in orchestrating violence through hierarchical networks. In 2013, violence was concentrated in counties where local politicians exploited existing grievances to mobilize supporters. In 2017, although gang-related violence decreased, police-perpetrated violence was widespread, particularly in opposition strongholds, indicating a political motive.

However, this does not necessarily mean that replacing FPTP with proportional representation (PR) for parliamentary elections would automatically produce greater ethnic diversity or representation. In some cases, PR could even weaken the localized representation that currently exists under FPTP. Constituency-based elections often result in representatives from those communities being elected to parliament because many Kenyan ethnic groups are territorially concentrated. A purely proportional system might thus dilute this territorial link. Yet, PR could be beneficial in strengthening pan-Kenyan political parties and movements. By allowing votes from dispersed supporters across the country to be aggregated, PR could enable nationally oriented parties to

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with James Gondi- Human rights lawyer, Nairobi. December 12, 2023.

<sup>87</sup> Reginald Oduor (2022). “The History of Ethnicised Politics in Kenya and its Impact on the Management of the Country’s Public Affairs”. *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*. New Series, Vol.8 No.2, 29–62. <https://doi.org/10.4314/tp.v8i2.3>

gain parliamentary representation even when their supporters are geographically scattered. In this sense, PR might help promote broader, cross-ethnic political coalitions<sup>88</sup>.

At the same time, the persistence of electoral violence and winner-takes-all dynamics in Kenya appears to be driven less by the parliamentary electoral system and more by the presidential structure of government, where control of the executive is concentrated in a single office. In the Kenyan context, this has been compounded by perceptions among some communities, such as the Luo, that they are effectively excluded from the presidency, particularly since most presidents have come from only a small number of ethnic groups.

Addressing such perceptions of exclusion is politically complex. Some observers have suggested mechanisms to ensure broader inclusion in executive leadership, such as informal or formal rotational arrangements among major communities, or restrictions that prevent candidates from the incumbent president's ethnic group from contesting the next election. While such proposals are controversial and difficult to implement, they reflect attempts to mitigate the concentration of executive power in a highly diverse society.

Since the introduction of multiparty politics, electoral violence has been systematically deployed as a strategy when the opportunity arises, institutions fail to constrain it, and elites are incentivized to use it. Central to this violence has been the politicization of ethnicity, with elites mobilizing their ethnic constituencies against each other. This ethnic mobilization often intersects with socioeconomic inequalities, amplifying tensions<sup>89</sup>.

While the 2010 constitution introduced reforms that strengthened democratic institutions, decentralized power and nurtured a culture of constitutionalism, the electoral system remains largely unchanged. As a result, the structural incentives for majoritarian, winner-takes-all politics – and the violence it often engenders – persist. Reforming Kenya's electoral system to include elements of proportional representation could reduce the zero-sum stakes of elections, mitigate ethnic mobilization, and decrease the likelihood of electoral violence.

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<sup>88</sup> Peter Rowan. Havoc to Hope: Electoral Violence in the Kenya 2022 General Election. <https://www.e-ir.info/2024/02/24/havoc-to-hope-electoral-violence-in-the-kenya-2022-general-election>

<sup>89</sup> Susanne Mueller (2011). "Dying to win: Elections, political violence, and institutional decay in Kenya". *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Volume 29, 2011. Issue 1

### 3.5.2 Social inequality and declining public democratic participation

Public participation is a cornerstone of democracy, as “rule by the people” requires that citizens be actively involved in decisions affecting their lives. Participatory democracy entails meaningful engagement in public affairs, enabling people to influence policies, hold authorities accountable, and ensure that governance reflects their interests<sup>90</sup>. Recognizing this, Article 10 of Kenya’s 2010 Constitution explicitly includes democracy and public participation among the values and principles of governance, binding all state organs and officials.

Despite these constitutional guarantees, Kenya remains one of the most unequal countries in Africa. The roots of social inequality stretch back to independence, when political elites accumulated wealth through land appropriation and the embezzlement of public funds. This wealth has been transferred through family lineage, and in effect, families of the political dynasties - Kenyatta, Moi, and Odinga - still dominate the economic and political landscape. Today, less than 0.1% of the population (about 8,300 people) own more wealth than the bottom 99.9% (over 44 million people), and the richest 10% earn on average 23 times more than the poorest 80%.<sup>91</sup> Kenya’s super-rich are among the fastest-growing globally<sup>92</sup>. As of 2025, the Moi and Kenyatta families rank among the wealthiest in Kenya, with estimated net worths of approximately \$3.7 billion and \$3.2 billion, respectively, placing them at the top of the country’s richest families.

This stark inequality has directly undermined public participation in democracy. The following statements of research participants highlight the link between economic marginalization and declining civic engagement:

The official unemployment rate for those aged 18–34 is nearly 40%, and the economy cannot absorb the 800,000 young people entering the workforce each year. Perhaps reflecting this, President Ruto campaigned on an economic ticket, coining the term “Hustler Nation” and promising a “bottom-up” approach to benefit the poor.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/the-case-for-public-participation>

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.oxfam.org/en/kenya-extreme-inequality-numbers>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.oxfam.org/en/kenya-extreme-inequality-numbers>

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Muthiga Murituhi- Africa Program Director, International Crisis Group (ICG), Nairobi. December 10, 2023.

Political power remains concentrated in the hands of a few, with dynastic families, business elites, and fast-changing political alliances dominating governance<sup>94</sup>.

This perception of a system serving only the ruling few has fueled youth disillusionment and declining voter turnout. As one participant noted: “Class inequality, wealth concentration, and ideology-free politics have convinced young people that these political elites stand for nothing”.<sup>95</sup>

Ethnic, generational, and socioeconomic inequalities further weaken social cohesion and erode trust in institutions. The longstanding dominance of the Kenyatta and Odinga families has led many to question the quality of Kenya’s democracy. In 2022, youth participation in elections reached a record low. The largest bloc of the electorate, with a median age under 20, has largely disengaged from mainstream politics<sup>96</sup>.

The paradox in the formal strengthening of democratic institutions while public participation declines is alarming. While elections are only one aspect of democracy, the declining engagement of the youth threatens the sustainability of Kenya’s democratic project. In a political landscape where money, dynasties, and elite interests shape discourse and determine outcomes, alternative forms of civic participation are increasingly limited, leaving large segments of the population feeling politically powerless. This partly explains the increasing resort to the streets to manifest the disillusionment and lack of participation and responsiveness of the political system.

### **3.6 Prospects of Democracy in Kenya**

Despite Kenya’s critical challenges, the prospects for democracy remain strong. This optimistic outlook is grounded in several key developments, which include: (i) the 2010 Constitution and the emergence of constitutionalism, which have generated public trust in the judiciary; (ii) devolution and efforts at nation-building that have promoted inclusion and reshaped political identity in peripheral regions; and (iii) a shift from electoral violence to elite negotiation and a gradual move from ethnicity-driven to issue-based politics, particularly around class and socio-economic concerns.

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with Irungu Houghton- Executive Director of Amnesty Kenya, Nairobi. December 11, 2023.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Interview with human right activist, Nairobi. December 14, 2023.

### 3.6.1 Consolidation of democratic institutions

Kenya's 2010 Constitution marked a major turning point in the country's constitutional development, ushering in a new era of constitutionalism and significantly strengthening democratic institutions, most notably the judiciary. Since its adoption, the courts have increasingly demonstrated autonomy from the executive branch, handling politically sensitive disputes with a growing degree of professionalism and independence. Several landmark rulings, such as the following, illustrate this trend.

- During the disputed 2017 presidential election, the Supreme Court of Kenya annulled the victory of Uhuru Kenyatta, citing significant irregularities in the electoral process. The court ordered a repeat election and sharply criticized the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission for failing to conduct the election in a credible and transparent manner. The ruling was historic, marking the first time in Africa that a court nullified a presidential election.
- In 2020–2021, the judiciary blocked the proposed Building Bridges Initiative, a constitutional amendment process supported by President Uhuru Kenyatta and opposition leader Raila Odinga. The courts ruled that the amendment process was unconstitutional, emphasizing that the power to initiate fundamental constitutional change lies with the people rather than the president.
- In 2024, a court ruling challenged the government's plan to deploy Kenyan police to Haiti as part of an international security mission. The court held that the National Security Council of Kenya, led by President William Ruto, lacked the legal authority to deploy regular police forces abroad, despite parliamentary approval. The issue became internationally visible during William Ruto's state visit to the United States, underscoring the judiciary's willingness to scrutinize executive action, an unusual degree of judicial assertiveness in the regional context.
- More recently, Kenyan courts have played an evolving role in reviewing the constitutionality of recent Finance Acts. Through these cases, the judiciary has acted as a check on both executive and legislative authority in the politically sensitive area of taxation.

Despite these advances, Kenya's judiciary still faces challenges in fully securing its independence. In the Haiti deployment case, the government ultimately proceeded with the mission after adjusting the legal framework. Similarly, the Supreme Court of Kenya later upheld the constitutionality of the 2024 Finance Act after earlier legal challenges. These developments

highlight the continuing tension between judicial oversight and executive authority.

Nevertheless, Kenya has made significant progress. The country has moved from a historically entrenched “imperial presidency” toward a system in which executive power is more visibly constrained by constitutional institutions, particularly an increasingly assertive judiciary. This transformation, underpinned by the principles of constitutionalism, is best understood by tracing the trajectory of the Kenyan judiciary.

Before 2010, the judicial branch was largely unable to act as an independent and impartial arbiter of democratic governance due to historical, legal, and political constraints. The 2010 Constitution fundamentally changed this, making the judiciary accountable to the people and guaranteeing its independence. Judges are now explicitly bound only by the Constitution and the law and cannot be directed or controlled by any individual or authority. The process of recruitment of judges has also been more transparent, including competitive selection processes that involved publicly aired interviews of candidates, with the final presidential appointment largely a formality. In reconfiguring the balance of power among Kenya’s three branches of government, the judiciary has emerged as a notable success story in Africa<sup>97</sup>.

Despite its autocratic past, Kenya’s democratization process is distinguished in the region by a vibrant economy, a dynamic private sector, an active civil society, independent media, and competitive elections. The 2010 Constitution, widely regarded as the most significant political development since independence, introduced an expansive Bill of Rights, guaranteed socio-economic rights, and established devolved governance to strengthen local participation. Over the past decade and a half, human rights have improved markedly, due process is increasingly respected, and the constitutional courts have played a central role in restraining the executive from abusing state machinery for political repression<sup>98</sup>.

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<sup>97</sup> Interview with Muthiga Murituhi, Africa Program Director, International Crisis Group (ICG). Nairobi, December 10, 2023.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with James Gondi, human rights lawyer, Nairobi. December 10, 2023.

### 3.6.2 Devolution and nation rebuilding

A major source of hope for national cohesion and democratic participation, particularly in Kenya's peripheral regions of the Northeast and Coast, is the devolutionary political order established by the 2010 Constitution, a landmark democratic milestone. The Constitution outlines the objectives of devolution as follows:

To promote democratic and accountable exercise of power; to foster national unity by recognizing diversity; to give powers of self-governance to the people and enhance their participation in the exercise of state power and decision-making; to recognize the right of communities to manage their own affairs and to further their development; to protect and promote the interests and rights of minorities and marginalized communities; to ensure equitable sharing of national and local resources; and to enhance checks and balances and the separation of powers.<sup>99</sup>

Kenya now has two levels of government: national and county. Local government has been reorganized into 47 self-administered counties, including three in the Northeast and six along the Coast. The devolutionary system has introduced significant democratic dimensions: it establishes local executive authority that can check the national executive and has enabled a substantial transfer of development resources to the counties. The Equalization Fund, in particular, allocates resources to marginalized regions for a period of twenty years to bring basic services, such as water, roads, health facilities, and electricity, up to the national average.

Despite these gains, the peace and democratic dividends of devolution have been undermined by elite capture at the county level, often turning local governments into decentralized sites of corruption and conflict. This is especially detrimental in peripheral regions, where devolution is intended to address political grievances, economic marginalization, and social discrimination. As one observer notes:

Massive graft, corruption, and misallocation of political and economic resources have stymied the region's ability to benefit from devolution. Resources meant for the population have been misappropriated, leaving little to show for ten years of governance. The failures of the center have been replicated at the periphery. Oversight institutions mandated to fight corruption have been

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<sup>99</sup> <https://www.klrc.go.ke/index.php/constitution-of-kenya/139-chapter-eleven-devolved-government/part-1-objects-and-principles-of-devolved-government/343-174-objects-of-devolution>

unable or unwilling to act. Elected governors have turned the northeastern counties into family ‘fiefdoms’ and ‘small monarchies.’<sup>100</sup>

Devolution has also intensified clan-based divisions and competition, which, while undermining the inclusionary agenda, has increased the vulnerability of these regions to violent extremism. As noted by analysts:

Devolved government in Kenya’s newly formed north-eastern counties, intended to address decades of marginalization, has been undermined by dominant clans monopolizing power and pervasive corruption. Violent clan competition and friction between county elites and national administrative structures have allowed Al-Shabaab to expand and operate with relative impunity across large areas of the Northeast.<sup>101</sup>

The Constitution further emphasizes creating a government that reflects Kenya’s diversity, thereby strengthening national belonging. Early gains from this inclusionary agenda were evident during the Jubilee Coalition Government (2013–2017), which increased national-level representation of minorities. Somali representation, for instance, expanded significantly: three cabinet portfolios (Foreign Affairs, Industrialization, and Sports/Culture/Arts), the chairmanship of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), and two seats in the Supreme Court were held by Somalis, alongside an increase in Somali parliamentarians from 13 to 32. Research participants evaluated these developments positively:

Decisions by successive governments to improve the representation and inclusion of minority groups in politics, bureaucracy, and security have enhanced the legitimacy of the state among communities like the Somali. The Constitution recognizes historical injustices, devolves power, allocates resources, and establishes the Equalization Fund. While corruption remains a problem, governance through devolution has significantly transformed infrastructure, economic activity, and social development. Somali and other minority representation at the center has improved. The 2010 Constitution has fundamentally

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<sup>100</sup> <https://www.klrc.go.ke/index.php/constitution-of-kenya/147-chapter-twelve-public-finance/part-1-principles-and-framework-of-public-finance/373-204-equalisation-fund>

<sup>101</sup> Kenya’s Somali Northeast: Devolution and Security. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°114, 17 November 2015

reformed Kenya's defective post-colonial governance framework.<sup>102</sup>

The increasing legitimacy of the Kenyan state is central to democratization: citizens contest governments, not the state itself, as noted by a research participant:

Across ethnic groups, there is a broad consensus regarding national symbols, history, and institutions, allowing the state to be perceived as neutral in power competition. The economic sphere has also become more inclusive; over the past three decades, Somali and other minorities have risen in public and political life, integrating fully into Kenya's economy and security sectors. Those who were once considered secessionists in the 1960s are now proud Kenyans thriving within the system<sup>103</sup>.

Political inclusion of Kenya's historically marginalized regions has expanded since the 2022 elections. The administration of William Ruto has taken several steps aimed at integrating peripheral communities into national political and administrative structures. These include appointing leaders from previously underrepresented regions, adopting the National Policy on Ethnic Minorities and Marginalized Communities 2025–2035, and advancing large-scale infrastructure initiatives such as the Horn of Africa Gateway Development Project to improve transport and economic connectivity in the northeastern part of the country.

One of the administration's most significant inclusionary measures was the abolition, in May 2024, of the mandatory vetting process for applicants seeking the Kenyan National Identity Card in the Northeastern region and other border counties. For decades, residents of these areas (many of whom belong to minority or pastoralist communities) faced additional screening requirements that often delayed or prevented them from obtaining national identification documents, thereby limiting access to citizenship rights and public services.

The government has taken symbolic and legal steps to address longstanding historical grievances. On July 28, 2023, Kenya formally granted citizenship to members of the Pemba community, a group of Zanzibari origin that had been excluded from Kenyan citizenship since

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Rashid Abdi, an independent consultant, Nairobi, December 2023.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Farah Maalim, former Deputy Speaker of Kenya National Assembly, Nairobi. June 12, 2023.

independence in 1963<sup>104</sup>. For decades, many Pemba were effectively treated as stateless, leaving them without full legal recognition and contributing to their socioeconomic marginalization.

Another notable development was the return to Kenya of activist and lawyer Miguna Miguna in October 2022. Miguna had been deported to Canada in 2018 after participating in a mock presidential swearing-in ceremony for opposition leader Raila Odinga. His return marked an important moment for the restoration of the rule of law, reinforcing the principle that citizenship rights cannot be arbitrarily revoked by the state and that court orders, particularly those concerning fundamental rights, must be respected<sup>105</sup>. Taken together, these measures signal a broader effort to address historical exclusion and strengthen political inclusion within Kenya's constitutional framework.<sup>106</sup>

Ruto's February 2025 visit to Kenya's Northeast was met with rare unity, jubilation, and optimism. Unlike past presidential visits marked by tension and securitization, his reception reflected not only expectations of development but also a desire for recognition and secure citizenship. His symbolic gestures and public commitment to addressing historical injustices were therefore received with widespread enthusiasm. Ruto made a speech filled with the aura of reconciliation: "Our fellow countrymen from Northern Kenya will no longer suffer the indignity of extra-vetting and ethnic profiling to acquire national identification documents"<sup>107</sup>. This represents a rare commitment to ending the historically entrenched institutional discrimination faced by Kenya's Somali population and other marginalized peripheral communities.<sup>108</sup>

Ruto moved beyond symbolic recognition of the injustices suffered by Kenyan Somalis, an important element of transitional justice, to take concrete executive action. His administration appointed Somali Kenyans to key national positions, sending a strong signal that the community is no longer being sidelined but integrated into the highest levels of

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<sup>104</sup> <https://www.president.go.ke/ /president-ruto-grants-citizenship-to-pemba-community/>

<sup>105</sup> [https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke//tea/news/east-africa/exiled-kenyan-lawyer-miguna-returns-home-3991538#google\\_vignette](https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke//tea/news/east-africa/exiled-kenyan-lawyer-miguna-returns-home-3991538#google_vignette)

<sup>106</sup> Interview with a leader of Kenyan CSO, Nairobi. June 15, 2025.

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/ /williamsamoei/posts/our-fellow-countrymen-from-northern-kenya-will-no-longer-suffer-the-indignity-of/1219525296195408/>

<sup>108</sup> <https://somalistream.com/ /president-rutos-visit-to-north-eastern-kenya-signals-a-shift-in-history/>

government<sup>109</sup>. However, whether this inclusionary momentum will be sustained and expanded in ways that meaningfully strengthen national cohesion remains to be seen. While devolution and inclusion have advanced, nation-building and democratic governance, historical exclusions and contemporary securitization policies continue to limit the full realization of these democratic and inclusionary objectives.

### **3.6.3 Toward issue-based politics?**

The prospects for democracy in Kenya are further evidenced by the apparent reduction in electoral violence that was a longstanding feature of Kenyan politics, and the strengthening of negotiation experiences and elite bargaining. This trend was especially visible during the 2022 general election, widely regarded as the most peaceful in the country's history. Post-election, the Ruto administration engaged in dialogue with Odinga's opposition, which accepted the court ruling that declared Ruto as the winner. Odinga's compliance with the judiciary's decision marked a notable departure from earlier electoral disputes, which often escalated into large-scale violence<sup>110</sup>.

Kenyan political elites tend to rely on bargaining rather than violence when the perceived costs of conflict are high. In 2022, a balanced distribution of power among electoral contestants was a key factor in preventing violence. Neither candidate had overwhelming control of state machinery: while Ruto had served as Vice President, he did not command the full apparatus of government, and Uhuru Kenyatta's late endorsement of Odinga was hesitant, limiting Odinga's leverage. Other contributing factors included the strengthening of democratic institutions, particularly a judiciary capable of adjudicating electoral disputes; changes in socioeconomic risk factors; active civil society interventions; and the institutionalization of elite bargaining as a norm since the 2008 Handshake agreement and the Kibaki–Odinga National Pact.

Elite bargaining has proven critical in mitigating post-election unrest. Following his unsuccessful court petition, Odinga mobilized protests and brief episodes of violence, which were later resolved through dialogue. In May 2023, Ruto met with Odinga to review several policy demands, including the request to reconsider the executive's role in directing appointments to the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission

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<sup>109</sup> FCD with Kenyan Somali, Nairobi. June 11, 2025.

<sup>110</sup> Peter Rowan, 'Havoc to Hope', *supra* note 88.

(IEBC), demonstrating that negotiation remains a central tool in managing electoral tensions<sup>111</sup>.

Another significant democratic trend in Kenya is the growing shift from ethnicity to class as a primary mobilizing factor in politics. While socioeconomic divisions have historically influenced Kenyan elections, class emerged as a central issue during the 2022 campaign. Previously, political coalitions were largely organized along ethnic lines. Ruto, however, campaigned on an economic narrative, defining Kenya as a “Hustler Nation” and contrasting his own humble background – as a self-made entrepreneur who once pushed wheelbarrows and sold chicken. The entrenched privilege of political dynasties such as the Kenyattas and Odingas was symbolically expressed in this election campaign, displaying the “everyday Ruto” pushing wheelbarrow:



**Source:**

BBC, “Kenya’s Deputy President Ruto campaigns for ‘Hustler Nation’”  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-58246207>

Political leaders campaigned across ethnic boundaries much more than ever before, dramatically reversing the historical pattern of ethnic voting. In 2022, for instance, Kikuyu and Kalenjin voters largely supported Ruto together, highlighting an incipient form of class-based political mobilization<sup>112</sup>. Ruto’s “hustlers versus dynasties” narrative emphasized empowerment and opportunity rather than ethnic antagonism, signaling a positive inflection in Kenya’s democratic and political culture. The recent

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<sup>111</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/june-alerts-and-may-trends-2023>

<sup>112</sup> Peter Rowan, ‘Havoc to hope’ *supra* note 88.

Gen-Z protests similarly emphasized issues, rather than ethnic identity. This nascent shift in Kenyan politics from *identities* to *issues* (including governance outcomes, and responsive and accountable government) can usher unprecedented improvements in democracy, effective governance and inclusive development. Nevertheless, the risks of reversal and return to the history of rigged elections, oppressive and predatory state and ethnic violence cannot be excluded. Accordingly, Kenyan stakeholders and external support should work towards enhancing the consolidation and resilience of the country's democracy and development.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

To deepen democracy, the way forward envisages limiting the powers of the imperial presidency, strengthening democratic institutions, and implementing comprehensive reform. Electoral reform is also critical, particularly moving beyond the winner-takes-all system toward more inclusive arrangements that encourage coalition-building and reduce ethnic polarization. Strengthening accountability in devolved counties is essential for effective and inclusive governance. Expanding civic and inclusive notions of national identity –especially in historically marginalized regions– will also be vital for nation-building. Finally, meaningful democratization will require tackling corruption and addressing structural inequalities through stronger oversight, digital governance, equitable land reforms, job creation, and inclusive public dialogue on economic policy.

Kenya's democratic trajectory is notable in Africa for its combination of a vibrant economy, active private sector, robust civil society, competitive elections, and independent media. Human rights have improved over the past decade and a half, due process is increasingly respected, and the courts play a central role in checking the executive and preventing the abuse of state machinery for political repression. While challenges remain, notably related to the political neutrality of the police and security sector and corruption and inefficiency in the public service, Kenya's consolidation of democratic institutions, particularly the judiciary, signals a strong foundation for continued democratic development.

As discussed in the preceding section, the Kenyan political and democratic trajectory remains a work in progress. The country is arguably an exceptional island of stability and democratic experiment in the region. While challenges remain, it may be finding ways away from authoritarian,

violent and exclusionary politics, and towards democratic, peaceful and inclusionary governance. Notably, alternation of power, including between different coalitions, has now become regular, thanks to the two-term presidential term limit, although the country is yet to see an incumbent lose elections, affirming the importance of incumbency advantages. Kenya also seems to have found a way to recognize and address identity, including through decentralization, without necessarily formally empowering identity groups. Kenya's journey offers important insights for its neighbors in the Horn. Nevertheless, this progress is neither linear nor inevitable.

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## Chapter 4

# Democratization in Ethiopia: The Turbulence of a Post-Imperial Polity

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### Introduction

This chapter examines the challenges and prospects of democratization in Ethiopia. The analysis proceeds in four main sections, followed by a conclusion. Section 4.1 sets the historical and analytical context. It traces the construction of autocracy in Ethiopia and its reproduction across successive political regimes, emphasizing the long-term processes of political centralization that began in the mid-nineteenth century. These processes created a strong path dependency in which autocracy became structurally embedded in the Ethiopian state.

Section 4.2 situates Ethiopia's democratic performance within comparative democracy indices. Historically, the country has experienced several episodes of political liberalization that have not culminated in a durable democratic transition. Reform-oriented leaders have introduced periods of political opening, yet these reforms have rarely been accompanied by deeper institutional changes to the structure of the state. As a result, liberalization has tended to be partial and difficult to sustain. These episodic openings help explain why Ethiopia has occasionally shown improvements in democracy indices, particularly during moments of reform. In recent years, however, Ethiopia's performance across major national, regional, and international democracy indicators has declined significantly. Ongoing conflicts, insurgencies, and counterinsurgency operations, along with reports of serious violations committed by both state and non-state actors, have contributed to a challenging political and security environment that has negatively affected democratic governance and civil liberties.

Section 4.3 examines the structural challenges in Ethiopia's democratization. A persistent nation-building crisis has created chronic legitimacy deficits: nineteenth-century expansion integrated new societies through violence, fostering a dominant-group, European-style state that strengthened northern and urban nationalism but entrenched social inequalities and generated the discourse of "Amhara domination" in

imperial Ethiopia. Ethnic federalism addressed some grievances but generated new divisions, including the discourse of “Tigrayan domination” in federal Ethiopia, and crucially, the absence of a shared sense of belonging. The 2018 reshuffle shifted power to Oromo elites, fueling reactive Amhara nationalism and tensions with Tigrayans, worsening competing nationalisms that undermine prospects for democratic consolidation.

A deep asymmetry between state and society compounds the problem. Ethiopia’s strong, historically centralized state entrenched autocracy, reinforced by successive regimes. Economic and institutional weaknesses and fragmentation further limit democratization. Rural populations are largely excluded from governance, and traditional institutions have been co-opted or weakened. Widespread poverty, faltering developmental-state growth, public debt, rapid population expansion, and insufficient youth employment opportunities increase vulnerability to ethno-nationalist and religious mobilizations, further constraining democratic prospects.

Section 4.4 identifies positive developments and prospects. Early post-2018 liberalization produced significant legislative reforms that expanded civic space and enabled the emergence of democratic institutions such as the reformed Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and the National Election Board of Ethiopia. Once instruments of repression under EPRDF rule, these institutions, led by independent-minded figures for most of the reform period, including former opposition members, represented fragile but important countervailing forces. There have also been modest advances in legal pluralism, including limited recognition of customary property rights and efforts to integrate traditional institutions into state governance, particularly at the local level. Nonetheless, meaningful partnerships with traditional authorities remain underdeveloped and constrained by persistent patterns of co-optation. The last section highlights the conclusion of the chapter.

## **4.1 The Democratic Context**

### **4.1.1 The historical construction of autocracy**

The Ethiopian state is among the oldest continuous polities in the world, with a recorded history dating back to the powerful Kingdom of Axum, which attained global prominence during the early Christian era, and the pre-Axumite Da’amat kingdom that had its capital at Yeha since the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Orthodox Christianity played a central role in state consolidation from the fourth century CE, when it was adopted as the

official state religion, a status it retained until the 1974 revolution. Ethiopia is distinctive in African history in that Christianity, and later Islam, were introduced early and organically, rather than through nineteenth-century missionary activity, as was the case elsewhere on the continent<sup>1</sup>.

This sense of Ethiopian distinct history was further reinforced by the country's victory against the Italian colonial forces at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, making Ethiopia one of the two African states to escape formal colonization. Originating in the northern highlands, the territorial boundaries of the Ethiopian state expanded and contracted over time, with the modern state assuming its current borders by the end of the nineteenth century, following the expansions under Emperor Menelik II,<sup>2</sup> who was the King of Shoa (1866-1889) and Emperor of Ethiopia (1889-1913). For much of its history, Ethiopia functioned as an empire characterized by decentralized governance.

While the monarchy constituted the central authority, it accommodated regional dynasties ruled by subordinate kings, reflected in the emperor's title as "King of Kings." As Christopher Clapham observes<sup>3</sup>, Ethiopia's large and diverse territory required mechanisms to accommodate diversity. Prior to 1855, this was achieved through the effective devolution of power to regional governors who, while formally subordinate to the emperor, exercised substantial autonomy. Although imperial authority was absolute in principle, its practical reach varied considerably across time and space.

This political arrangement changed fundamentally in the mid-nineteenth century, when successive emperors, beginning with Emperor Tewodros II (1818-1868), embarked on a deliberate project of political centralization during his reign (1855-1868), laying the foundations of modern autocratic rule. The centralization drive intensified following the Battle of Segale in 1916, which resulted in the removal of Lij Iyasu and the ascension of Ras Teferi as Crown Prince and heir apparent.

The process reached its apex under Emperor Haile Selassie (1892-1975). Crown Prince Ras Teferi was crowned as Emperor Haile Selassie in 1930, and a year later, a constitution was enacted that institutionalized

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<sup>1</sup> Tadesse Tamirat (1972). *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270-1527*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Dagmawi Woubshet (2010). "Gleaning Ethiopia". *Callaloo*, Vol. 33, No. 1 <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.0.0610>

<sup>3</sup> Andreas Eshete (2013). "The Ethiopian Experience of Devolved Government". *Ethiopian Journal of Federal Studies*, volume 1. 1.

autocracy.<sup>4</sup> The 1931 Constitution explicitly affirmed the absolute authority of the emperor, stating: “By virtue of his imperial blood, as well as by the anointing which he has received, the person of the emperor is sacred; his dignity is inviolable and his power indisputable” (Article 5)<sup>5</sup>.

One of the constitution’s most consequential effects was the formal curtailment of the political power of the regional nobility, historically the principal counterweight to imperial authority. Bahru Zewde characterizes this as a “political death warrant” for the nobility, effectively ending the era of the *King of Kings* and the empire’s de facto decentralized governance<sup>6</sup>. As Semir Yusuf notes<sup>7</sup>, the constitution decisively strengthened the monarchy by requiring nobles to accept the provisions of the 1931 Constitution stipulating that they could no longer sign treaties with foreign powers or receive arms and decorations without imperial authorization.

Autocracy also found ideological justification among early twentieth-century Ethiopian intellectuals, often referred to as “Japanizers” due to their admiration for Japan’s state-led modernization through political centralization. Teklehawariyat Tekle Mariam, a leading figure among the Japanizers and a principal architect of the 1931 Constitution, explicitly rejected democratic governance, arguing that popular rule was unsuitable—and even dangerous—for “uneducated and backward” societies, and that democracy itself continued to generate bloodshed even among “civilized” peoples<sup>8</sup>.

Haile Selassie’s claim to absolute authority was further legitimized through a doctrine of divine kingship, rooted in the Solomonic myth that traced the Ethiopian monarchy’s lineage to the biblical union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. The 1931 Constitution enshrined this myth as a legal foundation of legitimacy and sovereignty. Article 3 provides: “... the imperial dignity shall remain perpetually attached to the

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<sup>4</sup> Bahru Zewde (1984). “Economic origins of the absolutist state in Ethiopia (1916-1935).” *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, vol. 17,

<sup>5</sup> <https://chilot.files.wordpress.com/2011/04/ethiopian-constitution-of-1931.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Bahru Zewde (2002). *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855–1991*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Athens: Ohio University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Semir Yusuf (2022). *Ethiopia’s democratic predicaments: state–society dynamics and the balance of power*. Institute for Security Studies, Monograph 209, November 2022 <https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/mono209.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Sara Marzagora (2023). “Political Thought and the Struggle for Sovereignty in Ethiopian-Japanese Relations (1927–1936)”. *The International History Review*, 45:1, p.103.

line of His Majesty Haile Selassie I, descendant of King Sahle Selassie, whose line descends without interruption from the dynasty of Menelik I, son of King Solomon of Jerusalem and the Queen of Ethiopia known as the Queen of Sheba.” The 1955 Revised Constitution reinforced this sacralized authority by referring to Haile Selassie as “*the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God*.” These ideological, institutional, and constitutional developments entrenched autocracy as the dominant mode of governance in Ethiopia – a legacy that continues to shape the country’s political trajectory.

#### **4.1.2 The autocratic relay**

Haile Selassie’s autocratic rule generated widespread popular grievance, creating conditions for radical political change. This challenge was spearheaded by a second generation of Ethiopian intellectuals, crystallized in the student movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Drawing heavily on Marxist frameworks, students articulated Ethiopia’s economic problems and social inequalities through the language of the “*national question*,” linking class exploitation with ethnic domination. A series of protests followed, and the aging monarch proved incapable of responding effectively to the ferment of the period, leading to a creeping revolution that culminated in the military seizure of state power in 1974.

In September 1974, Emperor Haile Selassie was arrested, and imperial autocracy was replaced by a military dictatorship, the *Derg*, which ruled Ethiopia until 1991. Despite revolutionary promises of a “people’s government,” the *Derg* rapidly consolidated power and deepened political centralization (after a few months of initial slogans such as ‘Ethiopia Tiqdem’ and ‘Ethiopian Socialism’). After some months in power, it claimed to pursue Marxist ideology grounded in “the dictatorship of the proletariat”. The *Derg* extended state control further than the imperial regime by penetrating society down to the grassroots level through the *kebele* structures. Political liberalization following the revolution was short-lived. By the late 1970s, the regime had eliminated urban opposition movements through revolutionary violence known as the *Red Terror*. Meanwhile, opposition politics shifted from urban-based activism to rural, ethnonational armed resistance<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Clapham (1990). *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia*. Cambridge.

Emerging from this context, and drawing inspiration from Eritrean liberation movements, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), itself rooted in the student movement, started armed struggle in 1975, and it became a major military and political contender. By the late 1980s, the TPLF had consolidated control over the northern Tigray region and spearheaded the formation of a coalition of ethnonational movements in 1989: the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). In 1991, the EPRDF toppled the Derg, promising peace, democracy, and development<sup>10</sup>.

Peace, the EPRDF argued, would be secured through an ethnic-federal political settlement that dismantled Ethiopia's historically centralized unitary state. This reconfiguration, termed ethnic federalism or multinational federalism, represented a dramatic reversal of the imperial nation-state project. On the positive side, the new order delivered significant gains in ethnocultural justice: the recognition of vernacular languages in education, courts, and regional administration; the institutionalization of legal pluralism through customary and religious courts in civil matters; and the creation of constitutionally guaranteed self-rule for "nations, nationalities, and peoples."

Most strikingly, Article 8(1) of the 1995 FDRE Constitution states that "All sovereign power resides in the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia". Even if the Constitution's preamble embodies terms such as shared legacies, common destiny and the necessity of one economic community, the literal interpretation of Article 8(1) seems to provide that sovereignty resides in these groups rather than in the Ethiopian state. This formulation with quasi-confederal implications can be considered as a culmination of the student movement's articulation of "the national question".

However, Ethiopia's federal experiment has been deeply contested. Critics argue that it has overemphasized difference at the expense of national cohesion, hardened ethnic boundaries, and intensified intercommunal tensions. Rather than resolving conflict, it has at times produced new forms of violence, contested borders, and political exclusion<sup>11</sup>. Paradoxically, the empowerment of historically marginalized

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<sup>10</sup> David Turton (2005). *Ethnic federalism: The Ethiopian experience in comparative perspectives*. James Currey Publishers.

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group/ ICG (2009). *Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents*. Africa Report N°153 – 4 September 2009

groups also produced new regional minorities, often rendered vulnerable through the discourse of “natives” versus “settlers” or “titular” versus “non-titular” populations<sup>12</sup>. Since none of Ethiopia’s regions are ethnically homogeneous, ethnic federalism has struggled to balance majority rule with minority protection, including physical security, property rights, and political representation. While minorities have faced threats across the country, Amhara communities living outside the Amhara region have particularly faced targeted violence, often framed through their association with the imperial past.

Alongside federal restructuring, the post-1995 constitutional order formally embraced liberal democracy and introduced multiparty elections for the first time in Ethiopia’s history. Yet democratization under the EPRDF was constrained by its ideological commitment to *revolutionary democracy*, a Leninist-inspired doctrine privileging vanguard leadership, democratic centralism, and socioeconomic rights over political pluralism and civil liberties<sup>13</sup>. Liberal constitutional provisions were largely situational concessions rather than evidence of a genuine democratic transformation, as the EPRDF came to power during a post–Cold War moment dominated by liberal triumphalism<sup>14</sup>.

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<https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/153-ethiopia-ethnic-federalism-and-its-discontents.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Asnake Kefale (2013). *Federalism and Ethnic Conflict in Ethiopia: A Comparative Regional Study*. New York: Routledge’;

See also, Dereje Feyissa (2006). “The experience of Gambella regional state. In: David Turton (ed.). *Ethnic federalism: the Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective*. Eastern African Studies. Oxford: Currey, pp. 208–230

<sup>13</sup> Unlike Marx who predicted “a spontaneous revolution by the proletariat”, Leninism insisted on “the need for leadership by a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries”. Also, Marxism predicted a temporary dictatorship of the proletariat, whereas Leninism, in practice, established a permanent dictatorship of the Communist Party. Marxism envisioned a revolution of proletarians in industrialized countries, while Leninism also emphasized the revolutionary potential of peasants in primarily agrarian societies (such as Russia). Britannica. “How does Marxism differ from Leninism?”

<https://www.britannica.com/question/How-does-Marxism-differ-from-Leninism>

<sup>14</sup> Dereje Feyissa (2011). “Aid negotiation: the uneasy ‘partnership’ between EPRDF and the donors”. *Journal of East African Studies*, 5(4). 788–817.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2011.642541>

Unlike other liberation movements that ideologically reinvented themselves, the EPRDF retained revolutionary democracy as its core doctrine. As Bach observes<sup>15</sup>, revolutionary democracy functioned as an ideological *bricolage*, drawing selectively from Leninism, Marxism, Maoism, and liberalism, while ultimately legitimizing authoritarian governance and serving as a tool to exclude both internal and external “enemies.” In practice, Ethiopia evolved into an electoral authoritarian regime: regular multiparty elections were held, but liberal-democratic standards were systematically violated<sup>16</sup>. Despite five national elections, the EPRDF demonstrated zero tolerance for power sharing with opposition parties, entrenching a dominant-party system for nearly three decades.

Ethiopia’s implementation of a dominant one-party system under the EPRDF for nearly three decades effectively foreclosed any realistic prospect of democratic governance, despite the formal existence of a multiparty electoral system. Elections functioned largely as a façade, masking the consolidation of authoritarian rule. In this context, Samuel P. Huntington (1993), an influential and controversial figure in comparative democracy, advised the EPRDF, while visiting Ethiopia during the constitutional making process, to establish a dominant-party system that would prioritize economic development over political competition<sup>17</sup>. Given Ethiopia’s ethnic diversity, Huntington argued that such a party should cultivate a broad social base, rather than one organised around ethnic identity, to secure electoral dominance. His recommendation was grounded in his belief that “an extremely high correlation exists between levels of democracy and levels of economic development.” EPRDF partially adopted Huntington’s recommendations. It set up a vanguard party but fundamentally disagreed with Huntington on identity politics and ethnic federalism.

Once the EPRDF consolidated power, it actively entrenched autocratic rule through multiple institutional and coercive mechanisms. Rather than dismantling the historically entrenched autocratic structures of the Ethiopian state, the ruling coalition built upon and deepened them,

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<sup>15</sup> J. Bach (2011). “Abiyotawi democracy: neither revolutionary nor democratic, a critical review of EPRDF’s conception of revolutionary democracy in post-1991 Ethiopia”. *Journal of East African Studies*, 5(4). 641-663.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2011.642522>

<sup>16</sup> Semir, 2022, *supra* note 7.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Huntington (1993). *Political development in Ethiopia: a peasant-based dominant-party democracy*. Report to USAID/ETHIOPIA on Consultations with the Constitutional Commission, 11.

expanding state control over both society and the economy. The EPRDF retained the Derg-era *kebele* system and further intensified social and political surveillance by introducing sub-*kebele* control structures, effectively extending party–state penetration into everyday life. These mechanisms of totalizing control transformed the dominant-party system into a durable form of electoral authoritarianism, rendering meaningful political competition virtually impossible<sup>18</sup>.

The brief democratic opening preceding the 2005 election marked the only genuine experiment with political pluralism under the EPRDF. When the opposition Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) performed strongly and claimed victory, post-election protests were violently suppressed. Security forces killed dozens of demonstrators and detained thousands. In response, the EPRDF narrowed political space through repressive legislation and criminalization of dissent. From 2006 onward, the regime shifted its core source of legitimacy from federalism to the developmental state, officially abandoning socialist rhetoric while pursuing state-led capitalism inspired by East Asian models<sup>19</sup>.

EPRDF’s hegemonic power produced two distinct forms of opposition. Pan-Ethiopianist forces resented the narrowing of political space and the risks ethnic politics posed to national unity, while ethnonationalist forces opposed the de facto re-centralization of power despite the federal structure. As David Turton noted<sup>20</sup>, pan-Ethiopianists criticized ethnic federalism for being “too ethnic,” granting nations and nationalities the right to self-determination up to secession. In contrast, ethnonationalist critics argued that the EPRDF’s problem was not excessive ethnicity but insufficient federalism. Christopher Clapham similarly highlighted the inherent tension in EPRDF’s dual projects: ethnic federalism, which promoted decentralization, and the developmental state, which emphasized centralization, including in policymaking<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Aalen Lovise (2020). “The Revolutionary Democracy of Ethiopia: A Wartime Ideology both Shaping and Shaped by Peacetime Policy Needs”. *Government and Opposition*; 55 (4), 653-668. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2018.54>

<sup>19</sup> Toni Weis (2016). *Vanguard capitalism: party, state, and market in the EPRDF's Ethiopia*. PhD Dissertation, University of Oxford. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:c4c9ae33-0b5d-4fd6-b3f5-d02d5d2c7e38>

<sup>20</sup> David Turton (2006). *Ethnic federalism – the Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective*. James Currey Publishers.

<sup>21</sup> Christopher Clapham (2018). “The Ethiopian developmental state”. *Third World Quarterly*. 39(6), 1151–1165. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1328982>

While EPRDF's developmental state delivered impressive economic growth after 2006, mainly driven by debt-based public infrastructure investment, it also intensified political centralization and state control over society and the economy. The near-total EPRDF electoral victories of 2010 and 2015 show the consolidation of hegemonic power. Yet this dominance proved brittle. By the mid-2010s, sustained protests, particularly in Oromia and later in Amhara, exposed deep contradictions within the EPRDF's twin projects of ethnic federalism and developmental authoritarianism. The immediate catalyst was the Addis Ababa Master Plan, perceived as a unilateral federal intrusion into Oromia's territorial and political autonomy.

These protests eventually converged into a broader coalition of dissent, culminating in the political transition of 2018 that brought Abiy Ahmed to power. His administration initially ushered in unprecedented political liberalization, raising hopes for a democratic transition.

However, the absence of a coherent transition roadmap, renewed insurgencies in Oromia and Amhara, and the outbreak of the devastating war with the TPLF following the postponement of the 2020 election plunged Ethiopia into renewed crisis. The autocratic relay – imperial, military, revolutionary, and developmental – thus continues to cast a long shadow over Ethiopia's contemporary political trajectory.

## 4.2 Ethiopia in Democratic Indices

The early years of political reform in 2018–2019 generated optimism that liberalization could pave the way for a democratic transition. PM Abiy Ahmed's electrifying acceptance speech on April 2, 2018, raised expectations by emphasizing freedom, equality, rule of law, and a level playing field for political competition. He proclaimed: "Democracy is unthinkable without freedom... We need to respect all human and democratic rights... From this day forward, we will look at political parties outside of EPRDF as competitors rather than enemies..."<sup>22</sup> The new government introduced a series of political and legal reforms, including expanded freedoms of assembly, expression, and association, the release of political prisoners and journalists, and reforms in the justice, media, and prison sectors. These measures were widely praised domestically and internationally and initially signaled a commitment to democratization.

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<sup>22</sup> ETV. Dr. Abiy Ahmed Official Ethiopia Prime Minister April 2, 2018 First Speech.  
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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuocIEcP3Rs>

However, these gains were short-lived. Ethiopia soon faced a surge in communal violence, renewed insurgencies, and ultimately full-scale war. Polarization deepened existing social cleavages. The dissolution of the EPRDF and creation of the Prosperity Party (PP) in November 2019, excluding TPLF, triggered a deadly power struggle between the federal government and Tigray, culminating in the devastating Tigray War (November 2020–2022). The shift also further fractured the Oromo elites.

Ethiopia's two most populous regions, Oromia and Amhara, have been marked by persistent political instability driven by overlapping insurgencies. In Oromia, long-standing power struggles among competing Oromo nationalist forces culminated in the emergence of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), which launched an insurgency in western Oromia in 2019 and gradually expanded into southern and central parts of the region. In the Amhara region, an insurgency erupted in 2023, rooted in hegemonic competition between Oromo and Amhara nationalisms and in grievances over the protection of Amhara communities living outside the region, particularly in Oromia, as well as perceived systemic disadvantaging of Amharas in political and security governance at the federal level and in Addis Ababa.

These dynamics have been further compounded by unresolved territorial disputes between the Amhara and Tigray regions and by the terms of the November 2022 Pretoria Cessation of Hostilities Agreement between the federal government and the TPLF. Many Amhara actors felt excluded from the agreement and perceived it as exposing them to renewed insecurity and potential attacks by Tigrayan forces. Taken together, the war in Tigray and the insurgencies in Oromia and Amhara have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and caused material destruction estimated in the billions of dollars, deepening Ethiopia's multifaceted crisis of state stability and national cohesion. Other regions, such as Benishangul and Gambella, also continue to face recurrent insecurity and violence.

According to International IDEA, Ethiopia experienced notable gains across all four categories of the Global State of Democracy framework in the five years following the 2018 political reforms. However, ongoing conflicts and their ripple effects suggest a new status quo defined more by volatility and uncertainty than by meaningful democratic consolidation<sup>23</sup>. In the 2024 Global Democracy Index, Ethiopia ranked poorly across all key dimensions of democratic performance: 123rd out of 173 countries in

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<sup>23</sup> IDEA. (2022). Global state of democracy report 2021: Forging Social Contracts in a Time of Discontents. <https://www.idea.int/gsod/global-report>.

representation, 133rd in rights, 139th in the rule of law, and 117th in political participation<sup>24</sup>.

On its part, Freedom House continues to classify Ethiopia as “Not Free”, reflecting stalled political reform and the risk of reversal in the absence of stability. In its 2024 assessment, Ethiopia scored 20/100, i.e., 10/40 for political rights and 10/60 for civil liberties, one score less than for the 2023 rating<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, Ethiopia’s overall governance score in the 2023 Ibrahim Index of African Governance was 48.5/100, with slight improvements over the years, but still Ethiopia performed way below Africa’s high achievers, including Kenya, which scored 60.3/100<sup>26</sup>. Transparency International’s 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index gave Ethiopia a score of 37/100, ranking 99th out of 180 countries, highlighting persistent governance challenges<sup>27</sup>. In its 2025 report, Human Rights Watch notes that “the human rights situation in Ethiopia remained dire, with government forces, militias, and non-state armed groups committing serious abuses in conflict-affected areas and elsewhere throughout the country”, and the report states growing humanitarian crisis with millions in need of emergency assistance<sup>28</sup>.

## 4.3 Challenges to Democratization in Ethiopia

### 4.3.1 The crisis of nation-building

Since Dankwart Rustow’s (1970)<sup>29</sup> seminal work on democratic transition (discussed in Chapter 2), national unity has been recognized as the fundamental condition for democratization. The background condition of national unity, according to Rustow, implies that citizens must clearly identify with a shared political community for democratization to take root. Importantly, Rustow argues that no specific level of economic development or social differentiation is necessary for democracy to emerge; such factors only influence the process indirectly, either fostering unity or exacerbating conflict.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.idea.int//democracytracker/country/ethiopia>

<sup>25</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org//country/ethiopia/freedom-world/2024>

<sup>26</sup> [https://iiag.online/  
/data.html?meas=GOVERNANCE&locZW&view=table&subview=score&range1from=2014&range1to=2023&range2from=2019&rang](https://iiag.online//data.html?meas=GOVERNANCE&locZW&view=table&subview=score&range1from=2014&range1to=2023&range2from=2019&rang)

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/ethiopia>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.hrw.org//world-report/2025/country-chapters/ethiopia>

<sup>29</sup> Dankwart A. Rustow (1970). “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model”. *Comparative Politics*, 2(3), 337–363. <https://doi.org/10.2307/421307>

An essential implication of Rustow's genetic model of democracy is its universality. According to this view, democracy can, in principle, emerge anywhere in the world –Global North or Global South– provided that the critical condition of national unity is met. In the Ethiopian context, the persistent legacy of the discourse and practice of ethnic domination and contested identities poses a profound challenge to achieving this foundational prerequisite for democratization.

Contested statehood and weak national unity have made democratization in Ethiopia particularly challenging. Ethiopia is one of only two African countries, alongside Sudan, where the nation-state was constructed through cultural homogenization and political centralization<sup>30</sup>. Mirroring European nation-building projects, which sought to forge a unified national identity by suppressing cultural differences, the Ethiopian empire pursued a similar approach by privileging the Amharic language and Orthodox Christianity as the official religion of the state<sup>31</sup>.

This nation-building project produced mixed results. On one hand, it fostered a supra-ethnic identity for many, particularly in urban areas, reinforced by the national pride stemming from the victory at Adwa. On the other hand, the violent territorial expansions under Emperor Menelik II and the subsequent assimilationist policies provoked lasting ethnonational grievances, fueling mobilization among marginalized groups, especially in southern regions.

Language policies reinforced these inequalities: Amharic was made the sole medium of instruction in schools, the language of the judiciary at all levels, and the exclusive language of administration across national, provincial, and local institutions<sup>32</sup>. The amended 1955 Constitution further entrenched this hierarchy, affirming both the Emperor's absolute power (Art. 4) and the privileged status of Amharic (Art. 125), systematically disadvantaging non-Amharic-speaking communities.

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<sup>30</sup> Jon Markakis, Gunther Schlee & John Markakis (2021). *The Nation State A Wrong Model for the Horn of Africa*. Max Panck Institute.

<sup>31</sup> F. Alemayehu, (2011) Greater Ethiopia: the evolution of a pluralist politico-legal system in a pluralist polity [Internet]. Available at: [http://aigaforum.com/articles/Greater\\_Ethiopia\\_the\\_Evolution.pdf](http://aigaforum.com/articles/Greater_Ethiopia_the_Evolution.pdf) [Accessed 22 August 2011].

<sup>32</sup> Getachew Anteneh and Derib Abdo (2006). Language Policy in Ethiopia: History and Current Trends. *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Sciences*, 2(1), pp. 37-62. <file:///C:/Users/MIZAN/Downloads/GetachewandDerib-Lang.Policy.pdf>

Pan-Ethiopian parties such as the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (MEISON) had, in their party programs (of August 1975<sup>33</sup> and March 1976<sup>34</sup> respectively) included the Stalinist-Leninist motto of the unrestricted right of nationalities to self-determination. For these parties, this was a strategic principle within the framework of unity among all working classes. However, their suppression by the Derg left armed ethnonationalist movements as the primary contenders for power. For the ethnonationalist movements, the Stalinist-Leninist motto was an immediate objective.

By the late 1980s, the TPLF/EPRDF and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) had emerged as the country’s dominant political forces. A tactical alliance between the two hastened the downfall of the Derg in 1991 and led to the establishment of a transitional government with a power-sharing arrangement. Beyond a mere regime change, this transition reconfigured the Ethiopian state along ethno-federal lines, designed to address “the question of nationalities.” Nine regional states were created based on ethnicity, and the 1995 Constitution enshrined the right of “Nations, Nationalities and Peoples” –Ethiopia’s term for ethnic groups – to extensive self-rule, including, in principle, the option of secession. In doing so, Ethiopia went further than any other country in formally constitutionalizing ethnicity.

The alliance between the EPRDF and OLF proved short-lived. Despite ideological alignment, power struggles led the OLF to exit the transitional government in 1992 and resume armed struggle. The EPRDF pressed ahead with the federal project, but its regime became increasingly associated with ‘Tigrayan domination,’ reflecting the TPLF’s dominant position within the coalition and its control over the national economy through parastatals, especially the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT). TPLF hegemony weakened after the death of its long-time leader Meles Zenawi in 2012, and EPRDF ultimately succumbed to public protests and internal rebellion from its former junior partners, the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) and Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM)<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ethiopia/eprp-program.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ethiopia/meison-program-eng.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Wuhibbegizher Reda, Executive Director of African Affairs Research. Institute of Foreign Policy, December 19, 2023.

Political change since 2018 ushered in a new era, bringing Oromo elites to the center of state power –from the Prime Minister’s Office to the mayorship of Addis Ababa and key military positions. While this increased visibility partly reflects a rebalancing of historical ethnic inequalities, it has also fostered a sense of political entitlement among some Oromo elites, justified by their role in the Qeerroo protest movement and by majoritarian logic<sup>36</sup>. Although Ethiopia has no majority ethnic group, the 2007 census identifies Oromos as the largest at 34% of the population, and Oromia itself is the largest and an economically and geographically strategic region, surrounding the capital and bordering nearly all other states except Tigray.

This concentration of Oromo power has disrupted the so-called OroAmara alliance that preceded the 2018 power reshuffle, sparking a new hegemonic rivalry between Oromo and Amhara elites both within the Prosperity Party and across broader nationalist politics. Amhara forces have framed this with the term *tereigninet* (“our time to rule”), while Oromo intellectuals use *Oromuuma* to articulate aspirations to reshape the Ethiopian state, including promoting Afan Oromo as a federal language, securing economic benefits, and pursuing greater regional autonomy. Although this Oromo elite move (to actively shape central politics, culture and economy) represents a shift from marginalization toward national influence, it has intensified ethnic competition and political tension, particularly affecting Amharas living outside their regional state.

The Tigray war had produced a temporary peace between these political forces, united by opposition to Tigrayan nationalism. However, this fragile convergence quickly unraveled following the Pretoria Peace Agreement in November 2022, which triggered a rapid realignment of forces and intensified Amhara political anxieties. In particular, the federal government’s attempt, widely perceived as Oromo-dominated, to dismantle regional *special forces*, beginning with the Amhara region, proved to be the final catalyst for armed resistance.

Having already mobilized and armed themselves during the Tigray war, the Amhara popular defense forces coalesced into an organized resistance movement under the banner of *Fano*. The movement combines legitimate demands for security and political representation with an imperial nostalgia rooted in aspirations to reassert Amhara political dominance over the Ethiopian state. This hegemonic ambition is often justified through claims of historical entitlement, as reflected in the controversial slogan “*Amhara arash, qedash, negash*”, suggesting Amharas are destined to

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<sup>36</sup> <https://x.com/7BetNeftegna/status/2005965374182023540>

farm, pray, and rule. Such rhetoric has predictably alienated other ethnonationalist actors, limiting Fano's ability to forge broader political alliances.

Ironically, Amhara nationalist claims increasingly mirror their Oromo counterparts. While Amhara nationalism invokes *yegna* politics, irredentist claims grounded in ancestral entitlement, Oromo nationalism advances *kegna* politics, an expansionist agenda premised on territorial and political dominance. Though articulated in different languages, *yegna* and *kegna* convey the same assertion, "it is ours" (claim-making) and are mutually constitutive. The collision of Oromo, Amhara, and Tigrayan nationalisms, combined with the volatility of shifting alliances, has created an extremely dangerous political environment, casting doubt not only on prospects for democratization but on the very survival of the Ethiopian state.

Virtually nothing remains uncontested: history, national symbols, the flag, and even revered historical figures –celebrated as heroes by some and condemned as villains by others. Particularly unsettling for nation-building is the violent contestation surrounding the commemoration of the Battle of Adwa, including disputes over ownership of the victory and where it should be celebrated. If Ethiopians cannot agree on Adwa, one of the few shared pillars of national pride, it raises a profound question about what remains capable of unifying the polity.

More than six decades after the "question of nationalities" emerged as a central political issue, its resolution remains elusive. Successive regimes have advanced different institutional responses, yet each iteration has proven deeply divisive. Ethiopia's current predicament underscores the urgent need for a new social contract capable of sustaining a more inclusive and consensual vision of nationhood. Much of the country's chronic instability stems from the failure to agree on what Ethiopia is, and what it ought to be. The resurgence of Amhara nationalism, now framed through a narrative of victimhood, has once again reopened this fundamental question. As Dankwart Rustow argued, national unity is a prerequisite for democratization: citizens must agree, at least minimally, that they belong to the same political community and that the nation itself is not in question. The presence of such a shared belonging does not guarantee democracy, but its absence effectively precludes democratic prospects. Ethiopia today falls far short of this threshold.

### 4.3.2 The structural imbalance between state and societal forces

A substantial body of scholarship links the emergence of effective statehood to warfare, particularly based on the European experience. Most famously associated with Charles Tilly's dictum that "war makes the state, and the state makes war," this literature argues that sustained interstate competition compelled rulers to develop centralized, capable, and extractive states. These processes of state formation, in turn, laid important institutional and normative foundations for democratization.

Christopher Clapham<sup>37</sup> extends the warfare-based theory of state formation to the African context, arguing that most African states "missed out on the all-important experience of war." Modern African states were largely created through external conquest by imperial powers whose overwhelming military superiority meant that African societies experienced colonial rule primarily as domination rather than as a mutually constitutive process of state-building. As Clapham notes, these societies could derive from the experience "only a memory of futile resistance," rather than the institutional and normative legacies associated with war-driven state formation in Europe.

Ethiopia, along with Eritrea, is often treated as an exception within Africa, given its long history of warfare and comparatively robust state institutions. Yet Clapham argues that Ethiopia's experience diverges in crucial ways from the European model. Most Ethiopian warfare was internal rather than external and thus lacked a clearly defined external "other" against which a national identity could be forged. State frontiers were fluid and weakly institutionalized, as they were not stabilized through sustained interstate conflict. Instead, the periphery often "petered out into areas that did not in any very meaningful sense form part of any state at all," and was governed through periodic extraction and raiding rather than settled administration. As a result, warfare tended to be cyclical rather than developmental.

The brief exception was the mid-sixteenth-century wars of Ahmad Gragn, during which the Christian empire faced an existential threat from the Sultanate of Adal. However, this episode was too short-lived to generate durable processes of state consolidation. Moreover, it was predominantly religious expansion rather than a war between territorially distinct states. Consequently, from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, warfare in Ethiopia "did not foster the growth of any 'national'

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<sup>37</sup> Christopher Clapham (2001). War and State Formation in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Failed States Conference, Florence, 10-14 April 2001

sentiment, because it was almost entirely internal rather than external: there was no significant ‘other’ against which a national identity could be defined”.<sup>38</sup>

Semir Yusuf, broadly concurs with Clapham’s Tillyan framework and extends it by demonstrating how the Ethiopian experience lacks the crucial struggle between state and societal forces that historically generated democracy elsewhere. As he argues:

The emergence of democratic governance in the West was largely a byproduct of state-making. State concessions to provide representation and recognize rights were significant outcomes of the existence of strong contenders to power. The Ethiopian state has deep indigenous roots; it has existed for a long time and emerged through intense and continuous warfare. These factors have rendered it more robust in coercive, organizational, and penetrative terms than the average postcolonial African state. However, this process did not engender any significant democratic movement on the part of the state, because it was not confronted by strong contenders demanding representation or limited government. The Ethiopian state and the political regimes that control it are very strong<sup>39</sup>.

A central structural constraint on democratization in Ethiopia, therefore, is the persistent imbalance between state power and societal forces. This asymmetry has been particularly pronounced since the mid-nineteenth century, following the consolidation of centralized imperial rule. The primary driver of this centralization was a perceived external threat, especially the looming danger of European colonial expansion. Ethiopian emperors, acutely aware of the fate of other African polities, sought to construct a strong, centralized state capable of resisting foreign domination.

This political logic was strongly articulated by early twentieth-century Ethiopian intellectuals, often referred to as the *Japanizers*, who urged Ethiopia’s rulers to emulate Japan’s rapid modernization and centralization in response to colonial pressure. Professor Messay Kebede provides a nuanced account of this intellectual and political moment:

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<sup>38</sup> Id., p. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Interviewed in January 2024.

Ethiopian intellectuals attributed the country's vulnerability to colonial threats to chronic internal conflict –among regions, between the center and the periphery, and over royal succession– and prescribed a strong, centralized state as the solution. Historically, monarchs had limited power, but Haile Selassie embraced this vision, using *zemenawinet* (modernity) and development to justify sweeping centralization. Mengistu deepened it through socialism, nationalizing land and property and redefining rights as state-issued (*legash*, not *askebari*). Meles Zenawi combined ethnic federalism with a developmental state that in practice required centralization, a trajectory Abiy Ahmed has continued. Across regimes, power has remained indivisible, drawing even well-intentioned leaders into autocratic rule. At the root of Ethiopia's democratic predicament lies the autocratic structure of the state itself, underscoring the need for democracy as a system of checks and balances to limit power.<sup>40</sup>

Semir Yusuf concurs with Messay's historical diagnosis and further develops it through a path-dependency lens, emphasizing institutional "lock-in" effects: Autocratic rule in Ethiopia is not accidental but historically constituted, and once established, it generates self-reinforcing dynamics. To understand this, we must return to history and examine the socio-economic and political factors that shaped the construction of autocracy and normalized it as a governing practice. Since its consolidation in the nineteenth century, successive regimes have actively worked to preserve an autocratic political system<sup>41</sup>.

Moreover, Semir notes that despite the Ethiopian state's strength, it has not gone unchallenged. State power has repeatedly been contested through both popular protest and armed struggle. Yet neither pathway has produced democratization. Protest movements, while capable of catalyzing political change, as in 2018, remain organizationally weak and are prevented by autocratic constraints from evolving into durable contenders for state power. Likewise, armed resistance failed to advance democracy even though it has been more successful in capturing the state.

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<sup>40</sup> መስታወት-"አምባገነን መሪዎች ለምን ደጋገሙን?" Mengizem media Mestawet Reeyot Alemu with Pro. Messay Kebede Dec 7,23.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqx9\\_1Y9na8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tqx9_1Y9na8)

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Semir Yusuf

This outcome aligns with the findings of the “rebels as rulers” literature, which highlights the difficulties encountered by armed movements in transitioning from insurgency to democratic governance. EPRDF’s ascent to power in 1991 illustrates this pattern. Rather than dismantling authoritarian structures, EPRDF reproduced and deepened them, drawing upon the historically sedimented autocratic repertoire of the Ethiopian state while perfecting new mechanisms of societal and economic control. In the process of waging war, rebel movements often develop centralized, hierarchical, and coercive organizational cultures. When such movements capture the state, they tend to transfer these authoritarian norms directly into the new political order<sup>42</sup>. As Clapham succinctly observed, “in Ethiopia the rebels inherited the state; in Eritrea, the rebels became the state.”<sup>43</sup> In Ethiopia, the TPLF’s internal authoritarian traditions played a decisive role in the reproduction of autocratic rule under EPRDF, reinforcing the deep structural impediments to democratization.

### **4.3.3 Ethiopia’s troubled political transition**

Ethiopia’s 2018 political transition was unprecedented. It was neither the outcome of a successful armed rebellion, as in 1991, nor the result of a democratic election or outright regime collapse. Rather, it emerged from a rare convergence of sustained popular protest and elite-led reform within the incumbent ruling coalition. Equally remarkable was the relatively peaceful transfer of power from Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn to Abiy Ahmed in April 2018.

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<sup>42</sup> Terrence Lyons (2019). *The Puzzle of Ethiopian Politics*. Lynne Rienner Publishers. <https://www.rienner.com/uploads/5d001ceb3a521.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Clapham (2017). *The Horn of Africa: State Formation and Decay*. NY: Oxford University Press.



Mounting public pressure and the scale of nationwide protests compelled the EPRDF to change course. Yet the peaceful transfer of power was also facilitated by the TPLF's recognition that its long-standing political hegemony had become untenable. Shifting power relations within the EPRDF coalition, combined with adherence, however grudging, to internal party procedures, led the TPLF to concede defeat in the leadership contest and accept Abiy Ahmed's ascent.

However, as Semir Yusuf argues, neither rebel victory nor peaceful elite-led transitions have historically fostered democratic consolidation in Ethiopia. Instead, peaceful transfers of power have often preceded violent contestation, as in 1974. In both 1974 and 2018, political change was driven by mass protest rather than decisive victory over the state. Consequently, excluded actors refused to legitimize the new order, while incoming leaders lacked the organizational and coercive capacity to impose authority, creating conditions for instability.

The situation was further complicated by the dissolution of the EPRDF and its replacement by the Prosperity Party (PP) in 2019. This produced a highly unusual scenario: a ruling party that neither seized power through armed struggle nor acquired it through competitive elections. The TPLF's refusal to join the PP intensified the crisis. Facing the dismantling of a coalition it had painstakingly constructed and fearing selective prosecution, the TPLF retreated to its regional stronghold in Tigray and adopted an increasingly confrontational posture. This shift was enabled by

its continued control over regional security forces and significant military capacity until Abiy consolidated power in late 2019<sup>44</sup>.

The subsequent proliferation of communal violence across the country reflected both a growing security vacuum and an escalating power struggle between the federal government and the TPLF. Simultaneously, Abiy's administration faced challenges from Oromo nationalist forces, particularly the OLF and the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), which claimed greater ownership of Oromo nationalism and of the protest movement that precipitated political change. The entry of prominent activist Jawar Mohammed into formal politics in 2019 further heightened tensions. Both the OLF and OFC viewed Abiy as lacking legitimacy and related his emergence with the OPDO, long regarded as a subordinate partner within the EPRDF.

In this volatile context, Jawar's claim that Ethiopia had "two governments"—his own and Abiy's—symbolized the erosion of state authority and the ease with which mass mobilization could challenge formal power<sup>45</sup>. Confronted by simultaneous threats from the TPLF and Oromo opposition forces, Abiy increasingly pivoted toward pan-Ethiopianist rhetoric and alliances, recalibrating his political strategy in ways that would further reshape Ethiopia's already fragile transition. Abiy's populist rhetoric quickly antagonized ethnonationalist forces, who perceived it as a direct threat to Ethiopia's ethno-federal order. His public assertion that "regional borders are mere administrative lines" was particularly provocative in a constitutional system where political sovereignty is explicitly vested in "nations, nationalities, and peoples."<sup>46</sup> Such statements reinforced ethnonationalist fears that the federal compact was being hollowed out, contributing significantly to post-2018 political instability.

Awol Allo framed Abiy's project as "Making Ethiopia Great Again" (MEGA), explicitly likening it to Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again."<sup>47</sup> According to this critique, Ethiopia's turmoil reflects a clash between two irreconcilable visions. On the one hand, Abiy's perceived

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with a peace and security scholar, Addis Ababa University, Dec.10, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> <https://gebremariam3.rssing.com/chan-50763547/article4076.html?nocache=0>

<sup>46</sup> <https://addisfortune.news/timely-reminder-regional-states-are-sovereign-so-says-the-constitution>

<sup>47</sup> Awol Allo. How Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopia-first nationalism led to civil war.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/25/how-abiy-ahmeds-ethiopia-first-nationalism-led-to-civil-war>

push toward a centralized state was regarded as centralization in which the center dominates political, economic, and cultural life; and on the other hand, the federalist vision championed by the TPLF, Oromo opposition forces, and several southern nationalities was presented as an emphasis on constitutionally entrenched regional autonomy and shared sovereignty.

Labeling Abiy *ahadawi* (unitarist), ethnonationalist actors intensified their resistance, with some turning to armed struggle. A splinter faction of the Oromo Liberation Front launched an insurgency in 2018 under the banner of the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA). While the charge of unitarism captured genuine ideological anxieties, it arguably overstated the case. In practice, the Abiy administration was no more centralizing than the EPRDF had been, even though its early embrace of Ethiopia's "Great Tradition", previously dismissed by the EPRDF as chauvinist, signaled a discursive shift away from ethnofederal orthodoxy.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the postponement of the 2020 elections became the immediate catalysts for escalating political tensions. Following the assassination of Hachalu Hundessa, an iconic figure of the Oromo protest movement, in mid-2020, the government moved decisively against Oromo opposition leaders, including the arrest of senior figures in the Oromo Federalist Congress, such as Jawar Mohammed. Meanwhile, relations with the TPLF deteriorated rapidly after it proceeded with a unilateral regional election and the full-scale war in November 2020.

At the same time, Abiy consolidated a strategic alliance with Eritrea, formalized through the 2018 peace agreement that ended decades of hostility following the 1998–2000 border war. Although widely celebrated and rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize, this rapprochement later revealed a more instrumental dimension. It evolved into a de facto war alliance against the TPLF, a common adversary. Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki, who harbored deep grievances against the TPLF for its role in the border war and Eritrea's subsequent international isolation, seized the opportunity to reassert regional influence.

Eritrea's direct involvement in the Tigray war internationalized the conflict and raised the specter of regional destabilization. Sudan, sympathetic to the TPLF and seeking strategic advantage amid Ethiopia's internal turmoil, exploited the situation by asserting control over disputed border territories. Together, these dynamics transformed Ethiopia's

internal political crisis into a broader regional security threat, further undermining prospects for democratic transition and national cohesion<sup>48</sup>.

Violent contestation also surfaced within the ruling PP. Disagreements over how to respond to what many perceived as the emergence of Oromo political hegemony culminated in a violent split within the Amhara regional leadership. One faction was led by the regional president, Ambachew Mekonnen, and the other by General Asaminew Tsige, head of the regional security apparatus. In June 2019, in what the federal government described as a regional coup attempt, General Asaminew orchestrated the assassination of President Ambachew and several members of his cabinet. Shortly thereafter, federal security forces killed Asaminew while he was on the run. This episode underscored the fragility of the transition and the extent to which coercive power, rather than institutional mediation, shaped political contestation.

From a comparative perspective, the ideal pathway for Ethiopia's democratic transition in 2018 would have required a rough balance of power between state and societal forces, followed by a comprehensive political negotiation among major actors. This does not imply that societal forces are inherently democratic; in the Ethiopian context, many opposition movements have themselves been internally authoritarian. Drawing on Rustow's and Tilly's insights, Semir Yusuf argues that democracy rarely emerges because political actors possess democratic intentions or a democratic political culture. Rather, it arises from prolonged and inconclusive struggles in which no actor is capable of decisively defeating its rivals.

As Semir further notes, democracy in the West did not originate from democratic culture or norms but from competitive and balanced power relations. Democracy becomes possible when political actors recognize that they cannot eliminate their opponents and are therefore compelled to negotiate rules of coexistence. This mutual recognition, the feeling that "*you may rule today, but I could rule tomorrow*", creates incentives to institutionalize competition and manage conflict through peaceful, negotiated mechanisms. In Rustow's and Tilly's terms, such dynamics lay the groundwork for democratic transition.

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with Michael Woldemariam, Professor of Political Science at Boston University, December 16, 2023.

Applying this framework to Ethiopia suggests that a more favorable outcome in 2018 would have required protesters and an organized opposition alliance strong enough to force negotiations but not strong enough to overthrow the state, and a state unable to reassert total control without concessions. In the absence of such a balance, no meaningful negotiation occurred. Instead, the historically entrenched imbalance between state and societal forces was rapidly reconstituted and reinforced. Under these structurally unfavorable conditions, a return to autocratic governance was not an aberration but a predictable outcome.

This perspective involves caution against overly personalized explanations that attribute Ethiopia's democratic failure solely to individual leaders. Such accounts overlook the deeper structural constraints on democratization embedded in the nature of the Ethiopian state. Unless an incumbent leadership possesses both the political will and the capacity to deliberately engineer a negotiated bargain between state and societal forces, a democratic transition remains unlikely. Even assuming genuine reformist intent, the Abiy administration operated under exceptionally adverse conditions. Confronted sequentially by Oromo nationalist opposition, a devastating war with the TPLF, and an ongoing Amhara insurgency, it repeatedly reverted to the familiar autocratic fallback position in the face of existential threats.

#### **4.3.4 Economic and institutional fragmentations**

As Kidane Mengisteab duly argues<sup>49</sup> the fragmentation of economic and institutional systems constitutes a major obstacle to democratization across the Horn of Africa. Central to this problem is the enduring duality between informal, traditional systems of governance and the formal institutions of the modern state. This institutional bifurcation has systematically undermined popular participation, a problem exacerbated by the overwhelmingly rural character of the region. In Ethiopia, where more than 80 percent of the population lives in rural areas, democratic political discourse remains largely confined to urban spaces.

Traditional governance institutions are not only excluded from national decision-making structures but are also routinely delegitimized by the state. Property rights sanctioned by customary systems are frequently violated because the state does not recognize them as legally valid. The most acute manifestation of this exclusion is found among pastoralist

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<sup>49</sup> Kidane Mengisteab (2020). *The Crisis of Democratization in the Greater Horn of Africa: Towards Building Institutional Foundations*, Boydell & Brewer.

societies, whose mobile production systems are rarely acknowledged as legitimate ways of life or viable livelihoods. This is despite extensive evidence demonstrating that pastoralism is the most effective and sustainable mode of resource management in arid and semi-arid environments.

A substantial body of evidence confirms that pastoralism in Africa’s drylands reduces risk, mitigates vulnerability, and enhances resilience. The FAO, for instance, notes that “the mobility of pastoralists exploiting animal feed resources across different ecological zones represents a flexible response to a dry and increasingly variable environment... ensuring access to high-quality grazing and generating economic value.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, notwithstanding this empirical consensus, pastoralists across Ethiopia have lost significant portions of their prime grazing lands to ill-conceived national development projects, particularly large-scale commercial agriculture.

Ethiopia has made some progress in addressing this institutional duality<sup>51</sup>. The adoption of a pastoralist policy that formally recognizes mobile pastoralism and its contribution to the national economy represents an important step forward. However, the continued emphasis on irrigation-based commercial agriculture in the lowlands, symbolized by the establishment of the Ministry of Lowlands and Irrigation, suggests that older developmental biases persist.

Substantial investment in the lowlands’ comparative advantage, namely livestock production, remains limited. Positive developments are also evident in legal pluralism. Ethiopia’s federal system constitutionally recognizes customary courts, at least in civil matters, and there is growing momentum toward integrating these institutions into the criminal justice system through stronger linkages with state courts. In addition, the Ministry of Peace has recently undertaken systematic studies of local institutions, documenting and classifying them according to their relevance for conflict resolution and human rights protection.

Traditional governance systems also possess democratic potential. Except for hereditary authorities, many local institutions nurture merit-based leadership. Among the Nuer of Ethiopia and South Sudan, for example, leadership emerges organically based on demonstrated

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<sup>50</sup> FAO. 2018. Pastoralism in Africa’s Drylands. <https://www.fao.org/3/ca1312en/CA1312EN.pdf>

<sup>51</sup> MoP. 2023. በኢትዮጵያ ለሰላም ግንባታ ፋይዳ ያላቸው ማህበራዊ-ባህላዊ ተቋማትና ሥርዓቶች ሚናዎ ምደባ.

competence in both peace and conflict situations<sup>52</sup>. Governance in many communities is participatory, with collective deliberation under the palaver tree often likened to a form of indigenous parliament. In a provocative intervention, Fidèle Ingiyimbere (2022)<sup>53</sup> characterizes the African palaver as a form of deliberative democracy analogous to Rawls's concept of public reason, a mechanism through which citizens deliberate on matters of common concern.

Democratic governance in Ethiopia can thus draw lessons from traditional systems of authority and build constructive partnerships. Yet the prevailing state approach has largely oscillated between elimination, neglect, and co-option of local institutions, all of which undermine their alternative bases of legitimacy. The failure of co-option is most evident in the Somali Regional State under the EPRDF<sup>54</sup>. Driven primarily by security considerations, the government formalized clan elders by incorporating them into the state apparatus as salaried officials operating from Jigjiga. These figures were widely derided by local communities as “government elders,” prompting the emergence of alternative “community elders” elected outside state control.

#### **4.3.5 Deepening economic crisis**

A substantial body of literature links socioeconomic conditions to democratic prospects, pioneered by Martin Lipset. In *Political Man*, Lipset<sup>55</sup> argued that economically advanced nations are more likely to sustain democracy. One strand of thought emphasizes economic development as a driver of democratization. It argues that growth stimulates social mobilization, which in turn fosters political mobilization and regime change. Industrialization and rising prosperity generate new social classes, most notably a commercial middle class, which mediates between elites and the poor, creating structural conditions conducive to democratic governance. Aristotle's observation that “a large, prosperous

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<sup>52</sup> Dereje Feyissa (2011). *Playing Different Games: The paradox of the identification strategies of the Anywaa and the Nuer in the Gambella region, Western Ethiopia*. Berghahn Books.

<sup>53</sup> Fidèle Ingiyimbere (2022). “Public reason under the tree: Rawls and the African palaver”. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Volume 50, Issue 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221117254>

<sup>54</sup> Tobias Hagmann (2007). “Bringing the Sultan Back In: Elders as Peacemakers in Ethiopia's Somali Region”. In: “*State Recognition and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa*”.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Lipset (1981). *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics Paperback*. John Hopkins University Press.

middle class may mediate between rich and poor” underpins this argument, later refined to highlight the role of a commercial middle class in sustaining democratic institutions such as the rule of law, electoral participation, and constraints on power<sup>56</sup>.

An alternative perspective reverses the causal flow, arguing that democratization can promote economic development by providing confidence in property rights and market stability<sup>57</sup>. Yet no definitive causal link has been established in either direction. Lipset himself did not frame economic development as a strict prerequisite for democracy; he described it as a “requisite” or “sustaining” condition. The key insight in these arguments is that economic development creates an environment more favorable for democratization, while economic crisis and widespread poverty constrain it. This leaves populations vulnerable to government patronage and mobilization along emotionally salient social categories such as ethnicity or religion.

Ethiopia exemplifies this challenge. Poverty is pervasive, undermining the structural foundations for democratic consolidation. According to a recent World Bank analysis (as of October 2025), progress in reducing extreme poverty in Ethiopia has reversed in recent years. The increase has been attributed to the combined effects of conflict, recurrent drought, and broader economic instability. National poverty rates rose from approximately 33% in 2016 to 39% in 2021, reflecting a significant deterioration after years of gradual improvement. Projections for 2025 suggest that poverty could increase further to around 43% if current trends persist. Multidimensional poverty has also worsened: estimates indicate an increase from 68% in 2019 to 72% in 2024, meaning that roughly 86 million people are experiencing multiple, overlapping deprivations related to income, health, education, and living standards. Together, these trends highlight the scale of Ethiopia’s current socioeconomic challenges and the vulnerability of earlier development gains<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Ronald M. Glassman (1995). *The Middle Class and Democracy in Socio-Historical Perspective*. Brill.

<sup>57</sup> Uk Heo and Alexander C. Tan (2001). “Democracy and Economic Growth: A Causal Analysis”. *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 463-473.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/422444>

<sup>58</sup> <https://documents1.worldbank.org/ /curated/en/099559004212518954/pdf/IDU-74184097-0606-4f26-a1b5-135f87d3c88c.pdf>

Ethiopia experienced economic growth over the past two decades, and at times, reports indicated averages over 10 percent. Such growth cultivates an emerging middle class unless it is dominated by predatory elites, thereby suppressing private sector development and the emergence of a broader middle class based on efforts, goodwill and attainments. Economic transformation underpins political developments, as seen in the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD's) electoral success in the 2005 elections, partly financed by a business class independent of the state. Most of the country's top opposition leaders also came from this upper middle class, able to self-finance campaigns and operate outside EPRDF patronage networks.

Despite this growth, Ethiopia's economic health is precarious. The expansion was driven by the EPRDF's developmental interventions, mainly financed through external debt and led by an elite group of leaders with a vision of transforming the country from poverty to development. Unlike classical developmental states in Southeast Asia, Ethiopia's approach lacked bureaucratic meritocracy and a strong role for the private sector. Instead, it resembled a centrally planned system, described by Tony Weis as "vanguard capitalism"<sup>59</sup>. Rapid growth often prioritized infrastructure and heavy public investment –sugar estates, light railways, and other projects– without adequate feasibility studies. Coupled with widespread corruption, these investments failed to generate returns, leaving the economy burdened with fast-maturing debt.

Structural vulnerabilities further undermine economic stability. Ethiopia's persistent trade deficit creates a chronic shortage of foreign currency, while distributional inequalities have fueled social unrest. As Tom Lavers notes<sup>60</sup>, shortages of land, employment opportunities, and the displacement of smallholders for investors were key drivers of the 2015 protests. Rapid population growth –currently 2.5 percent annually, with projections to double the population to 260 million by 2050– exacerbates these pressures. More than two million youth enter the labor market each year, far outstripping available opportunities.

The current administration has officially shifted to a market-oriented, homegrown economic reform program emphasizing privatization and private-sector leadership. In practice, however, elements of the developmental interventions persist, though the government avoids the

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<sup>59</sup> Toni Weis (2016), *supra* note 19.

<sup>60</sup> Tom Lavers (2023). *Ethiopia's 'Developmental State': Political Order and Distributive Crisis*. Cambridge University Press.

label due to its ideological association with anti-neo-liberal policies. Former World Bank officials and market-oriented scholars dominate the economic advisory team. The deeply neoliberal macroeconomic reforms introduced since August 2024 have further driven up the cost of living, making day-to-day survival a more pressing concern for ordinary citizens than democratic aspirations. Yet, the issues of major reform in land tenure security and land rights (as private, common, and state-owned property) that can bring about grass-roots empowerment for rural and urban landholders have not received adequate attention.

Youth dynamics significantly amplify Ethiopia's economic and political vulnerabilities. With approximately 71% of the population under thirty, a large proportion faces unemployment or underemployment, creating demographic pressure that, without targeted economic interventions, can exacerbate social and political instability. Economic conditions have intensified these risks. Between 2022 and 2024, annual inflation surged to 33% for consumer prices and 41% for food prices, while fast-maturing public debt and disruptions stemming from the Tigray war compounded the strain on households, creating what has been described as a "perfect storm" for unrest<sup>61</sup>. By November 2025, however, headline inflation had eased to 10.9%, the lowest level since early 2019, offering some relief. Nevertheless, addressing youth unemployment and ensuring economic stability remain critical to reducing the risk of future political and social tensions.<sup>62</sup> The education sector crisis intensifies the problem: only about 3 percent of one million students passed the national exam in the past three years, leaving the remainder exposed to migration, radicalization, or recruitment into armed groups<sup>63</sup>.

In short, Ethiopia's deepening economic crisis, marked by debt, inflation, unemployment, and youth marginalization, is linked to political instability. Survival imperatives undermine democratic engagement, while economic desperation increases receptivity to extremist ideologies, reinforcing a cycle of political violence and insecurity. The opposition is increasingly seeking to mobilize supporters on an economic platform, a shift vividly captured in Jawar Mohammed's well-known "pie chart" of regime change. In this framing, economic hardship accounts for 50 percent

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<sup>61</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-24/ethiopian-inflation-tops-35-in-december->

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopias-inflation-rate-decline-10-20252026-fiscal-year-2025-04-24/>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.psi.org.e/index.php/blog/460-evaluation-of-the-recent-dynamics-on-national-school-leaving-examination-result-in-ethiopia>

of the drivers of political change, government missteps for another 30 percent, and the opposition's own efforts for only 20 percent, underscoring a strategic reliance on socioeconomic grievances rather than organizational strength.

## **4.4 Prospects of Democratization in Ethiopia**

### **4.4.1 Building democratic institutions**

Despite Ethiopia's ongoing political and security challenges, there are some promising signs for democratization. One important outcome of early political liberalization has been the emergence or reform of key democratic institutions. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) illustrate this trend. Historically, both were de facto extensions of the EPRDF party, with leadership closely aligned with party interests. NEBE was central to political tensions, as flawed elections were used to legitimize an authoritarian government<sup>64</sup>.

In the early years of political change, both institutions were led by independent-minded professionals, some with opposition backgrounds<sup>65</sup>. EHRC has taken an active role in monitoring human rights violations and promoting norms through initiatives such as the annual human rights festival and arts competitions. NEBE has also demonstrated institutional integrity by challenging undemocratic practices and responding to constitutional disputes. For example, NEBE's 2021 decision to restrict Hararis living outside the Harari region from voting for the regional assembly was contested in the Supreme Court, which upheld the Hararis' voting rights. Even though the Supreme Court's decision can be contested based on a valid legal interpretation of voting rights, such peaceful contestations strengthen constitutionalism and the means of resolving political disputes through institutional channels. NEBE maintains amicable relations with political parties, approaching engagement with a historical sensibility that goes beyond formal procedures and takes contextual challenges into account. For example, most parties failed to hold General Assemblies before the June 2021 election. Confronted with

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<sup>64</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/article/ethiopia-election-isnt>

<sup>65</sup> The veteran opposition politician Birtukan Mideksa headed NEBE from 2018-2023 and the EHRC was headed by the human right activist Daniel Bekele from 2018-2024. Their resignation is a major setback in the building of democratic institutions in Ethiopia.

the enormity of addressing these procedural gaps, NEBE is exploring lessons from Kenya, where similar issues have been managed<sup>66</sup>.

The post-2018 civic space in Ethiopia has also seen notable expansion in recent years. The repeal of the repressive 2009 CSO Proclamation and its replacement with more progressive legislation in 2019 created legal and institutional room for civil society organizations working on democracy, human rights, and peacebuilding. This reform enabled a broader range of actors, previously excluded or marginalized, to participate in public life, advocate for rights, and engage in policy discourse. The subsequent establishment of the Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council (ECSOC) holds the potential to function as a significant societal counterbalance to the state, coordinating civil society engagement, fostering accountability, and negotiating democratic space with government institutions. At the same time, the outbreak of war and its aftermath have significantly narrowed these openings. Increasingly, civil liberties are constrained, the operational environment for CSOs has become precarious, and the space for public debate and advocacy is under pressure, highlighting the fragility of gains in civic participation.<sup>67</sup>

#### **4.4.2 In search of a common ground**

Narratives are central to nation-building as they create a shared identity, history, and purpose, fostering unity among diverse groups. At the same time, by selectively framing memories and elevating “heroes” or “enemies,” they legitimize power, justify conflict, or enable reconciliation, thereby shaping public opinion, policy, and the nation as an “imagined community”<sup>68</sup>.

The ruling Prosperity Party’s emphasis on shared narratives as a nation-building strategy offers a potential corrective to the excesses of institutionalized ethnic politics that have shaped Ethiopia over the past three decades<sup>69</sup>. National initiatives aimed at fostering unity and a shared sense of identity such as promoting the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as a symbol of collective effort and sacrifice, institutionalizing annual celebrations of the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF), and reconfiguring the memory of the Adwa victory on more inclusive and

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Bizuwerk Ketete, NEBE Board Member, November 13, 2024.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Befekadu Hailu, former Chief Executive, CARD, December 2023.

<sup>68</sup> César García (2018). “The Power of Myths and Storytelling in Nation Building: The Campaign for the Independence of Catalonia from Spain (2012–2015)”. *Canadian Journal of Communication* Vol. 43, No. 2.

<sup>69</sup> Prosperity Party on shared narratives. Unpublished document, 2023.

plural bases, function not only as symbolic gestures of integration but also as possible instruments for recalibrating Ethiopia's fragmented political landscape. When framed inclusively, these initiatives can help cultivate a civic form of nationalism that complements, rather than suppresses, Ethiopia's diversity by emphasizing shared struggles, mutual interdependence, and collective futures.

By foregrounding common achievements and shared historical reference points, such narratives have the potential to shift political identification away from narrowly defined ethnic constituencies toward a broader sense of civic belonging. This, in turn, can lower the zero-sum logic that has come to dominate ethnicized politics and create space for a politics of national consensus grounded in negotiated coexistence. In a deeply divided society such as Ethiopia, the symbolic dimension of politics matters: shared narratives can provide a minimum moral and emotional foundation upon which democratic dialogue, compromise, and institutional reform may rest.

However, what qualifies as "great" or "shared" narratives must be approached with strong conflict sensitivity and historical awareness. Certain historical framings risk reproducing exclusion rather than cohesion. For instance, elevating the 1978 Karamara victory against Somalia's invasion under Siad Barre as a "great" national narrative needs caution because it should not undermine recent integrative gains in the Ethiopia's Somali region, and the invasion does not represent the informed will of all Somalis who were (during the period) residing in Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and the current de facto state of Somaliland. Reinscribing such narratives without contextualization risks reviving old grievances and reinforcing feelings of marginalization<sup>70</sup>.

Moreover, narrative-based nation building cannot succeed in isolation from objective realities on the ground. Inclusive narratives must be matched by tangible improvements in the lived experiences of citizens, particularly in terms of security, equal protection, justice, and access to state services. Communities that continue to experience insecurity, displacement, or selective application of the law are unlikely to internalize national narratives, however rhetorically compelling. In fact, the mismatch between narrative and reality can induce disillusionment with the state. In this sense, narratives are enabling conditions, not substitutes, for inclusive governance and equitable state practices.

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<sup>70</sup> Se01Ep05: 'Dereje Feyissa on Grand Narratives Shaping Ethiopia's Foreign Policy'. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZv975tG264>

The credibility of this nation building project has been further weakened by the Prosperity Party's lack of a coherent discourse, oscillating between Pan-Ethiopianist and ethnonationalist positions, a pattern often driven by short-term political expediency and alliance-building imperatives. This inconsistency sits uneasily with the party's official claim to centrism, defined as maintaining a principled balance between Ethiopia's two polarized political extremes. While the search for common ground is commendable, inconsistency in positioning has generated skepticism about the party's commitment to a genuine middle path between unity and diversity. A more principled and predictable approach is required to clearly articulate how diversity is to be accommodated within a shared civic framework, and it should consistently align inclusive narratives with policy and institutional reform. This is essential if nation building on a more inclusive basis is to contribute meaningfully to democratic consolidation in Ethiopia.

#### **4.4.3 Peace agreements, national dialogue, and transitional justice**

Peace and political settlement remain central to democratization. Ethiopia's political transition has been severely undermined by escalating political violence and communal conflict. The Tigray war (2020–2022), along with ongoing insurgencies in Oromia and Amhara regions, has deepened political instability and produced a pervasive security crisis that constrains democratic processes. The Pretoria Peace Agreement of November 2022 has at least silenced the guns in Tigray and enabled the emergence of cautious confidence-building between the Tigray Interim Regional Administration and the federal government. However, the agreement is under considerable strain, exacerbated by fragmentation within the Tigrayan political elite and divided loyalties shaped by the deterioration of rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Divergent strategies over how to manage the TPLF, combined with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's renewed push for access to the Red Sea, perceived by Eritrea as a direct threat to its territorial integrity, have further complicated the post-Pretoria political environment and weakened the foundations of sustainable peace. Efforts to negotiate peace with the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) are ongoing. Although the two rounds of peace talks between the federal government and OLA in Tanzania ultimately failed, a faction of OLA signed a peace agreement with the Oromia regional government in December 2024, significantly contributing to a relative peace in the region. Similarly, a faction of the Fano movement

signed a peace agreement with the Amhara regional government a year later.

A comprehensive peace is yet to be achieved. Recognizing this limitation and the urgent need for inclusive political consultation, the government launched a national dialogue (ND) process through the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC), established under Proclamation No. 1265/2021. The Commission was mandated to independently lead and coordinate an inclusive and participatory national dialogue aimed at addressing Ethiopia's complex political, social, and ethno-federal challenges. Eleven Commissioners were selected from hundreds of nominees, representing a range of professional backgrounds and regional affiliations. The Commission has completed collecting agendas and is preparing to convene a national plenary to discuss the country's most contentious issues with the aim of fostering national consensus<sup>71</sup>. However, significant questions about the legitimacy and inclusiveness of the process persist, as opposition parties, key civil society actors, and some marginalized groups were left out from both the selection of Commissioners and the initial design of the ND agenda.

Ongoing conflicts across several regions further complicate the dialogue's effectiveness. Standard practice in peacebuilding and political transitions emphasizes that a successful national dialogue typically follows a comprehensive cessation of hostilities or at least a relatively stable security environment, allowing participants to negotiate in good faith without coercion or immediate threats. In Ethiopia, however, the national dialogue process is being pursued in parallel with active conflicts, undermining the full-fledged engagement of both the government and participants. As a result, the dialogue faces the dual challenge of building trust among fragmented actors while simultaneously addressing structural and institutional reforms in a highly volatile context, raising questions about whether it can achieve meaningful consensus on critical issues such as governance, federalism, and the balance of power between the state and societal forces.

Ethiopia has also initiated transitional justice mechanisms and developed a comprehensive transitional justice policy aimed at addressing historical grievances, promoting accountability, and fostering national reconciliation. These mechanisms seek to investigate and redress past human rights violations, provide reparations to victims, and hold perpetrators accountable, while also creating institutional safeguards to

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with an ENDC Commissioner, Addis Ababa, April 2024.

prevent the recurrence of atrocities. Beyond addressing individual cases of injustice, the transitional justice framework is intended to facilitate dialogue between communities, strengthen the rule of law, and contribute to building a more inclusive and cohesive national identity. If effectively implemented, these measures could play a critical role in supporting broader democratization efforts by restoring public trust in the state and providing a foundation for sustainable peace<sup>72</sup>.

Equally important is the imperative of stabilizing relations with neighboring countries. The Horn of Africa is a volatile regional security complex situated along one of the world's most strategic maritime corridors, linking the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean through critical chokepoints that handle more than 20 percent of global trade. The growing involvement of emerging middle powers from the Gulf, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, alongside China and Turkey, has intensified regional geopolitics, producing shifting alliance systems that increasingly pit neighboring states against one another.

Within this context, Ethiopia's renewed push for access to the Red Sea, now framed as a core national security priority, has triggered strong reactions from Somalia and Eritrea. These tensions have been exacerbated by the memorandum of understanding between Addis Ababa and Hargeisa to lease port facilities for commercial and military purposes in exchange for potential recognition of Somaliland, as well as Ethiopia's growing interest in regaining access to the port of Assab, which it views as unjustly lost due to past policy failures. Together, these dynamics have created a geopolitical tension that raises the specter of renewed conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and it intersects with the longstanding hydropolitical rivalry between Ethiopia and Egypt over the Nile. The completion of the GERD, while a developmental milestone, has further reshaped regional power relations, amplifying both opportunities for cooperation and risks of escalation.

However, the three national processes—peace, dialogue, and transitional justice—are unfolding in silos, without a clear strategy for integration. The prospects of democratization hinge on whether these processes can be coordinated effectively to achieve political settlement, ensure justice, and governance reform, especially the much-needed rebalance of the relationship between state and societal forces.

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<sup>72</sup> <https://www.accord.org.za/ajcr-issues/the-transitional-justice-policy-of-ethiopia-and-its-relevance-for-peacebuilding/>

## 4.5 Conclusion

Supporting democratization in Ethiopia should include strengthening the legitimacy of national political processes; reconfiguring the Ethiopian state to rebalance power relations between state and society; deepening the nation building project on more inclusive bases; reimagining democracy beyond majoritarian electoral system toward more consensus-based and consociational arrangements; strengthening countervailing institutions to enhance checks and balances; upholding secularism to prevent the fusion of religion and state power; and fostering constructive institutional integration between traditional and state systems to deepen democratic governance, particularly at the local level. This ultimately requires building a durable and principled partnership with local institutions and traditional authorities.

2026 is an election year in Ethiopia. While some opposition parties have expressed interest in and commitment to participating in the polls, others have opted for a boycott. Certain opposition actors, particularly those in the diaspora, are calling for mass civil disobedience, encouraging voters to register and obtain election cards but ultimately abstain from voting to deny the incumbent the legitimacy derived from electoral participation. Still other groups have turned to armed struggle as the only viable means of pursuing political objectives. They justify this choice by pointing to the continued contraction of political and civic space.

Although democracy entails far more than the conduct of elections, much is at stake in creating a genuinely level playing field for competing political forces in the run-up to the 2026 vote. The national dialogue process, which is expected to conclude before the election, is hoped to contribute, however modestly, to improving the conditions for a more credible and inclusive electoral process.

In conclusion, Ethiopia faces profound challenges to democratization. A long history of autocratic governance and ongoing armed conflicts have constrained prospects for meaningful democratic consolidation, leaving hopes for democracy modest. Yet there remain critical opportunities to redirect the country's trajectory. If effectively managed, the national dialogue process, transitional justice initiatives, and the 2026 elections could provide pathways toward political reconciliation, inclusive governance, and strengthened institutions. Conversely, if mishandled, these same processes risk undermining democratic progress, exacerbating insecurity, and even threatening the continuity of the state itself. The stakes

are high, and the outcome will depend on the careful balancing of reform, accountability, and broad-based inclusion.

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## Chapter 5

# Between Soldiers and Civilians: Sudan's Oscillation between Military and Civilian Rule

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### Introduction

Sudan's experience with democratization has been marked by a persistent and cyclical pattern in which brief episodes of civilian rule are repeatedly interrupted by military coups and prolonged authoritarianism. Following independence, the country's first democratic experiment (1956–1958) swiftly ended after a military takeover. Similar trajectories unfolded after the popular uprisings of 1964 and 1985, both of which succeeded in toppling military dictatorships and restoring civilian governments, only for these democratic interludes to be overturned by coups within a few years.

The 2019 Revolution once again raised hopes for a democratic transition. It produced a fragile power-sharing arrangement between civilian and military actors that lasted barely two years. The October 2021 coup dismantled this hybrid arrangement, derailing the transition and reaffirming the military's dominance. While initially united against civilian political forces, the two principal military actors, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), soon turned on one another. Since April 2023, their rivalry has escalated into a devastating civil war, killing tens of thousands, displacing millions, and destroying much of Sudan's infrastructure, including large parts of Khartoum. With no credible political settlement in sight, the war threatens not only Sudan's prospects for democratization but also the survival of the Sudanese state as a unified polity.

This chapter examines Sudan's checkered democratization trajectory in five sections. Section 5.1 situates democratization in a historical context, highlighting how violence was embedded in the postcolonial state from its inception. Section 5.2 analyzes the events leading to the 2019 Revolution, emphasizing the unprecedented political mobilization of women and youth, facilitated by social media and new forms of civic activism. Section 5.3 assesses Sudan's democratic performance using comparative indices, which consistently rank the country among the lowest in the region across

civil liberties, political rights, rule of law, and corruption, patterns exacerbated by protracted conflict and systemic human rights violations.

Section 5.4 examines the structural obstacles to democratization, including the unresolved crisis of nation-building, the profound power imbalance between military and civilian actors, the resource curse, first oil and now gold, and the role of external actors in complicating political transitions and fueling conflict. Section 5.5 explores prospects for democratization amid ongoing war followed by a conclusion in Section 5.6.

## **5.1 Oscillating between Democracy and Military Dictatorship (1953 - 1989)**

Postcolonial Sudan began with an auspicious and fragile democratic experiment. The country's first parliamentary elections were held in 1953 under the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement, paving the way for self-government. These elections led to the convening of Sudan's first parliament in 1954, which voted for independence in 1955. On 1 January 1956, Sudan formally became an independent republic, with Ismail al-Azhari heading the first national government.

The 1953 elections were decisive in shaping Sudan's political future and managing the transition from colonial rule. During this period, Sudan was governed as a parliamentary republic, with a Sovereignty Council serving as the collective head of state. Executive authority rested with successive coalition governments between the National Umma Party (NUP) and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). NUP and DUP have historically been Sudan's two dominant traditional political parties. The NUP traces its roots to the Islamic Ansar movement associated with the nineteenth-century Mahdist state and has long been led by the Mahdi family. While grounded in Islamic traditions, the party has also incorporated liberal ideas, including commitments to constitutionalism and human rights. The DUP, by contrast, is closely linked to the Khatmiyya, Sudan's largest Sufi order, reflecting the enduring role of religious networks in Sudanese party politics<sup>1</sup>.

Alongside these traditional parties, two ideologically driven movements have played influential roles: the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP) and the Muslim Brotherhood. Founded in 1946, the SCP emerged as a major force in the early post-independence period and became one of

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<sup>1</sup> G. R. Warburg (1986). "Democracy in the Sudan: Trial and error". *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2/3

the most influential communist parties in the Arab world. It continues to shape Sudanese leftist politics, particularly through professional associations and trade unions. The Muslim Brotherhood, one of the oldest transnational Islamist movements, has been a central actor in Sudan's Islamist politics. It had a decisive role in the 1989 military coup that brought Omar al-Bashir to power, and exerted significant influence behind the scenes thereafter<sup>2</sup>.

In July 1956, al-Azhari's government lost a vote of no confidence, ushering in a new government under DUP's Abdallah Khalil. The first full general election after independence which was held in February-March 1958, resulted in a victory for the Umma Party. This short-lived period of competitive parliamentary politics underscored both the promise of democratic governance and the fragility of Sudan's postcolonial institutions, thereby revealing deep structural weaknesses. Crucially, the political elite also failed to accommodate the country's profound ethnic, religious, and regional diversity, exacerbated by divergent colonial administrative practices in northern and southern Sudan. This failure contributed to the outbreak of civil war in the South as early as 1955, foreshadowing the successive armed conflicts that have plagued Sudan up to the ongoing civil war that began in 2023.

Sudan's first brief experiment in democracy was fragile, characterized by unstable coalition politics, weak institutional foundations, and unresolved structural legacies of colonial rule, including center-periphery inequalities and the politicization of identity. While it established the formal architecture of parliamentary democracy, it was undermined by inherited colonial constraints, elite fragmentation, and the absence of an inclusive political settlement. These weaknesses not only precipitated the country's first military coup in 1958 but also set a recurring pattern in Sudanese politics: brief democratic openings followed by authoritarian reversals. From the outset, therefore, Sudan's democratization process was shaped by acute political instability and intense elite competition over control of state power and resources. These dynamics continued to define the country's troubled democratic trajectory in the decades that followed<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> 'The Sudanese Political Parties: beginnings and failings'. <https://sudantribune.com/article/60095>

<sup>3</sup> <https://fanack.com/sudan/history-of-sudan/democracy-and-military-coup/>

Sudan's first military coup took place on 17 November 1958, when General Ibrahim Abboud led a bloodless takeover that overthrew the civilian government of Prime Minister Abdallah Khalil. Citing political instability and corruption, the military dissolved parliament and banned political parties, effectively suspending the nascent democratic order, also called Abboud's non-party formula (1958-1964). The coup marked the beginning of sustained military intervention in Sudanese politics. Abboud established a Supreme Council to govern the country, promising order and stability; however, his regime failed to address Sudan's deep-seated structural problems, most notably the escalating conflict in the South<sup>4</sup>.

The October 1964 Revolution brought down the Abboud regime. It was a largely peaceful popular uprising that opened the door to a short-lived return to civilian democracy. What made the revolution distinctive was the broad coalition it forged: students, workers, and professionals came together in shared opposition to authoritarian rule, economic hardship, and political repression –especially the regime's handling of the “Southern Problem,” including policies of forced Arabization.

The movement began with student protests at the University of Khartoum and quickly spread into mass demonstrations across the country. As professional associations and labor unions joined in, the protests escalated into a nationwide general strike that paralyzed the state. Faced with mounting popular pressure, Abboud was compelled to step down. The revolution paved the way for a transitional civilian government that sought to restore civil liberties and initiate a new constitutional order, even if the promise of democratic renewal would ultimately prove fragile<sup>5</sup>.

The Abboud regime was succeeded by a provisional civilian government, followed by parliamentary elections in April 1965, marking Sudan's second multiparty democracy period (1965-1969). These elections produced a fragile coalition government led by the Umma Party and the DUP under Prime Minister Muhammad Ahmad Mahjoub. However, the inability of successive civilian governments to resolve Sudan's structural political crises, most notably the center-periphery divide, civil war, and elite competition for state resources, reinforced a cyclical pattern of weak governance, military intervention, and rent-

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<sup>4</sup> <https://adst.org/2017/06/know-coup-coming-no-one-will-listen-sudan-1964/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/sudanese-bring-down-dictator-abboud-october-revolution-1964>

seeking politics. This cycle became a defining feature of Sudan's evolving political order.<sup>6</sup>

The succession of fragile civilian administrations proved unable to agree on a permanent constitution or to effectively address factionalism, economic stagnation, and growing ethnic dissent. Early post-independence governments were dominated by Arab Muslim elites who largely conceived Sudan as a Muslim Arab state, despite its profound ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. This exclusionary vision was reflected in the Umma's proposed 1968 constitution, which arguably represented Sudan's first explicitly Islamic-oriented constitutional project<sup>7</sup>.

As Ben Noble-Frapin observes, "beyond changes in the structure of political opportunity since independence, no important political organization in Sudan has been able to evolve and sustain itself without reference to Sudanese Islam in one way or another, and all political forces do so in relation to one another."<sup>8</sup> Over time, this centrality of Islamic reference points, embraced by both civilian and military actors, became a defining feature of Sudanese politics. In a country marked by deep social and religious diversity, the politicization of Islam has been a persistent source of exclusion and contestation, contributing fundamentally to chronic political instability.<sup>9</sup>

By late 1968, political unrest resurfaced, particularly within Sudan's universities, where student activism, led largely by communists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, once again became a catalyst for broader opposition. Many civilians, especially leftists who had played a central role in overthrowing Abboud in October 1964, felt deeply betrayed by the civilian government led by Prime Minister Mahjoub. Rather than delivering meaningful democratic reform, the post-revolutionary order appeared to reproduce elite dominance, political exclusion, and indecision over Sudan's core national questions. Disillusioned with parliamentary politics, segments of the civilian left began to cultivate alliances within the military, helping to pave the way for Sudan's second military coup on 25

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<sup>6</sup> Mahmoud A. Suleiman, "Celebrate the 48th anniversary of Sudan's glorious October 1964 revolution". *Sudan Tribune*, 20 October 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Abbasi (2023). *Democracy under God: Constitutions, Islam and Human Rights in the Muslim World*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Noble-Frapin (2009), "The Role of Islam in Sudanese Politics: a Socio-Historical Perspective." *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 20, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Noble-Frapin, id., 69-82

May 1969. The coup brought Colonel Gaafar Nimeiri, who stayed in power for sixteen years<sup>10</sup>.

Nimeiri's leadership was defined by his commitment to "Sudanese socialism," manifested in the nationalization of banks and major industries and the establishment of a single-party state under the Sudan Socialist Union. His regime initially sought political stabilization, most notably by ending the First Sudanese Civil War through the 1972 Addis Ababa Accords, which granted regional autonomy to the South. Over time, however, Nimeiri's rule grew increasingly authoritarian, marked by censorship, political repression, and the concentration of power in the executive. His regime swiftly abolished parliament, suspended the constitution, and outlawed all political parties, marking another abrupt end to civilian rule. Nimeiri's regime ushered in a single-party system and facilitated the personality cult of so-called al-Ra'is al-Qa'id (the president leader)<sup>11</sup>.

The rift between Nimeiri and the leftist political forces led to a failed coup in July 1971, led by factions of the Sudanese Communist Party, ironically, former allies who had helped him consolidate power in 1969. Nimeiri was quickly reinstated, after which he decisively turned against the communists, consolidating authoritarian rule and deepening the militarization and personalization of the Sudanese state.<sup>12</sup> In 1983, his imposition of strict interpretations of Islamic law (the September Laws) provoked widespread unrest, deepened social divisions, and reignited armed conflict in the South. Although his early economic reforms attracted some support, the mounting economic crisis and political discontent by the mid-1980s eroded his legitimacy. In 1985, Nimeiri was removed from power in a largely bloodless coup<sup>13</sup>.

In 1984 and 1985, following a prolonged drought, millions of Sudanese, particularly in western regions, were threatened by famine. In March 1985, the government's announcement of sharp price increases on necessities sparked the first wave of anti-government protests. What began as

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<sup>10</sup> 'Nimeiri takes charge in Khartoum'. <https://www.ebsco.com/ /research-starters/politics-and-government/nimeiri-takes-charge-khartoum>

<sup>11</sup> Dalia Abdelnabi (2024). *Tactical Compromises: Authoritarian Survival Mechanisms of Tactical Compromises: Authoritarian Survival Mechanisms of Sudan's Inqaz Regime (1989-2019)*, [Dissertation submitted to American University of Cairo].

<sup>12</sup> Dennis Hevesi, "Gaafar al-Nimeiry, a Sudan Leader with Shifting Politics, Dies at 79". *The New York Times*. 11 June 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Gresh (2010). "The Free Officers and the Comrades: The Sudanese Communist Party and Nimeiry Face-to-Face, 1969–1971". *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 (1): 9–30.

economic grievances quickly escalated into mass demonstrations that engulfed Khartoum and spread to other major cities. A nationwide general strike followed, paralysing state institutions and the economy. Years of economic mismanagement and rent-seeking had severely weakened the regime's capacity to sustain its kleptocratic order. Civilian-led protests, coordinated primarily by professional associations such as doctors, lawyers, and engineers, created the political conditions that compelled the military to intervene and remove Nimeiri from power after sixteen years of rule.

On 6 April 1985, a group of military officers led by Lieutenant General Abdel Rahman Swar al-Dahab overthrew Nimeiri. Three days later, al-Dahab authorized the formation of a fifteen-member Transitional Military Council (TMC) to govern Sudan. True to his public commitment that the military's role would be strictly temporary, al-Dahab oversaw a democratic transition that culminated in general elections in April 1986, transferring power to Sadiq al-Mahdi, the leader of the Umma Party. The TMC's decision to allow elections reflected both immense popular pressure and negotiated agreements with civilian political forces to restore democracy after sixteen years of dictatorial rule. Key to the transition was the swift consensus between the TMC and urban opposition groups on the structure and personnel of the interim government<sup>14</sup>.

This democratic opening can also be interpreted through incentive-based theories of authoritarian transitions. Rustow's framework (discussed in Chapter 2) emphasizes that democracy can emerge as a byproduct of peaceful contestation among contending political forces, while Wong's theory highlights elite incentives, suggesting that authoritarian regimes may liberalize "from strength" to preserve their interests rather than risk total exclusion. In Sudan, the TMC's willingness to oversee elections reflected both confidence in its ability to contain leftist factions within the professional associations and strategic alignment with Islamist actors, such as Jizouli Dafa'allah, the head of the Doctors' Union, who was appointed interim prime minister. The transition to a one-person, one-vote parliamentary system predictably enabled the rise of Sadiq al-Mahdi's Umma Party. While genuinely committed to parliamentary democracy, the party also remained sufficiently aligned with entrenched financial and military interests to avoid radical disruption of the existing socio-political

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<sup>14</sup> Atta H. el-Battahani (2023). *The dilemma of political transition in Sudan: An analytical approach*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2023.51>

order, illustrating how Sudanese democratization was shaped by the negotiation of elite incentives alongside popular demands<sup>15</sup>.

General elections in April 1986 brought Sadiq al-Mahdi to power as Sudan's third democratically elected leader. He formed a broad coalition government that included the Umma Party, the DUP, the National Islamic Front (NIF), and four southern parties. Mahdi's rule is often described as a period of "freewheeling" democracy, characterized by a relatively independent press, the absence of political prisoners, and vigorous public debate. However, his second term faced major challenges. Coalition governments were fragile, the second civil war that reignited in 1983 under the leadership of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), and the economy worsened, culminating in widespread riots in 1988 over rising prices of basic goods. Mahdi's inability to effectively manage these crises prompted the military to issue an ultimatum in February 1989, demanding decisive action toward peace or resignation. Although he attempted to respond by forming a new government and approving a peace plan, factions within the military, backed by the NIF, staged a successful coup under Omar al-Bashir in June 1989, bringing Sudan's third democratic period to an abrupt end.<sup>16</sup>

Al-Bashir's (1989-2019) military dictatorship further escalated the conflict with the SPLA through a strengthened Islamization and Arabization project that implemented stricter Sharia law. The June 1989 coup was orchestrated by Hassan al-Turabi, leader of the NIF, in alliance with the military under al-Bashir. Following the takeover, the regime proclaimed the "National Salvation Revolution" (NSR, or Al-Ingaz), launching Turabi's long-cherished vision of establishing a modern Islamic state in the Sunni Muslim world, akin to the Iranian Islamic Revolution in the Shia context. Alex de Waal describes the Bashir government, until Turabi's fallout in 1999, as a "military-Islamist duopoly."<sup>17</sup> In this power-sharing arrangement, Bashir, a military general, served as the head of state and the public face of the government, and Turabi served as the speaker of the National Assembly.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/~willowberridge/2019/06/14/14/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://afsa.org/sadiq-al-mahdi-recollection>

<sup>17</sup> <https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/>

[/101291/1/De\\_Waal\\_Sudan\\_a\\_political\\_marketplace\\_analysis\\_published.pdf](#)

During the 1990s, under Turabi's ideological guidance, Sudan became a hub for radical Islamist movements seeking to export revolutionary ideology and promote regime change in neighboring countries. The military-Islamist alliance also intensified the civil war in Southern Sudan, prolonging the conflict and humanitarian crises. The Al-Ingaz regime, characterized by the fusion of authoritarian military control and Islamist political ambition, ultimately started to unravel. By the late 1990s, the power struggle between Bashir and Turabi culminated in Turabi's expulsion from government. Bashir subsequently established the National Congress Party (NCP), incorporating select factions of NIF while retaining the core military-Islamist coalition that had underpinned his rule. The NCP became Sudan's sole legally recognized political party, inheriting the ideology of the NIF and maintaining the institutional structures created to consolidate power<sup>18</sup>.

Unable to secure a military victory in the South, and under severe international pressure, Bashir eventually entered negotiations with the SPLA, resulting in the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). The CPA established a six-year transitional government in Southern Sudan, after which the population would decide its future through a popular referendum, eventually leading to South Sudan's independence in 2011. While peace efforts progressed in the South, new rebellions emerged in Sudan's peripheral regions. In 2003, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) launched an insurgency in Darfur, accusing the central government of political marginalization and ethnic discrimination against non-Arab populations. The government responded with a brutal counterinsurgency campaign in alliance with rival communal militias characterized by widespread attacks on civilians, forced displacement, and ethnic cleansing, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people and creating a major humanitarian crisis that drew international condemnation.<sup>19</sup>

Alex de Waal, a leading authority on Sudanese politics, describes Bashir's regime as a paradigmatic example of a "political marketplace": a system in which monetized, transactional politics dominate, and political loyalties and services are effectively bought and sold to the highest bidder. In such a context, institutions and the rule of law are secondary, if at all

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<sup>18</sup> Sergey V. Kostelyanets (2021). "The Rise and Fall of Political Islam, in Sudan". *Politics and Religion Journal*, 15(1), 85-104 (Center for Study of Religion and Religious Tolerance, Belgrade, Serbia).

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Nawal Hassan Osman, Darfur Area Expert, January 12, 2024.

important. Following South Sudan's secession and the consequent loss of oil revenue, the Sudanese regime sought alternative sources to finance state operations and maintain its political networks. The 2012 discovery of gold in Darfur proved particularly fortuitous, rapidly becoming Sudan's principal source of hard currency. By some estimates, gold exports generated around \$2.5 billion annually, accounting for roughly 40 percent of the country's total exports, and providing a crucial financial lifeline for the kleptocratic state.<sup>20</sup> However, even such a boom in the gold market could not make up for the country's systemic political and economic mismanagement and intractable conflict.

## **5.2 The Pro-democracy Movement and the Stalled Transition**

Amid a deepening economic crisis, millions of Sudanese took to the streets from December 2018 onward, demanding an end to Bashir's three-decade autocratic rule. While protests had sporadically erupted since 2011, it was only in late 2018 that a sustained nationwide movement emerged. The initial demonstrations, sparked by rising food prices, began in Ad-Damazine, the capital of the historically marginalized Blue Nile state, and in Al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur. When the protests spread to Atbara, a historic center of the Sudanese labor movement in central Sudan, they gained nationwide prominence<sup>21</sup>.

What began as economic grievances soon transformed into broader anti-regime protests. Over three weeks, demonstrations spread across the country, reaching Khartoum and other marginalized regions. The movement culminated in the Khartoum sit-in, nationwide strikes, and acts of civil disobedience. After four months of sustained public pressure, the military announced the removal of al-Bashir from office on 11 April 2019. The decentralized protests gradually became more coordinated over time, under the shared values of freedom, peace and justice. Often described as "leaderless," the movement can also be understood as "shifting in leadership," with different towns, neighborhoods, or even days producing distinct figures and spokespeople. While predominantly led by young people, the protests drew participants from diverse socio-political

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230404-sudan-produced-41-8-tonnes-of-gold-in-2022/>

<sup>21</sup> Interview with head of a peacebuilding CSO operating in Darfur. February 10, 2024.

backgrounds, with their composition varying between urban and rural areas<sup>22</sup>.

From the outset, the movement embraced an explicitly anti-racist stance, countering the regime's attempts to blame Darfuris for the unrest. Slogans such as "the whole country is Darfur" symbolized broad national solidarity with a region long subjected to economic and political marginalization, discrimination, and campaigns of ethnic cleansing. These chants were also a powerful statement of the Sudanese youth's rejection of the ethnic polarization strategies that successive regimes had employed, sometimes successfully, over previous decades<sup>23</sup>.

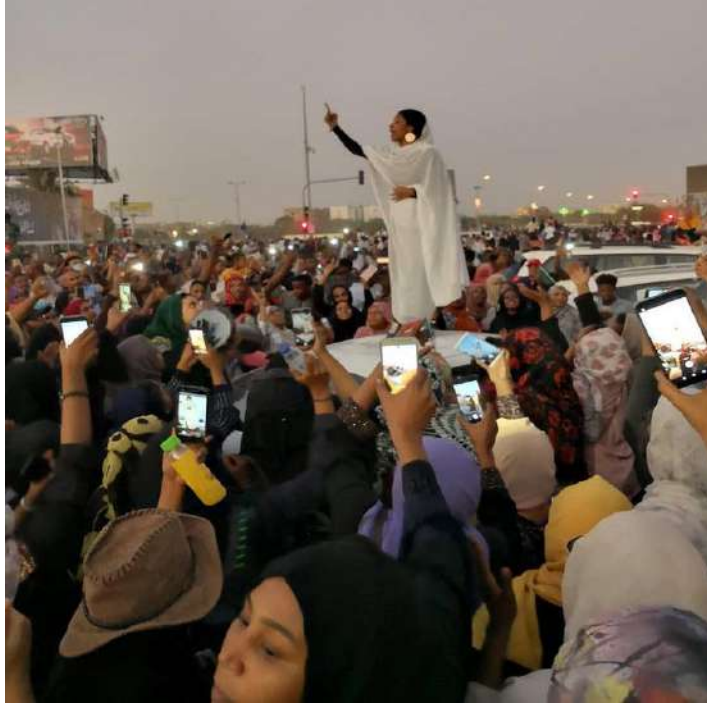
Women and the youth were at the heart of Sudan's 2019 revolution, playing both symbolic and practical roles in mobilization. Women led protests as "Kandakas," a reference to the legendary Nubian queens, while the youth had grassroots networks to organize demonstrations. Digital platforms became crucial tools for coordination, information sharing, and documenting state abuses, but they also exposed activists, especially women, to harassment, online violence, and surveillance, highlighting the double-edged nature of technology in contemporary resistance<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Alden Young, Magdi el-Gizouli, Margie Buchanan-Smith and Naomi Pendle (2019). "Sudan's Spring: causes and consequences." Rift Valley Institute Briefing Paper, 2019. [http://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/Sudan%](http://riftvalley.net/sites/default/files/publication-documents/Sudan%20Spring%20Briefing%20Paper.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Mohamed, Hamza. "Sudan's Female Protesters Leading the pro-Democracy Movement." AlJazeera.com, April 23, 2019. [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/sudan-women-protesters-](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/sudan-women-protesters-20190423080000.html)

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a woman participant of the protest. December 18, 2023.



The 22-year-old Alaa Salah stands on a car leading chants during a protest demanding that Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir step down in Khartoum, Sudan, on April 8, 2019 (The Atlantic, April 11, 2019)

While regime-changing protests are not new in Sudan's history, such as the mass civil resistance campaigns that toppled military rulers in 1964 and 1985, the 2019 uprising was distinctive in its organization and scale. The Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) played a pivotal role, coordinating and mobilizing protesters and sustaining momentum across the country. After months of consistent, cohesive, and high-intensity demonstrations, the widespread public pressure culminated in the military ousting Omar al-Bashir on 11 April 2019, bringing an end to decades of authoritarian rule<sup>25</sup>.

The April 2019 coup brought General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) to the forefront as the main power brokers, respectively as the head and deputy head of the Transitional Military Council (TMC). Once in power, the TMC continued to crack down on protesters, culminating in the Khartoum massacre of June 2019, during which over thirty demonstrators were killed<sup>26</sup>. Sustained public

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<sup>25</sup> Focus Group Discussion with Sudanese democracy activists, Nairobi, October 2025.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/06/04/sudan-halt-attacks-protesters>

pressure eventually forced the TMC to enter into negotiations with civilian political forces, paving the way for the transitional arrangement that followed.

Sudanese protesters demanded that the TMC step down and cede power to civilian leadership. Controversy erupted immediately when Lieutenant General Awad Ibn Auf, a close confidant of Bashir and accused war criminal, was named head of the TMC. On the streets, the popular anti-Bashir chant, “Fall, that’s all!” quickly evolved into “Fall, again!” signaling the population’s defiance. The TMC’s authority was further challenged when it imposed a curfew, yet many protesters remained camped outside military headquarters. Within a single day of resistance, Ibn Auf resigned. His successor, Army Inspector General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, was one of the few generals who had maintained communication with protesters during the sit-in. The following day, 13 April 2019, the curfew was lifted, the deeply unpopular intelligence chief, Salah Gosh, was dismissed, and formal talks between the military and protesters began<sup>27</sup>.

Rather than gathering in a public square, boulevard, or government office, protesters occupied the expansive area in front of the military headquarters, home to the three major branches of the armed forces. Normally a restricted area for public access, the site became a symbolic “free speech zone,” signaling both defiance and the military’s responsibility for any harm to peaceful demonstrators. Its proximity to the University of Khartoum and the activist-friendly Burri neighborhood further reinforced its strategic and symbolic importance. Functional committees were established to manage daily life within the encampment, reflecting the movement’s organization and resilience<sup>28</sup>.

In the context of uncertainty in the loyalty of the regular army and the police, the TMC relied on the notoriously repressive National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS) to disperse the sit-in, aiming to crush morale. Before dawn on June 3, the Rapid Support Forces (the paramilitary wing of the NISS, formerly the Janjaweed) launched a full-scale attack, killing over one hundred protesters and dispersing the camp. The massacre failed to intimidate the opposition. In its aftermath, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), a leading component of the Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC), called for a larger nationwide strike. Recognizing that

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/12/sudanese-protesters-jubilant-after-military-leader-rapidly-replaced>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Zunes-Sudans-2019-Revolution.pdf>

further violence would likely backfire, the TMC released arrested protesters and returned to negotiations, underscoring the protesters' determination and the limits of coercion in the revolution<sup>29</sup>.

The balance of power between FFC and the TMC ultimately resulted in the formation of a coalition government, brokered with the support of the African Union and the Ethiopian government. The FFC and TMC agreed on 4 August 2019 to form a civilian-led transitional government. The TMC was led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, with General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) as his deputy, while the FFC was represented by Abdalla Hamdok. The pro-democracy movement recognized that it lacked the strength to completely remove the military from positions of power or to defeat the combined forces of the NISS, right-wing Islamists, and the army. At the same time, the success of the general strike and the June mass demonstration made it clear to the military that the opposition could not be defeated and would settle for nothing less than civilian leadership.

International pressure further constrained the TMC, with the African Union suspending Sudan's membership and signaling diplomatic isolation for the regime. Perhaps the most decisive factor in the success of the pro-democracy movement was the disciplined commitment to nonviolence, which sustained popular support, undermined the military's legitimacy, and allowed protesters to negotiate from a position of moral and political strength. The new arrangement created a hybrid administration, with both civilian and military representatives in key governing bodies, but with a civilian prime minister, Abdalla Hamdok, and a civilian-led cabinet at the helm. Elections were initially scheduled for 2022, providing pro-democracy activists with an opportunity to advance civic education and consolidate support for democratic, secular parties, with the aim of countering the influence of the military, Islamist factions, and other anti-democratic forces.<sup>30</sup> The formation of this power-sharing arrangement and the Sovereign Council marked the first period since Bashir's 1989 coup in which Sudan was not under full military rule.

However, this fragile democratic experiment was cut short when the military staged another coup in October 2021, dissolving the government, arresting senior officials, and placing Hamdok under house arrest. In

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<sup>29</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/11/18/they-were-shouting-kill-them/sudans-violent-crackdown-protesters-khartoum>

<sup>30</sup> Stephen Zune (2021). *Sudan's 2019 Revolution: The Power of Civil Resistance*. ICNC Press.

response, Hamdok called for popular resistance against the military takeover, signaling continued civilian opposition to authoritarian rule. Millions of Sudanese once again took to the streets, organized by grassroots resistance committees, demanding civilian governance. On 30 October 2021, a military crackdown left fifteen protesters dead, drawing widespread condemnation from regional, continental, and international actors. Facing both determined popular resistance and mounting international pressure, the military reinstated Abdalla Hamdok as Prime Minister in November 2021. However, the reinstatement was rejected by the FFC and other civilian political groups, forcing Hamdok to resign in January 2022<sup>31</sup>.

In December 2022, UN-led negotiations between the military and civilian political forces resulted in a Framework Agreement establishing a two-year transitional government ahead of planned elections. Many Sudanese political and civilian groups opposed the agreement, continuing to protest against it. Meanwhile, tensions escalated between the two military leaders over the integration of RSF into the army. General Burhan sought to consolidate a broader social base within SAF, drawing support beyond the former regime and Islamist networks, while General Hemedti attempted to secure backing from civilian and professional groups. This power struggle erupted into open conflict in April 2023, when full-scale war broke out between the SAF and RSF, plunging the country into a new phase of instability that has threatened the very survival of Sudan as a united country.

The SAF and RSF are currently running parallel governments. Both RSF and SAF have committed war crimes. The RSF and allied militias have committed crimes against humanity, including murder, rape and other forms of sexual violence, deportation or forcible transfer, and persecution, and are responsible for ethnic cleansing in Darfur<sup>32</sup>. International initiatives to end the war, including efforts by the “Quad” group, comprising the United States, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, have so far failed to produce tangible results.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with a member of the Resistance Committee. December 20, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/dec-06-2023-designation-war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-committed-sudan#:~:text=Nearly%2020%20years%20after%20Secretary,RSF%20and%20allied%20militias%20have>

### 5.3 Sudan in Democratic Indices

Sudan has long been rated as “unfree” and “undemocratic” by major democracy indices. Freedom House has consistently classified Sudan as “Not Free,” and in its *Freedom in the World 2024* report, the country received a remarkably low score of 2 out of 100. This rating reflects the devastating impact of the civil war that erupted in April 2023, which has severely restricted political rights, curtailed civil liberties, and caused mass atrocities and displacement. Political rights are extremely limited, reflecting severe constraints on civic participation and governance, while civil liberties have been undermined by widespread conflict and human rights abuses. Internet freedom is similarly constrained, scoring just 27/100 and classified as “Not Free,” due to both infrastructure damage and deliberate service disruptions, according to Freedom House<sup>33</sup>.

Similarly, according to the 2022 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) report, Sudan ranks among the three worst-performing countries in the region, alongside South Sudan and Somalia, based on a 10-year governance trend (2012–2021). In the 2024 IIAG, Sudan’s overall governance score remained very low at 29.6/100, placing it 51st out of 54 African countries and well below the continental average of 49.3. Security and safety are major drivers of this decline, reflecting the ongoing conflict and persistent instability. Sudan is also identified as one of 11 African countries exhibiting a concerning decade-long deterioration in governance, with conditions worsening significantly since 2019<sup>34</sup>.

In 2024, Sudan faced severe democratic challenges, reflected in its low rankings in International IDEA’s *Global State of Democracy (GSoD)* Indices. The country scored particularly poorly in Rule of Law (163/173), Rights (159/173), and Representation (151/173), while also ranking 136th out of 173 countries in Participation. These low scores highlight Sudan’s struggle to maintain even basic democratic functions, including electoral integrity, political representation, and protection of civil and political rights, amidst ongoing conflict and political instability. Unfortunately, the context in which this decline occurs shows a broader global democratic erosion, underscoring the country’s acute governance crisis<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/sudan>

<sup>34</sup> <https://iiag.online/locations/sd.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/country/sudan>

In Transparency International's 2024 *Corruption Perceptions Index* (CPI), Sudan ranked 170th out of 180 countries, scoring just 15 out of 100, indicating severe perceived public sector corruption. This represented a decline from the previous year. Neighboring South Sudan ranked even lower, with a score of 8, making it the world's most corrupt country. The index, released in early 2025, also highlights a broader global trend of worsening corruption, with two-thirds of countries scoring below 50<sup>36</sup>.

The state of democracy and human rights in Sudan was far worse prior to the 2019 transition. After seizing power in the 1989 coup, the military-Islamist regime of Omar al-Bashir and Hassan al-Turabi violently repressed opposition, dismantled trade unions and professional associations, and purged the officer corps of non-Islamists. The regime also undermined the economic base of sectarian parties and provincial elites. Media freedom was crushed on its first day in power. The regime banned all civilian newspapers and, within weeks, launched its own state-run newspaper, *Al-Ingaz Al-Watani*, followed by other regime-affiliated publications. Political repression and human rights violations intensified alongside the civil war in the South and the counterinsurgency in Darfur<sup>37</sup>.

Bashir, who was later imprisoned by Sudan's transitional government in Khartoum, is indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity committed in Darfur between 2003 and 2018. His government mobilized the Janjaweed militia, accused of burning villages, massacring civilians, and committing mass sexual violence. The Darfur conflict resulted in an estimated 300,000 deaths and displaced approximately 2.7 million people, earning recognition as the first genocide of the 21st century<sup>38</sup>. Although Bashir has been removed, his military successors have preserved many of the repressive tools of his regime. These entrenched structures continue to undermine Sudan's democratic transition, perpetuating political instability, human rights abuses, and social fragmentation with long-term, devastating consequences.

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<sup>36</sup> <https://www.transparency.org/en/countries/sudan>

<sup>37</sup> <https://sudantribune.com/article43056/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://acleddata.com/2024/01/12/sudan-situation-update-januar-2024-the-rapid-support-forces-rsf-gains-ground-in-sudan/>

## 5.4 Critical Challenges of Democratization in the Sudan

Sudanese politics presents a persistent paradox: an entrenched autocratic order coexists with vibrant, recurrent popular protest movements that repeatedly overthrow incumbent dictators, yet ultimately give way to the reconstitution of militarized authoritarian rule. This section sheds light on this Sudanese puzzle by examining the structural and political obstacles to democratization, including: (i) the flawed foundations of nation-building, (ii) the rise and entrenchment of the military as a dominant political institution, (iii) the dynamics of the resource curse, and (iv) the role of external intervention.

### 5.4.1 The nation-state and its discontents

Sudan is one of the few countries in Africa where a nation-state model broadly resembling the European experience was pursued, namely, the construction of a unified nation through cultural homogenization and political centralization. This nation-building project revolved around a dominant core group whose culture was elevated as the foundation of national identity: the Arabic language and Islam. This occurred despite the country's profound ethnic and religious diversity. There are at least 19 ethnic groups in the Sudan.

Sudan's nation-building has been anchored in a geographically defined core, i.e., the riverine areas of central Sudan, rendering state formation inherently shaped by center-periphery relations. However, a key divergence lies in the political economy of dominance. Moreover, Sudan's cultural and political core has also functioned as the principal economic center, reinforcing patterns of exclusion and deepening peripheral marginalization.<sup>39</sup> Sudan's cultural, political, and economic core lies in the riverine areas of the central region through which the Nile flows, particularly in and around Khartoum. This core encompasses the River Nile, Khartoum, and Al-Gezira states and is predominantly inhabited by Nile-riverain tribes claiming Arabic heritage, most notably the Sha'āgiyya, Danagla (Dangala), and Ja'aliyya.

Among these groups, the Sha'āgiyya are especially concentrated in and around Khartoum, the country's most economically developed area, and have benefited disproportionately from their proximity to the capital. This geographic advantage has translated into preferential access to administrative, economic, and political opportunities during both the

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Jamal Kuku, Program Officer, Sudan – LPI program, January 8, 2024.

colonial and postcolonial periods. A similar pattern characterizes the Ja‘aliyya, although their political influence has also been underpinned by a strong sense of entitlement to political and Islamic leadership, historically rooted in their self-image as warrior communities. It identifies itself as *Awlad Arab* (sons of Arabs and rightful inheritors of the land), a designation associated with urbanity, education, and political entitlement<sup>40</sup>.

Importantly, the dominance of these riverain Arab groups predates colonial rule. It has deeper historical foundations in pre-colonial systems of power, including predatory practices associated with slavery and the slave trade, which were embedded within the broader Ottoman and Arab slave-holding empires. These historical hierarchies were later reinforced, rather than dismantled, by colonial and postcolonial state formation, consolidating the enduring centrality of the riverine elite<sup>41</sup>. Nile riverain Arab tribes, particularly the Ja‘aliyyin, Sha‘āgiyya, and Danagla, have dominated Sudan’s political, economic, and security sectors since the precolonial period. They have the added advantage of being a demographic majority, constituting around 70 % of the population<sup>42</sup>. This enduring dominance has profoundly shaped the Sudanese state and has come at a significant cost to peace and political stability. Over time, elites drawn from these groups have sought to impose a narrow Arab-Islamic conception of “Sudanese” identity on a deeply diverse society, often by hollowing out the purportedly autonomous and inclusive character of state institutions.

The privileging of this Arab-Islamic identity has systematically alienated non-Arab and non-Muslim populations, weakening their sense of belonging to the Sudanese state and contributing directly to recurrent conflict. While this identity project has functioned primarily as a mechanism for maintaining and reproducing minority rule and elite hegemony, it has also been shaped by the riverain elite’s own unresolved identity anxieties. Within the broader Arab world, Sudan is frequently regarded as African rather than Arab, a perception that has generated resentment among Sudanese elites and further intensified their insistence on Arab identity.

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<sup>40</sup> Abdu Mukhtar Musa (2022). “Ethnic Politics in Sudan: Dynamics of Instability”. *African Journal of Economics, Politics and Social Studies*” (Vol. 1)

<sup>41</sup> <https://study.com/academy/lesson/sudan-ethnic-groups.html>

<sup>42</sup> <https://study.com/academy/lesson/sudan-ethnic-groups.html>

Moving beyond Sudan's cycles of conflict will likely require the construction of a more inclusive national identity that transcends this narrow elite vision. Yet, the dominant northern elite has consistently favored an ethnic-nationalist model of statehood, in which the state is implicitly aligned with a single self-defined ethnic group, the riverain Arabs, reflecting a classic nation-state project ill-suited to Sudan's social and cultural plurality.<sup>43</sup> This nation-state project has generated multiple, layered peripheries, with South Sudan constituting the primary, or "hard-core", periphery. The divide between north and south has been marked by both ethnic and religious distinctions: South Sudanese populations are predominantly Christian or adherents of traditional belief systems and are ethnically non-Arab, or do not claim an Arab identity. Most Southern communities belong to the Nilotic language family, and they have historically been stigmatized and racialized by Sudan's self-identified Arab elites.

Colonial rule deepened these divisions by administering northern and southern Sudan as de facto separate domains, thereby institutionalizing difference rather than fostering integration. These colonial-era distinctions were subsequently reinforced by the postcolonial nation-state project, which sought to impose Arabic language, Islamic religion, and associated social hierarchies as markers of national identity. Consequently, the South Sudanese liberation struggle resisted this cultural and political imposition, as well as the broader patterns of discrimination and exclusion embedded within the Sudanese state.<sup>44</sup>

The long-standing North–South binary has obscured the existence of multiple internal peripheries within northern Sudan itself, a political reality rendered even more visible following South Sudan's secession in 2011 and Sudan's subsequent failure to reconstruct a more inclusive national identity. Northern Sudan is, in fact, nearly as ethnically diverse as the former South, encompassing numerous non-Arab communities, particularly in Darfur, Kordofan, and parts of the Northern states. Mirroring the racialization of difference historically applied to South Sudan, non-Arab Muslim populations in northern Sudan, especially in

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<sup>43</sup> Jennifer Pekkinen (2009). *Sudanese Elites: How the Riverain Groups Achieved Political Dominance and their Impact on the Sudanese State*.  
<https://sais.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/Sudanese%20Elites.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Hatim Badien, Country director/Sudan, United States Institute of Peace, January 15, 2024.

Darfur and Kordofan, have been subjected to ethnic violence, economic exploitation, and political marginalization.

In these regions, successive Sudanese governments have systematically favored migrant Arab nomadic groups, reinforcing unequal access to state protection, land, and political power<sup>45</sup>. When long-standing grievances in Darfur crystallized into armed rebellion in 2003, the state responded with extreme violence, including the mobilization of Arab Bedouin militias as part of its counterinsurgency strategy. These militias, infamously known as the Janjaweed, carried out widespread atrocities, including mass killings, village destruction, and sexual violence, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of civilians.

Importantly, these Bedouin Arab militias were not merely auxiliary forces operating at the behest of the Sudanese army. Over time, they leveraged their access to arms and state patronage to assert control over valuable grazing and agricultural lands in Darfur, fundamentally altering local power relations. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) and the RSF have their origins in this Janjaweed milieu, underscoring the continuity between past counterinsurgency practices and Sudan's contemporary militarized political order.

Sudan's centre-periphery dynamics have entered a third phase, marked by the open eruption of conflict within the so-called "Arab centre" itself. While the ongoing war between SAF and the RSF is undeniably driven by a power struggle between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and Hemedti, this competition is also articulated through competing claims of authenticity, specifically, over who more legitimately embodies "Arabness." This dynamic evokes attention to the hierarchical gradations of Arab identity within Sudan. Burhan hails from the Ja'aliyyin, while Hemedti, by contrast, comes from a Bedouin Arab clan in Darfur, part of the nomadic Arab populations spread across Darfur and Kordofan. Whereas *Awlad Arab* connotes refinement and elite status, "Bedouin" is discursively associated with backwardness and social inferiority<sup>46</sup>.

As in other peripheral regions of Sudan, riverain elites have historically exercised a marginalizing form of power over these "near peripheries," even as they have simultaneously mobilized them as instruments of

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Salma Abdalla, Senior Researcher, Raad Peace Research, January 5, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> 'Hemedti and Al-Burhan represent historical division in Sudan'. 2023. The Nordic African Institute. <https://nai.uu.se//stories-and-events/news/2023-09-08-researcher-hemedti-and-al-burhan-represent-historical-division-in-sudan.html>

repression against the medium and far peripheries. The current conflict thus reflects not merely personal rivalry or institutional fragmentation, but a deeper crisis rooted in the construction of a layered and exclusionary national identity. This hierarchical ordering of belonging, within Arabness itself, lies at the core of Sudan's protracted civil wars across different regions and historical periods. The absence of a minimal sense of shared belonging, what Rustow calls 'the background condition', has not thus enabled democratization to take root.

#### **5.4.2 The military as a major political institution**

On 25 October 2021, the Sudanese military dissolved the civilian-led transitional government and arrested prominent political figures, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. Burhan declared a state of emergency and suspended the civilian components of the transitional institutions. Rejecting characterizations of the move as a coup aimed at derailing Sudan's fragile democratic transition, Burhan claimed in a televised address that the military had intervened "to prevent civil war." He accused civilian political leaders of fomenting instability and violence against the SAF, arguing that they would be replaced by a government of technocrats and former rebels committed to what he described as "our path towards a state of freedom and peace."<sup>47</sup>

This seizure of power marked the fourth military overthrow of a civilian-led government in Sudan's postcolonial history and represents the latest iteration of a deeply entrenched pattern of politico-military intervention. More than an episodic rupture, the 2021 takeover reflects the military's enduring self-conception as the ultimate guardian of national unity and political order. The institutional culture, political socialization, and historical role of the armed forces have thus had a decisive and consistently corrosive impact on democratic politics in Sudan.

This situation is directly tied to SAF's position as a central political institution, which has fostered a distinctive form of vanguardism. This vanguardism is driven both by material self-interest and institutional imperatives. It is shaped by a path-dependent logic through which the army interprets the political landscape and acts by forming alliances or overthrowing civilian governments. SAF considers itself a unifying force in a country marked by diverse ethno-linguistic groups, racial identities,

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/26/protesters-in-sudan-return-to-the-streets-against-military-coup>

and religious affiliations, thereby framing its self-perception as the guarantor of the Sudanese nation.

As Harry Verhoeven<sup>48</sup> observes, “SAF has auto-proclaimed itself as custodian of the national interest, rather than beholden to the parochialism of political parties” and it “prided itself on being the only state institution that has consistently recruited from across the territory, including communities in Darfur, Kordofan, and Southern Sudan, which historically have been virtually absent from other government agencies.” He further emphasizes SAF’s exceptionalism by stating that, unlike the militaries of many postcolonial states, “SAF was not formed because of independence; pre-dating formal sovereign nationhood, SAF prides itself in being older than the Republic of Sudan and thus having a special responsibility to midwife the nation and guide it to modernity”.

Established under the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium, dominated by Britain in the joint administration (1899-2056) after the defeat of the Mahdist state, SAF was initially designed to serve colonial interests, consolidating control over the territory while recruiting from diverse communities. Unlike many postcolonial militaries, SAF did not emerge as a product of the struggle for independence. Instead, it inherited structures, hierarchies, and organizational norms from the colonial period. This historical legacy has shaped SAF’s enduring self-perception as the guardian of the Sudanese state, and this explains its deep entrenchment in national politics, long before Sudan achieved sovereignty.

State-making in Sudan has been so closely identified with the army that civilian governments, rather than consolidating democratic authority, have often sought political alliances with SAF. Civilian political formations have historically cultivated relationships with key army factions, leveraging SAF’s institutional power to advance their agendas and to suppress dissent in the peripheries. One of the most remarkable and unique features of Sudan’s political history is that, on two occasions (1964 and 1985), civilian forces successfully ousted military dictatorships. In both instances, the army either acted as a passive (though sympathetic) bystander or actively sided with the civilians.

Moreover, civilian political forces in Sudan have historically lacked cohesion and a shared vision for a democratic state. While the Umma Party and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) had occasionally formed coalition governments, other groups, most notably the Sudanese

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<sup>48</sup> Harry Verhoeven (2023). “Surviving revolution and democratization: the Sudan armed forces, state fragility and security competition.” *J. of Modern African Studies*, p. 418

Communist Party (SCP) and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), at times collaborated with the military to outmaneuver these traditionally dominant parties. This ongoing rivalry among civilian actors has consistently created openings for military intervention and successive coups. For instance, the SCP supported General Aboud's coup in 1958, while both the SCP and the MB backed Gaafar Nimeiry's 1969 coup. This illustrates how fractured civilian politics often facilitated the consolidation of military power<sup>49</sup>.

Sudanese politics has more recently entered a new and more fragmented phase, characterized by divisions within the military itself, and not just among civilian forces. These internal fractures ultimately precipitated the ongoing brutal civil war that erupted in April 2023 between SAF and RSF. Prior to October 2021, SAF overthrew three civilian governments, each time with support from competing political parties. The violent emergence of the postcolonial Sudanese state, already challenged by separatist movements, further reinforced SAF's sense of a national mission. In many peripheral regions, where the state's presence was weak, SAF often constituted the only visible and functioning arm of the government, providing basic services, employment opportunities, and symbolic authority, thereby embedding itself deeply in both state formation and local governance. However, the 1989 coup led by Omar al-Bashir marked the beginning of a new era of military dictatorship that endured until the 2019 Revolution. Three decades of military rule severely weakened civilian political opposition, leaving the subsequent revolution vulnerable to counterrevolution and paving the way for a return to military dominance just two years later.

The SAF has historically acted decisively against internal challenges, even when they emerged from within its own ranks, as when leaders like Omar al-Bashir undermined the institution by cultivating alternative and rival politico-military formations. The roots of the current deadly confrontation between Burhan and Hemedti can be traced to this deliberate fragmentation, which eroded SAF's monopoly on violence and its role as a vanguard institution. The first rival institution created under Bashir was the National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), which increasingly encroached on SAF's mandates and privileges. A more consequential challenge was the emergence of RSF, which evolved from the Janjaweed militias that had fought in Darfur in the 2000s. In 2013, these militias were formalized as the RSF, initially deployed as border guards. By 2015, RSF

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<sup>49</sup> G. R. Warburg (1986). "Democracy in the Sudan: Trial and Error". *Northeast African Studies*. Vol. 8, No. 2/3.

units, alongside SAF troops, were sent to Yemen to fight alongside Saudi and Emirati forces. The same year, the RSF was granted the status of a “regular force”, and a law enacted in 2017 further legitimized the RSF as an independent security entity<sup>50</sup>.

Bashir increasingly relied on the RSF as a tool of ‘coup-proofing’, while its political and economic influence grew through control over security in Darfur’s gold-mining regions. Exploiting these new structures, Hemedti demonstrated exceptional political entrepreneurship, emerging as a major power broker during the final years of Bashir’s rule. By the time of the 2019 Revolution, the RSF’s forces numbered over 30,000 and were supported by an expanding commercial empire fueled by gold revenues and geopolitical rents, providing Hemedti with both financial resources and recruitment capacity that rivaled SAF<sup>51</sup>. Likewise, SAF has cultivated a sprawling commercial empire.<sup>52</sup> A 2022 report identified at least 408 SAF-affiliated entities, including major institutions such as the Omdurman National Bank, Sudan’s largest financial institution, highlighting the deep entanglement of the military in both the political and economic spheres of the country<sup>53</sup>.

Facing a determined pro-democracy movement, the SAF and RSF had temporarily aligned, cooperating in two major coups: first against Bashir in April 2019, and later against the civilian transitional government of Prime Minister Hamdok in October 2021. Both institutions perceived a significant threat from the Tamkeen Removal Committee, an anti-corruption body established to dismantle Bashir’s entrenched deep state. Yet, in the wake of the October 2021 counterrevolution, political competition between the SAF and RSF came fully into the open.

As revolutionaries, particularly left-leaning factions, pushed for maximalist demands, calling for the SAF to return to the barracks and face accountability for past atrocities, the army faced a strategic dilemma. Unlike the role of General al-Dahab in facilitating a democratic transition

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<sup>50</sup> FCD with Sudanese democracy activists, Nairobi, October 2025.

<sup>51</sup> Joshua Craze & Raga Makawi, *The Republic of Kadamol: A portrait of the Rapid Support Forces at war*. HSBA Briefing paper, January 2025.

<https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-HSBA-Briefing-Paper-2025-RSF-EN.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> D Resnick, H Abushama, M Ahmed, O Kirui, & K Siddig (2026). “Under the Gun: Military and Paramilitary Actors in Sudan’s Agrifood System”. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 1–22

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/29/sudan-economy-dominated-by-military-interests-report>

in 1985 after the coup against Nimeiri, General al-Burhan saw no political incentive to do the same. Rather than confronting the revolution directly, SAF realigned with a less threatening political force: the Islamists. A carefully managed exit strategy with a face-saving formula could have potentially preserved more of the revolutionary gains. But the revolution's uncompromising pressure cornered SAF, which perceived the challenge as an existential threat, both to its institutional role as the self-proclaimed "savior of the nation" and to the personal interests of its leadership.

The harder the revolutionaries pressed for accountability and sought to curtail SAF's political relevance, the more it activated the army's survival instincts, prompting it to fight back, not only against the civilian transitional government but also against the "upstart" RSF, whose growing military and economic power threatened SAF's dominance. This dynamic illustrates the weight of unintended consequences in revolutionary politics: efforts to advance the revolutionary cause inadvertently empowered counterrevolution. By pressing SAF toward confrontation, the civilian transitional authorities and revolutionaries facilitated its consolidation with the Islamists, thereby reinforcing a classic self-fulfilling prophecy: the very actions intended to check SAF's influence produced evidence confirming its alignment with Islamist forces and the authoritarian practices of the Al-Ingaz regime under Bashir. SAF's alliance with the Islamists was tactical rather than ideological, as only a small number of committed Islamists exist within the army. The Islamists were perceived by SAF as less threatening and less assertive than other civilian political forces, making them a convenient partner for preserving institutional interests. However, the integration of Islamist militias into the SAF could also increase the political fortune of Islamists in Sudanese politics.<sup>54</sup>

On the surface, democratization in Sudan could appear feasible, but sustainable progress requires an approach informed by historical sensibilities and a thorough analysis of actors beyond individual personalities, particularly the institutional actors such as SAF. This perspective acknowledges that the interests and preferences of such actors, including their responses to revolutions and state-building efforts, are shaped by older, path-dependent logics that constrain the range of choices available to each generation of officers. These behaviors can thus be

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<sup>54</sup> Imam Mohammed Tawhidi. "The Muslim Brotherhood's influence on Sudan's military leadership and its impact on regional stability". *TRENDS Research & Advisory*, 24 Nov 2025. <https://trendsresearch.org/insight/the-muslim-brotherhoods-influence-on-sudans-military-leadership-and-its-impact-on-regional-stability/?srsltid>

understood as embodied practices, carrying meaning derived from decades of operating within the SAF as an autonomous social structure with its own norms, hierarchies, and political logic.

The Sudanese political landscape requires a fundamental reconfiguration of the historically entrenched power relations between the military and civilian forces, which have long conferred political precedence on the former. Civilian actors have typically relied on segments of the military to effect change, rarely pursuing a deeper transformation of the underlying conception of power and politics. Achieving a lasting democratic transition thus demands going beyond regime change to harness revolutionary energy in a way that rebalances the military-civilian relationship.

Such a project must include a carefully designed exit or face-saving strategy for the military, whose institutional socialization positions it as the self-styled vanguard of the Sudanese state, alongside guarantees to safeguard its legitimate material interests. Without such measures, Sudan risks remaining trapped in a cyclical pattern of brief civilian rule followed by prolonged military dominance, with profound human costs. At the same time, the current fragmentation of the military, manifest in the rivalry between SAF and RSF, if the country survives it, may open new political possibilities, allowing civilian forces to assert a democratic agenda in ways previously constrained by the army's historical cohesion and dominance.

### **5.4.3 The resource curse and the politics of extraction in Sudan**

Studies have consistently demonstrated a link between the extractive sector and authoritarianism, particularly in countries where democratic institutions are weak or absent at the time of discovering strategically valuable resources. In Sudan, this dynamic has played out first with oil and later with gold. The acquisition and exploitation of these resources have reinforced authoritarian rule by providing regimes with independent sources of revenue that reduce reliance on taxation and public accountability.

By 1999, Sudan had become a major oil-producing country, attracting billions of dollars in international investment, including the construction of a 1,600-km pipeline from Heglig and Unity State (now part of South Sudan) to Port Sudan. Revenues from the oil sector, estimated at over USD 11 billion annually, were used primarily to fund political patronage networks and secure military loyalty, rather than to develop public infrastructure, education, or healthcare. In effect, control over natural

resources enriched elite actors and entrenched authoritarian governance, consolidating the political and economic dominance of the ruling regime<sup>55</sup>.

There is a direct link between oil revenue and military spending in Sudan. As historian Robert Collins observes, “On the same day that Sudan loaded its first tanker of oil, a shipment of tanks arrived from Poland.” The Beshir regime manipulated the economy to maximize personal and institutional profit, allocating at least 70 percent of oil revenues to the military during the oil boom<sup>56</sup>. Beyond direct profits, oil wealth provided the government with access to international loans and investments. While precise figures are difficult to ascertain, it is estimated that between 1999 and 2011, Sudan’s total income from petroleum, loans, and investments amounted to approximately USD 110 billion.

The secession of South Sudan in 2011 caused a severe blow to Sudan’s economy, depriving it of roughly 75 percent of its oil wealth and substantially altering the dynamics of power and patronage. The resulting fiscal crisis contributed to an inflation rate of nearly 50 percent in 2014 and prompted the government to cut fuel subsidies, exacerbating the high cost of living and fueling widespread social unrest. Public protests, including those in September 2013, were met with violent repression, leaving more than 170 people dead and many more injured. Despite the loss of its oil-rich south, crude oil continues to play a central role in Sudan’s economy and remains a key source of political leverage and state power<sup>57</sup>.

The large discoveries of gold in 2011 provided the Bashir regime with a second economic lifeline, which it moved quickly to control and exploit. In 2012, Bashir inaugurated one of Africa’s largest gold refineries. Gold revenues grew rapidly: in 2009, they were estimated between USD 400 and 500 million, but by 2012 they had surged to approximately USD 2.5 billion. Like oil, gold in Sudan has functioned as a classic resource curse. In Darfur, gold wealth brought heightened suffering, as both state and non-state actors violently competed for control of the mines. In the first two

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<sup>55</sup> Luke Patey. Oil, gold and guns: The violent politics of Sudan’s resource booms. <https://worldpeacefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Oil-gold-and-guns.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> Robert O. Collins (2014). *A History of Modern Sudan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 170, 185.

<sup>57</sup> World Bank. 2015. Sudan country economic development memorandum: Realising the potential for diversified development. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/771411474649783837/pdf/103352-REVISED-SudanCountryEconomicMemorandumRealizingthePotentialforDiversifiedDevelopmentTheWorldBankWashingtonDC.pdf>

years of the gold rush, more than 800 people were killed, and around 150,000 were displaced. Arab tribes, once heavily armed by the government to suppress insurgents, turned their weapons on one another in pursuit of the gold<sup>58</sup>.

It was in this context that Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti) emerged as a new gold baron, leveraging control over mines to consolidate his influence both domestically and internationally. As highlighted in the following section, his growing economic and military power attracted strategic attention from external actors, including the United Arab Emirates and the Russian private military company Wagner Group.

#### **5.4.4 External interventions and authoritarianism**

The Horn of Africa has long been a focal point of external intervention, perhaps more than any other region in Africa, due to its geostrategic location. Situated along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the region controls the Bab el-Mandab strait, a critical maritime chokepoint connecting the Middle East and Europe via the Suez Canal. Because of its historical and geographic links, the Horn is also deeply affected by Gulf rivalries, from the sectarian divide between Shia Iran and the Saudi-led Sunni bloc, to the Houthi–Saudi/UAE conflict in Yemen, and the competition between Qatar and the Saudi–Emirati coalition. The latest iteration of these regional tensions is the emerging hegemonic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Of all Horn countries, Sudan has been closely drawn into the Gulf orbit.

External actors have been central to Sudan’s political instability and civil war, with the UAE playing a particularly prominent role. The Sudanese government under General Burhan has accused the UAE before international courts of supporting the RSF, including alleged ‘genocide’ against the Masalit community in West Darfur, an allegation which is also shared by the US government. International organizations, human rights groups, and Western intelligence agencies have similarly reported extensive Emirati military and financial backing for the RSF, widely seen as crucial to the group’s ability to sustain the war. Reports indicate that this support has moved through complex regional networks involving Libya, Chad, Uganda, and parts of Somalia, alongside alleged Emirati logistical and intelligence hubs in Darfur and the recruitment of foreign mercenaries as far as Colombia<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>58</sup>[https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SudansDeepState\\_Final\\_Enough.pdf](https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SudansDeepState_Final_Enough.pdf)

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/08/colombian-mercenaries-sudan-war>

The UAE's involvement is driven by four interrelated interests. *First*, Sudan has been a key source of mercenaries for Emirati-led wars, especially in Yemen, where tens of thousands of Sudanese fighters were deployed. Sudanese troops were deployed to Yemen in 2015, funded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In 2016, a contingent of the RSF was sent under a separate agreement that bypassed SAF command<sup>60</sup>. The SAF and RSF thus operated independently, laying the groundwork for their current institutional rivalry. Estimates of their combined forces range from 7,000 to 15,000 troops, representing the largest contribution of ground forces to the Saudi-Emirati coalition<sup>61</sup>. Hemedti further extended his regional ambitions to Libya. In July 2019, the first 1,000 of a promised 4,000-strong RSF contingent were deployed to fight alongside General Khalifa Haftar, with support from Egypt and the UAE, further cementing Hemedti's involvement in both gold-fueled commercial ventures and regional mercenary operations<sup>62</sup>.

*Second*, the UAE has strong economic interests in Sudan's land, gold, and ports. Gold exports, facilitated by RSF-linked networks, are particularly important to Dubai's role as a global trading hub, while Emirati firms control large-scale agricultural projects and have pursued strategic port investments along Sudan's Red Sea coast. Hemedti became a business tycoon, with overseas financial links in the UAE, primarily trading in gold. In 2023, his worth was estimated at \$7bn<sup>63</sup>. There is a direct link between external actors and Sudan's extractive sector, particularly its coveted strategic resources such as Darfur's gold. Gold plays a central role in generating revenue and strengthening the economies of external actors, most notably the UAE, where it holds a prominent place in trade and finance. Dubai, the UAE's wealthiest and most internationally renowned emirate, is often called "the city of gold" due to the vast quantities of gold sold regularly in its Deira Gold Souks.

*Third*, ideology matters: the UAE is deeply hostile to political Islam and has tended to favor the RSF over the SAF, which it associates with Islamist networks dating back to the Bashir era. Reports of Iranian support to SAF,

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<sup>60</sup><https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/>

[/101291/1/De\\_Waal\\_Sudan\\_a\\_political\\_marketplace\\_analysis\\_published.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/101291/1/De_Waal_Sudan_a_political_marketplace_analysis_published.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> <https://jamestown.org/> /sudans-controversial-rapid-support-forces-bolsters-saudi-efforts-yemen/

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/> /africa/2019/07/30/sudans-army-provides-libyas-haftar-with-1000-militiamen/amp

<sup>63</sup> 'Why is the UAE involved in Sudan's bloody civil war?'

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/explainers>

particularly after Burhan's visit to Tehran in January 2024, reinforced his identification with Islamist groups both domestically and globally. The UAE leadership views militant Islamism as an existential threat to its authority and has responded by combating Islamist groups such as ISIS and backing non-Islamist actors in fragile states. Since the Arab Uprisings of 2011 revealed the transnational appeal of Islamist ideologies, the UAE has intensified efforts to counter them externally while promoting nationalism and military pride at home. This stance is rooted in the UAE's political structure: the ruling families do not derive legitimacy from religious authority but from historical, tribal, and material foundations. Islamist movements, which label Western-backed Arab regimes as illegitimate, therefore pose a direct challenge to Emirati rule, prompting sustained efforts to contain their influence domestically and regionally<sup>64</sup>.

Sudan has also emerged as a proxy arena for wider regional rivalries. As strategic competition intensifies in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, particularly between the UAE and Saudi Arabia amid shifting U.S. regional priorities, Sudan has become a site for power projection. This rivalry was already evident in Yemen, where the two Gulf states backed opposing forces, but the rupture extends well beyond that conflict. What was once a closely coordinated Gulf partnership has evolved into a broader geopolitical competition spanning the Middle East, Africa, and the Red Sea corridor. The UAE's deepening strategic alignment with Israel has further widened the rift with Riyadh. In this context, Emirati support for the RSF and Saudi backing of the SAF reflect not only Sudan's internal divisions but also larger regional realignments and competing visions of order in the Red Sea region<sup>65</sup>.

Egypt is also a key external actor in Sudan's civil war, viewing stability along its southern border as vital to its interests, particularly regarding the Nile and disputed frontiers. Despite sustained diplomatic efforts, Cairo faces a difficult choice between neutrality and backing one side. While the SAF shows Islamist tendencies that the al-Sisi government opposes, it remains the country's last relatively cohesive national institution after Bashir's fall. By contrast, the RSF is a tribal-based militia backed by regional actors, widely seen in Cairo as an unreliable foundation for a stable Sudan.

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<sup>64</sup> Alissa Fromkin. 'How the UAE is Fighting Islamist Ideology: Part One'.  
<https://www.iar-gwu.org/blog/2015/02/02/how-the-uae-is-fighting-islamist-ideology-part-one>

<sup>65</sup> <https://ecfr.eu/article/from-partners-to-rivals-what-the-saudi-uae-rupture-means-for-europeans/>

Egypt's support for the SAF has become increasingly explicit. In September 2025, Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty stressed the need to distinguish the Sudanese national army from other armed actors and reaffirmed Egypt's commitment to strengthening its capabilities, in coordination with security partners in the Horn of Africa, including Eritrea and Somalia<sup>66</sup>. For Cairo, the SAF, not the RSF, remains the principal bulwark of stability on its southern frontier.<sup>67</sup> Accordingly, despite close ties with the UAE, Cairo and Abu Dhabi now find themselves on opposing sides of the conflict.

Ethiopia's role in Sudan's civil war remains ambiguous. Addis Ababa officially claims neutrality, but Burhan fears that Ethiopia's close ties with the UAE and some rebel groups could open an eastern supply route to the RSF, especially after the RSF's consolidation in Darfur. Ethiopia is also wary of Egypt's efforts to encircle it over the GERD (Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam) dispute by forging alliances with Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, and even Djibouti. As Eritrea openly backs SAF amid its deteriorating relations with Ethiopia, regional alliance politics risk pushing Addis Ababa closer to the RSF-UAE axis. More troubling for Ethiopia is SAF's reported recruitment of fighters from the Tigray Defense Forces and Tigrayan refugees in Sudan, mirroring earlier SAF support for Tigrayan forces during the Tigray war<sup>68</sup>. SAF, in turn, has accused Ethiopia of facilitating a UAE-financed military camp in Benishangul-Gumuz near the Sudanese border, further deepening mutual suspicion<sup>69</sup>.

Russia and Turkey have also emerged as influential, but fluid, external actors in Sudan's civil war, with their involvement shaped by shifting geopolitical calculations, access to strategic resources, and ambitions for regional influence. Russia initially cultivated close ties with the RSF through the Wagner Group<sup>70</sup>, using gold extraction and security

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<sup>66</sup> Secretary Blinken's joint press availability with Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=esNIzfbqeXw>

<sup>67</sup> 'Unlikely foes: Egypt and the UAE's hidden battle for Sudan'. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/sudan>.

<sup>68</sup> 'Coordination and Support between the Sudanese Army and Tigray Forces'. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/46212/>

<sup>69</sup> 'Ethiopia Accused of Training and Arming the RSF Militia'.

<https://sudanhorizon.com/ethiopia-accused-of-training-and-arming-the-rsf-militia/>

<sup>70</sup> The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company, exploits gold mining in Africa to channel funds to the Kremlin, helping Moscow circumvent Western sanctions. Reports indicate that Wagner assisted Bashir's regime in suppressing protests through the training of Sudanese intelligence and security forces, supported the October 2021 coup, and continued to help security forces suppress pro-democracy movements

cooperation to generate revenue, evade sanctions, and expand its footprint in Africa. More recently, however, Moscow has recalibrated toward the SAF, prioritizing long-term strategic gains, most notably the prospect of securing naval access on the Red Sea, which would enhance Russia's global military reach and maritime presence<sup>71</sup>.

Turkey's engagement follows a different trajectory but similarly reflects strategic ambition. Ankara has provided military technology, including drones, and diplomatic backing largely to the SAF and Islamist-leaning factions, viewing Sudan as a key node in its broader Red Sea and Horn of Africa strategy. Turkey seeks to combine security cooperation with economic and political influence, reviving earlier interests in port access, trade, and reconstruction deals. Together, Russian and Turkish involvement adds another layer to Sudan's conflict, deepening the militarization of rival factions and entangling the war in wider struggles over resources, ports, and regional power projection<sup>72</sup>. All the key actors involved appear to be authoritarian in orientation or show little genuine interest in facilitating a democratic transition. Moreover, traditional pro-democracy external actors, at least rhetorically, have played a limited role in the unfolding crisis in Sudan. Rather than merely reflecting a vacuum of democratic support, the situation seems characterized by active external backing for authoritarian forces, further entrenching the obstacles to democratization.

## 5.5 Prospects for a Democratic Transition in Sudan

The pro-democracy movement, known in Sudan as the 2019 Revolution, and the subsequent establishment of a civilian-military coalition government that lasted until 2021, initially appeared to herald the long-awaited democratic transition. This process was further reinforced by the 2020 Juba Peace Agreement (JPA), which brought various armed groups and liberation movements into the transitional governance framework. The

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throughout 2022. Wagner is also implicated in escalating tensions between the SAF and RSF, with claims that the RSF may have acquired surface-to-air missiles via Il-76 military transport planes on 13 April 2023, just two days before the outbreak of open conflict on 15 April 2023. See for instance

<https://www.cnn.com/ /2023/04/20/africa/wagner-sudan-russia-libya-intl>

<sup>71</sup> 'Conflict in Sudan: A Map of Regional and International Actors'.

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org//article/conflict-sudan-map-regional-and-international-actors>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/ /news/egypt-and-turkey-move-support-saf-following-fall-el-fasher>

JPA is a highly complex instrument, addressing a wide range of issues including governance, security, and transitional justice, and was intended to guide future constitutional negotiations. These negotiations include the restructuring of Sudan into a federal system designed to safeguard the country's diversity and protect the rights of minorities. The agreement also contains critical provisions on equitable distribution of national wealth and the separation of religion and politics, reflecting an ambitious vision for a more inclusive and democratic Sudan.<sup>73</sup>

The hope for Sudan's democratic transition was abruptly dashed by the coup of October 25, 2021. In 2022, a UN-led Framework Agreement briefly revived expectations of a civilian-led government and the establishment of constitutional arrangements to guide the country through a transitional period culminating in elections. Yet, this expectation suffered a further major setback with the outbreak of the prolonged war between the SAF and RSF on April 15, 2023. With regard to military gains between the two factions, RSF's initial gains in the war include its big push to the east in 2024 and its occupation of Al Fasher in Darfur in late 2025. As a result, General Burhan fled the capital, Khartoum, and re-established his administration in Port Sudan, in the eastern Red Sea state. This was reversed by SAF's counteroffensives and reoccupation of lost territories such as Wad Madani and Khartoum. SAF has now moved its centre of power back to Khartoum.

As winning the battlefield differs from governing, the RSF faces a profound legitimacy deficit. Officially, it is still considered a "militia," despite its formal regularization under the Bashir regime in 2017, and it lacks the institutional prestige and historical legitimacy that SAF enjoys as a central state institution. Its legitimacy is further undermined by a history of atrocities, particularly in Darfur, even if some of these actions were carried out under Bashir's counterinsurgency policies endorsed by SAF. The November 2023 ethnic cleansing in West Darfur by RSF-affiliated local Arab militias has further tarnished its image, signaling a serious impediment to any role in a democratic transition<sup>74</sup>.

RSF's occupation of parts of Khartoum was also accompanied by widespread looting and displacement. While the RSF framed these actions as a form of "class war," targeting elites and redistributing resources to marginalized groups, the destruction and theft were indiscriminate. To compensate for this loss of legitimacy, Hemedti has increasingly employed

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<sup>73</sup> <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/juba-agreement-peace-sudan>

<sup>74</sup> FCD with Sudanese democracy activists

populist and class-based rhetoric, presenting himself as a champion of the underprivileged, drawing on his background in the western peripheries<sup>75</sup>. He has also portrayed himself as anti-Islamist, even though his rise to power was entirely contingent on the Islamic Bashir regime, which he served and protected zealously. Indeed, Bashir himself affectionately referred to him as “Hemayti,” an Arabic term meaning “my protector,” reflecting the close bond between the two<sup>76</sup>.

Civilian political forces in Sudan are caught between a rock and a hard place. While they abhor the RSF and its record of atrocities, some nonetheless value the RSF’s anti-Islamist rhetoric, seeing it as a tool to dismantle the military-Islamist establishment that SAF represents. In this context, a segment of the forces that reconstituted the former Forces of Freedom and Change (FFC) as the Coordination of Civilian Democratic Forces (Taqaddum), which signed the Addis Ababa Declaration with Hemedti in December 2023, is aiming to initiate a peace process<sup>77</sup>. Meanwhile, the armed groups that were signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement appear to have aligned with SAF as the “lesser evil,” given the RSF’s close association with Arab tribes that it mobilized against indigenous communities in Darfur, Kordofan, and the Blue Nile regions. These Arab tribes, acting both through RSF and independently, continue to displace local populations and seize land.

A third political force is the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), which remains firmly opposed to any engagement with the military. The Islamists, though not yet operating as a fully reconstituted party, continue to exert influence through existing political networks within and beyond SAF, aiming to regain their former dominant position. Like SAF, they maintain a sense of entitlement, claiming the role of “saviors” tasked with rescuing the nation from the chaos of civilian, or democratic, politics. Parallel to these formal political actors are the Resistance Committees, also known as neighborhood resistance groups. Originating in the 2019 protest movement, these grassroots initiatives now focus on humanitarian and professional assistance, seeking to protect civilians caught in the deadly confrontations between SAF and RSF.

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<sup>75</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/r/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/06/15/the-many-faces-of-sudan-s-general-hemedti-a-son-of-the-desert\\_6032190\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/r/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/06/15/the-many-faces-of-sudan-s-general-hemedti-a-son-of-the-desert_6032190_124.html)

<sup>76</sup> Interview with head of a Sudanese CSO, Nairobi, October 12, 2024.

<sup>77</sup> ‘A strong civilian coalition is vital to avert Sudan’s disintegration’.  
<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/06/strong-civilian-coalition-vital-avert-sudans-disintegration>

It remains to be seen whether “the war between the two generals” will create an opportunity to rebalance the longstanding power asymmetry between Sudan’s military and civilian political forces. The conflict has undermined the army’s role as the nation’s ultimate security provider. And it has rather exposed the army’s profound disjuncture between its self-perception as the savior of the state and the stark reality on the ground.

Civilian political forces in Sudan continue to operate under the shadow of the military and its competing factions. Until the emergence of the Nairobi coalition in December 2025, there were three main civilian coalitions, each perceived as aligned with a warring party. Tasis, founded in February 2025, was linked to the RSF; the Democratic Bloc comprises parties and armed groups aligned with the SAF; and Hamdok’s Sumoud, made up of political parties and civil society organizations, has been accused by SAF of supporting the RSF.

In April-May 2025, the RSF and SAF each established rival parallel governments, creating a thin façade of civilian rule while accelerating the potential for Sudan’s fragmentation. In April 2025, the RSF-backed *Tasees* alliance announced a so-called “Government of Peace and Unity” to administer RSF-controlled areas. Proclaimed from Nyala, the largest city in Darfur, largely under RSF control, the RSF-led government named Mohamed Hassan al-Taishi, a former civilian member of the Transitional Sovereign Council, as prime minister. Its leadership is dominated by the RSF and allied armed movements and political factions. In response, the SAF formed its own “Government of Hope” in May 2025, based in Port Sudan, which has served as the army’s de facto capital since the outbreak of fighting in Khartoum<sup>78</sup>. The army announced in January 2026 that it has moved its capital back to Khartoum.

On December 16, 2025, a broad spectrum of Sudanese political parties, armed movements, civil society organizations, and prominent figures signed a nine-point political roadmap in Nairobi. Framed as a civilian-led initiative to end the war and restore a democratic transition, the signatories included the National Umma Party, the Sudanese Congress Party, the Darfur Lawyers Association, the Coordination of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees, and the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM-AW) led by Abdelwahid al-Nur. Former Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok has also endorsed the declaration.

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<sup>78</sup> ‘The Civilian Façade in Sudan’s War: Rival Governments and the Battle for Legitimacy’. <https://timep.org//2025/08/06/the-civilian-facade-in-sudans-war-rival-governments-and-the-battle-for-legitimacy/>

The Nairobi Declaration presents civilians as a “third pole” in the conflict, seeking to reclaim political agency after months of marginalization by armed actors and foreign mediators. While anti-war and pro-peace in orientation, the declaration does not include concrete measures for military reform. It has reignited longstanding debates within Sudanese political and civic circles regarding representation, legitimacy, and the continued dominance of elite-driven civilian politics. Critics argue that the initiative fails to fully reflect Sudan’s broader civic movement. For example, even though reference was made to grassroots Resistance Committees, neighborhood groups that played a pivotal role in the 2019 Revolution, they did not formally endorse or participate in the declaration.<sup>79</sup>

The Nairobi Declaration emerged in the wake of the September 2025 statement by the team of international mediators, also called the Quad, consisting of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the United States, calling for an immediate three-month truce to pave the way for a permanent ceasefire, humanitarian access, and the creation of a civilian-led political transition. The Quad emphasized the need for excluding remnants of the Bashir regime and reforming Sudan’s security forces under civilian oversight. These points were also mentioned in the Nairobi Declaration.

However, the initiative has drawn criticism from international actors. The European Union, for instance, has distanced itself, emphasizing the need to consolidate civilian platforms under a single credible framework, ideally led by the African Union (AU) and broadly accepted by Sudanese society, rather than multiplying competing coalitions. The AU continues to support Sudan’s civilian peace process through mediation, inclusive dialogue, condemnation of military takeovers, suspension of Sudan following coups, and advocacy for Sudanese-led solutions. Working with partners such as the UN and IGAD, the AU stresses an immediate ceasefire, humanitarian aid, security sector reform, and a return to constitutional order, despite challenges posed by civilian fragmentation and external interference<sup>80</sup>.

International actors also caution against conflating ceasefire efforts with structural reforms. Violence must first subside, and prematurely linking military reforms or political changes to ongoing negotiations could

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<sup>79</sup> <https://au.int/t/en/pressreleases/20250211/sudan-war-calls-our-relentless-collective-action-high-level-dialogue-sudan>

<sup>80</sup> <https://transitionmagazine.fas.harvard.edu/walking-the-tightrope-the-african-unions-struggle-for-peace-in-sudan/>

undermine the transition. Both the Quad and the EU increasingly assert that neither SAF nor RSF should have a future political role, and that remnants of the Bashir regime must be excluded entirely. Yet both forces remain indispensable to any cessation of hostilities, creating a central and unresolved contradiction in international strategy toward Sudan<sup>81</sup>.

## 5.6 Conclusion

Sudan's early decades were characterized by oscillation between short-lived democratic periods and extended military rule, followed by the entrenchment of authoritarianism, justified through a state-sponsored Islamist ideology ill-suited to Sudan's social and ethnic diversity, from the 1990s until the 2019 Revolution. Despite the revolution's success in ending three decades of dictatorship, civilian forces proved unable to counter the military's coordinated counterrevolution. Thus, Sudan not only missed a critical opportunity for democratic consolidation, but it also slid toward an existential crisis as the military fractured into open warfare.

While the conflict poses the most immediate and severe challenge, it has also deeply discredited the military's longstanding self-image as the guardian of the state. At the same time, civilian political forces remain fragmented and struggle to articulate a unified democratic vision. Ending the war and preserving national unity are therefore indispensable preconditions for any democratic future. This will require comprehensive peace negotiations that include not only the warring military factions but also armed groups from peripheral regions and grassroots pro-democracy actors, to prevent further fragmentation and avert broader regional destabilization. Sudan's repeated cycles of uprising and coup have often prioritized regime change over the construction of a durable democratic order. Understanding why these cycles persist and why moments of popular mobilization have failed to translate into lasting democratic institutions is essential in assessing whether Sudan can finally break with its authoritarian past.

Democratization in Sudan faces profound structural and political challenges, including the entrenched power of the military, weak and fragmented civilian institutions, ongoing armed conflict, economic crisis, and deep social fragmentation. Repeated disruptions of civilian rule have undermined public trust and limited the consolidation of democratic

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<sup>81</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/22/sudanese-bloc-declares-nairobi-roadmap-but-is-it-a-civilian-breakthrough>

norms. In addition, exclusion of key actors, particularly the youth, women, and marginalized regions, has further constrained a democratic transition.

Political change in Sudan has been cyclical, characterized by the repeated alternation between civilian and military rule, a pattern rooted in deep structural weaknesses in the state and society. Civilian governments have historically been fragmented, institutionally weak, and unable to effectively manage economic crises, social grievances, or long-standing center–periphery conflicts in marginalized regions such as Darfur, South Kordofan, and the Blue Nile region. These limitations have undermined their legitimacy and capacity to consolidate power, leaving governance vulnerable to disruption. At the same time, the military remains highly politicized, economically entrenched, and organized as a distinct institutional power with vested interests, positioning itself as the ultimate arbiter in moments of political instability.

Sudanese society has demonstrated a strong tradition of popular mobilization, with uprisings in 1964, 1985, and 2019 overthrowing authoritarian regimes; yet transitional periods have repeatedly failed to dismantle military dominance through comprehensive reforms, security sector restructuring, or genuine power-sharing, thereby allowing the armed forces to reassert control. External and regional actors have often reinforced military authority for strategic, geopolitical, or stability reasons, further limiting the prospects for civilian consolidation. Moreover, the absence of a shared national project, weak civil society integration in formal politics, and persistent economic fragility exacerbate these cycles. As a result, Sudan remains trapped in a political rhythm where aspirations for democratic civilian governance are repeatedly interrupted by military intervention, illustrating the fragility and incompleteness of its political transitions and the structural barriers to sustained democratization.

Despite these obstacles, prospects for democratization remain. Sudan’s popular uprisings, strong civil society, resistance committees, and sustained demands for civilian governance demonstrate widespread commitment to democratic change. International engagement and regional pressure also offer opportunities to support a renewed transition process. Crucially, inclusive governance, security sector reform, and meaningful participation of civilians are essential for rebuilding legitimacy and preventing relapses into authoritarian rule.

While Sudan’s path to democracy remains uncertain and fragile, the persistence of popular mobilization and civic resistance indicates that democratization is still a viable, albeit long-term, prospect rather than a

closed chapter. However, meaningful democratic transition and consolidation are impossible without an end to the ongoing civil war. Sudan must also re-engage in a comprehensive nation-building project, underpinned by inclusive national dialogue and credible transitional justice processes. This requires genuine democratic political will among Sudan's diverse political actors, as well as a more enabling and coherent international environment. At present, Sudan continues to function as an arena in which competing regional and international hegemonic rivalries are played out, further constraining prospects for democratic change.

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Chapter 6

**Impediments to Democratization in South Sudan:  
The Birth of a Nation in an Institutional Void and  
Fractured Leadership**

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**Introduction**

This chapter examines the challenges and prospects of democratization in South Sudan against the backdrop of the country's unfinished and deeply intertwined projects of state-building and nation-building. As the world's newest state, South Sudan faces the formidable task of constructing effective state institutions while simultaneously forging a shared national identity out of a society marked by historical marginalization, protracted conflict, and deep political and ethnic fragmentation. These dual challenges have profoundly shaped the country's post-independence political trajectory and continue to constrain efforts toward democratic governance.

The chapter is organized into five main sections. Section 6.1 traces the long and arduous trajectory of South Sudan's liberation movements, beginning with the outbreak of armed struggle in 1955 and culminating in the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) in 2005. It examines the evolution of the southern resistance, the internal divisions within liberation movements, and the militarized political culture that emerged from decades of war with Khartoum, a legacy that would later shape post-independence governance and state formation. The section also analyzes the tragedy of South Sudan's rapid descent into civil war less than two years after achieving independence in 2011.

Section 6.2 assesses South Sudan's democratic performance using major international and regional indices, all of which consistently rank the country at or near the bottom globally. Section 6.3 examines the structural obstacles to democratization in South Sudan, including the limits of donor-driven state-building, leadership crises and SPLA/M fragmentation, resource curse dynamics, failed nation-building, and regional interference. Section 6.4 explores the prospects and openings for democratization in South Sudan and shows that, despite persistent challenges, the context and the way forward are not entirely bleak. The conclusion of the chapter is highlighted in Section 6.5.

## **6.1 An Evolving Context**

### **6.1.1 Historical background**

South Sudan, the world's youngest nation, gained independence from Sudan in 2011. Its struggle for statehood was shaped by decades of marginalization by Khartoum-based elites, where a nation-building project centered on political centralization and cultural homogenization excluded Southern communities. This included the imposition of Islam and the Arabic language on predominantly non-Islamic and non-Arabic southern populations, exacerbating longstanding social, religious, and cultural fault lines. Historical experiences of slavery and colonial-era policies of separate development further entrenched divisions, leaving Southern elites apprehensive about Sudanese independence in 1956 under Khartoum's hegemony. Northern elites' domineering exercise of power fueled a long history of Southern liberation movements, beginning with the Anya-Nya insurgency in 1955 and culminating in the Addis Ababa Peace Agreement of 1972. The agreement granted South Sudan brief regional autonomy and a modest democratic dispensation, which lasted until 1983. Several elections have since been held, but political instability and conflict have

continued to shape the trajectory of South Sudanese statehood and governance<sup>1</sup>.

The second South Sudanese liberation war began in 1983, when Khartoum revived its earlier nation-building agenda by imposing Islam and Arabic and abrogating South Sudan's autonomous regional government<sup>2</sup>. This conflict, lasting until 2005, was led by the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/SPLM) under Dr. John Garang. Unlike the earlier Anya-Nya movement, the SPLA initially wavered between advocating a democratic "New Sudan" and pursuing full independence for South Sudan<sup>3</sup>. The war was far more intense and protracted, resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths on both sides and transforming the SPLA into a powerful politico-military force. While this ultimately enabled South Sudan to attain statehood, it entrenched undemocratic norms and centralized practices shaped by wartime imperatives.

As the primary institution of governance, the SPLA was the only arena where South Sudanese could exercise political rights, but it operated under dictatorial leadership. This authoritarian structure precipitated the first major SPLA split in 1991, led by Dr. Riek Machar. Lacking external support, Machar's faction fragmented further and entered various deals with Khartoum, ranging from power-sharing arrangements to promises of a future referendum on South Sudan's status. It took more than a decade for the SPLA to temporarily reunify and negotiate the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) with the Sudanese government in 2005<sup>4</sup>.

The CPA established Sudan's Government of National Unity (GoNU), an interim South Sudanese government (GoSS), and set the stage for national elections in 2010. One of its key protocols was the Agreement on Wealth Sharing, crucial in a country heavily reliant on oil revenue. Under the CPA, 2 percent of oil revenue was allocated to oil-producing states, while the remainder was split evenly between the GoSS and the northern

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<sup>1</sup> Bona Malwal (2015). "The Anya-Nya Liberation Movement, 1955-72". In: *Sudan and South Sudan*. Palgrave.

<sup>2</sup> Aleksis Ylönen (2017). Confronting the "Arab North": Interpretations of Slavery and Religion in Southern Sudanese Separatist Resistance. <https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/handle/10071/13795>

<sup>3</sup> John Young (2005). "John Garang's Legacy to the Peace Process, the SPLM/A & the South." *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 32, no. 106, 2005

<sup>4</sup> Riek Machar (1995). *South Sudan: A History of Political Domination - A Case of Self-Determination*. <https://www.africa.upenn.edu/>

government and states<sup>5</sup>. The agreement also mandated a referendum in January 2011, allowing South Sudanese to choose between remaining within Sudan under existing power-sharing arrangements or pursuing full independence. The referendum ultimately produced an independent South Sudan, which emerged from the GoSS framework but inherited a fragile political structure: a fragmented ruling party and minimal experience with democratic governance<sup>6</sup>.

The embryonic South Sudan was built on a fragile foundation, one ill-suited to democratic governance. The CPA's implementation marked a false start: SPLM leaders assumed government positions in 2005 without elections, selected primarily for their SPLA civil war record, to placate rivals, or to reintegrate rebel factions. This practice of awarding key posts entrenched a de facto one-party system, with the SPLM controlling all levels of power. Authority was further consolidated through tribal, familial, and client networks, leaving most of the population politically marginalized. The opacity of the oil sector reinforced this kleptocratic system, providing the SPLM with resources to consolidate its dominance<sup>7</sup>.

The 2010 national elections, the first multi-party vote in nearly 25 years, unsurprisingly resulted in a landslide SPLM victory with 93% of the vote. While multiple parties participated, the stark asymmetry in power and resources left them little chance of success. The election was marred by widespread human rights violations perpetrated by both SPLM and the northern ruling National Congress Party (NCP), particularly in southern states where SPLM forces collaborated with independent candidates. The absence of accountability for political intolerance set a precedent for the undemocratic practices that would persist in post-independence South Sudan. In January and July 2011, the CPA-mandated referendum overwhelmingly endorsed independence, with 98.83% voting in favor. While the referendum was a democratic milestone, independent South Sudan has since struggled to translate this historic exercise into a functioning democratic transition<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Oil started being produced in Sudan in the 1990s and has become the mainstay of the economies of the north and south

<sup>6</sup> E Grawert (ed.) 2010. *After the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Sudan*. Boydell & Brewer,

<sup>7</sup> Alex de Waal. Visualizing South Sudan: The SPLM Strategy for the CPA Interim Period. <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2014/03/18/visualizing-south-sudan-the-splm-strategy-for-the-cpa-interim-period/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/06/30/democracy-hold/rights-violations-april-2010-sudan-elections>

### 6.1.2 Independent South Sudan: A country at war with itself

Since independence, South Sudan has confronted the formidable and simultaneous tasks of state-building and nation-building under profoundly adverse conditions. Indeed, some analysts have questioned whether South Sudan ever achieved substantive statehood at all, describing it not simply as a fragile or failed state, but as one that “never truly functioned as a state in the first place.”<sup>9</sup> Independence in 2011 was followed by less than two years of relative calm before the country descended into a devastating civil war (2013–2018) that claimed more than 400,000 lives and shattered already fragile institutions<sup>10</sup>.

The conflict was triggered by an internal power struggle within the SPLM between President Salva Kiir and his Vice President, Riek Machar. What began as an elite political contest quickly assumed an ethnic dimension, as both leaders mobilized support along Dinka and Nuer lines, respectively, South Sudan’s two largest ethnic groups in the country. The ensuing violence spread across multiple regions, unleashing widespread communal conflict and further eroding social cohesion among historically interconnected communities. Machar fled the country, while the SPLM leadership in government detained senior SPLA figures accused of plotting a coup, many of whom remained imprisoned until the 2018 peace agreement. The SPLM itself fractured into rival factions: Kiir’s SPLM–In Government (SPLM-IG), Machar’s SPLM–In Opposition (SPLM-IO), and the SPLM–Former Detainees (SPLM-FD), alongside several smaller splinter groups<sup>11</sup>.

Regional mediation efforts led by IGAD and neighboring states produced the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (ARCSS), which proved short-lived as hostilities resumed in 2016. A more comprehensive settlement was eventually reached in 2018 through the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). The agreement envisaged a 36-month transitional period culminating in democratic elections. South Sudan’s long-awaited transition to democratic governance through its first post-independence

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<sup>9</sup> Commentary by Kate Almquist Knopf, director of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/crisis-governance-south-sudan>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/south-sudans-splintered-opposition-preventing-more-conflict>

<sup>11</sup> Douglas Johnson (2016). *South Sudan: A New History for a New Nation*. Ohio University Press. <https://ohioopen.library.ohio.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1075&context=oupress>

general election has been delayed several times. Originally scheduled for December 2024, the elections were postponed for a fourth time in September 2024 following the two-year extension of the 2018 R-ARCSS and the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RTGoNU).

Elections are now set for December 2026, with a new government expected to take office in February 2027. Despite this delay, South Sudan has recorded notable progress in its transitional justice process<sup>12</sup>. The detention of Vice President Riek Machar and his wife, Angelina Teny, who also serves as Minister of Interior, on charges of murder, treason, and crimes against humanity has cast serious doubt on the durability of the peace agreement and the prospects for a free and fair election, particularly if Machar is prevented from participating. Machar has been implicated by the government in the March 2025 assault in Nasir, where the White Army militia, largely composed of ethnic Nuer fighters, overran a government garrison, resulting in approximately 250 fatalities<sup>13</sup>.

The RT-GoNU is a broad but fragile coalition led by President Kiir and five Vice Presidents, including Machar. In addition to SPLM-IG and SPLM-IO, it incorporates SPLM-FD, the South Sudan Opposition Alliance (SSOA), and a grouping of Other Political Parties (OPP). Power-sharing constitutes the core pillar of the R-ARCSS, alongside security sector reform (including the unification and redeployment of forces), constitutional review, electoral preparation, and administrative boundary reform linked to federalism<sup>14</sup>.

Implementation of the peace agreement has been sluggish across most sectors, with the partial exception of elite power-sharing. Even here, progress has been limited and exclusionary. As one former senior SPLM official observed, the R-ARCSS largely rewards the “gun class,” while sidelining non-violent actors and weakening opposition forces. Many smaller ethnic communities that neither participated in the war nor aligned with armed signatories remain underrepresented in transitional governance<sup>15</sup>. While public support for power-sharing remains relatively

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<sup>12</sup> <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/south-sudan-s-game-of-thrones-continues>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/09/south-sudan-vice-president-riek-machar-charged-with-murder-treason-and-crimes-against-humanity/>

<sup>14</sup> Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS). <https://www.peaceagreements.org/wgenerateAgreementPDF/2112>

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Dr. Majak D’Agoot, former Deputy Chief of the Sudanese Intelligence and South Sudan’s Defense Minister and has formerly held the role of Senior analyst at the Changing Horizon Institute for Strategic Policy Analysis, December 14, 2023.

strong, surveys indicate that most South Sudanese oppose the continued expansion of government structures under the R-ARCSS, reflecting growing frustration with elite-driven settlements that have yet to deliver peace, accountability, or democratic transformation<sup>16</sup>.

## 6.2 South Sudan: The Lowest Performer in Democracy Indices

Freedom House's 2023 report classifies South Sudan as “*not free*,” assigning it an overall score of just 1/100, with -3/40 for political rights and 4/60 for civil liberties, a score unchanged from 2022<sup>17</sup>. The score remains the same in Freedom House's 2025 Report.<sup>18</sup> Transparency International's 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index ranks South Sudan 180<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries, making it the most corrupt country globally<sup>19</sup>. Its score (9/100) in the 2025 Index also shows its rank as 181<sup>st</sup> (along with Somalia) out of 181 countries.<sup>20</sup> This entrenched corruption has further eroded public trust, weakened service delivery, and deepened the country's already fragile security environment. The UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan likewise identifies corruption and elite competition along kinship and ethnic lines as key drivers of human rights abuses and ethnic conflict<sup>21</sup>.

Grand corruption is systemic in South Sudan. In 2012, 75 senior officials were merely asked to return an estimated USD 4 billion in stolen public funds, without investigations or prosecutions<sup>22</sup>. Patronage and nepotism permeate the security sector, erasing the boundary between civilian authority and the military. Investigations by *The Sentry* show how post-independence elites have built a kleptocratic system capturing oil, public procurement, security institutions, and finance, directly linking corruption to conflict and repression. Public frustration is intense, with citizens openly describing corruption as theft, reflecting its social costs and

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<sup>16</sup> Luka Kuol (2019). The 2018 South Sudanese Peace Agreement: A Litmus Test of Coercive Mediation. The Zambakari Advisory. Special Issue, Spring 2019.

<sup>17</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-sudan/freedom-world/2025>

<sup>18</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-sudan/freedom-world/2025>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2025/index/ssd>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/02/un-commissions-inquiry-finds-south-sudans-leaders-fuelling-violence>

<sup>22</sup> “South Sudan Officials stole \$4bn”, BBC News, 5 Jun 2012, accessed on 10 December 2023. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18326004>.

its role in denying basic services. These predatory networks fuel violence as elites use conflict to renegotiate access to power and resources<sup>23</sup>.

Public resentment toward corruption in South Sudan is deep and widespread, extending not only to its scale but also to the language used to describe it, as the following description of the situation by a research participant indicates:

Many South Sudanese reject the term *corruption* as a euphemism that obscures the gravity of the offense. As one widely echoed sentiment puts it, corruption should be called by its proper name – *theft*. Framing it as stealing restores a moral dimension that the abstract language of corruption dilutes, since theft is universally understood, socially condemned, and openly named and shamed. The concept of corruption, often absent from everyday vernacular, is seen as masking the depth of criminality and institutional decay. Using more direct and locally resonant terms would better capture the lived reality of public resource plunder. For many citizens, the theft of public money explains the absence of basic services and development: when the state fails to deliver, people lose any sense of ownership in, or loyalty to, the state itself<sup>24</sup>.

The wider South Sudanese public is very critical of the magnitude of corruption, and they resent the language used to describe it, as the following commentary suggests:

We should call corruption by its name, which is theft. The term corruption is a euphemism. It should be called stealing or theft. Doing so will insert a moral dimension. Most people do not condone theft, which is often named and shamed. The concept of corruption, which is not even used by uneducated people needs to be interrogated. It hides the extent of decay and crime. Perhaps more local terms need to be used to highlight the criminal dimension of corruption. People call out those who steal as ‘thieves’. Theft of public money is why there are just no public resources in South Sudan for the provision of social services. If the

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<sup>23</sup> “The Nexus of Corruption and Conflict in South Sudan: Dismantling the financing of Africa’s deadliest conflict”, *The Sentry*, July 31, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Dr. Jok Madut Jok, former South Sudan undersecretary in the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, currently an academic, professor at Syracuse. December 6, 2023.

state does not deliver services, people will not have a stake in each state<sup>25</sup>.

Other democracy indices also rate South Sudan very low. Under the Global State of Democracy framework, South Sudan consistently ranks among the world's lowest-performing countries across all democratic dimensions. In the 2024 global rankings, it is placed 151st in representation, 165th in rights, 164th in the rule of law, and 161st in participation, out of 173 countries.<sup>26</sup> Freedom House classifies South Sudan as “not free,” assigning it an exceptionally low overall score of 1/100, broken down into -3/40 (negative three out of forty) for political rights and 4/60 for civil liberties<sup>27</sup>.

Similarly, the 2024 Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) places South Sudan at the bottom among countries in the continent, scoring 19/100 in overall governance, far below the African average of 48.9<sup>28</sup>. South Sudan has especially deteriorated in two out of the four IIAG categories since 2014, namely Participation, Rights & Inclusion and Foundations for Economic Opportunity. However, it has improved the most in Human Development, driven by progress in the subcategories Health, Education and Social Protection & Welfare<sup>29</sup>.

The human rights situation is equally alarming. According to Human Rights Watch, South Sudan continues to face a severe human rights and humanitarian crisis marked by ongoing conflict, inter-communal violence, widespread civilian displacement, and persistent impunity. Authorities have systematically failed to ensure accountability for grave violations, including state-sponsored extrajudicial killings<sup>30</sup>. Together, these indicators depict a political system trapped in a vicious cycle of authoritarianism, corruption, and violence, with profound consequences for democratic governance and human security.

South Sudan's persistent ranking at the bottom of global democracy indices is partly attributable to the extremely low institutional baseline from which the country began at independence. Unlike many postcolonial states, South Sudan entered statehood with virtually no experience of democratic governance and without even the basic trappings of modern

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.idea.int//democracytracker/country/south-sudan>

<sup>27</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-sudan/freedom-world/2023>

<sup>28</sup> <https://mo.ibrahim.foundation//sites/default/files/2024-10/2024-index-report.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <https://assets.iiag.online//2024/profiles/2024-IIAG-profile-ss.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/south-sudan#:~:text=>

administrative institutions. This profound institutional deficit has deep historical roots.

A key source lies in the colonial legacy of Anglo-Egyptian rule (1899–1956). British colonial administration deliberately divided Sudan into two distinct political and administrative entities through the so-called “Southern Policy,” under which Southern Sudan was governed separately from the more economically and administratively developed North<sup>31</sup>. While officially justified as a measure to protect the South from northern domination, the policy in practice resulted in systematic neglect. The South received minimal investment in infrastructure, education, and administrative capacity, leaving it without a functional governance apparatus. Moreover, the policy failed to prevent northern political dominance after independence.

Postcolonial governance further entrenched these inequalities. Successive governments in Khartoum not only neglected the South but also actively marginalized and exploited it, reinforcing patterns of political exclusion. The prolonged civil wars that followed destroyed the meager institutional capacity and social infrastructure that had existed. Prior to the signing of the CPA in 2005, South Sudan had no formal institutions of self-rule capable of governing a modern state.

Although the CPA created an unprecedented opportunity for institutional development through the Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS), the SPLA/M leadership prioritized securing political independence over building sustainable governance structures. This task was further complicated by Khartoum’s continued subversive involvement, including support for rival armed groups in the South aimed at shaping the outcome of the 2011 referendum. Consequently, independence in 2011 left South Sudan with the burden of constructing a state almost entirely from scratch.

The scale of this challenge cannot be overstated. South Sudan emerged from Africa’s longest-running civil war, which claimed over two million lives and displaced more than four million people, leaving behind a deeply traumatized and polarized society. As one close observer aptly remarked, governing South Sudan was akin to “building a plane while flying it.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> David Nailo N. Mayo (1994). “The British Southern Policy in Sudan: An Inquiry into the Closed District Ordinances (1914-1946)”. *Northeast African Studies*, New Series, Vol. 1, No. 2/3

<sup>32</sup> Manuel Manrique (2014). “South Sudan: The roots and prospects of a multifaceted crisis”, Policy briefing document, submitted to European Parliament, March 2014:

Ministers and senior officials were compelled to acquire basic governing skills through on-the-job learning while simultaneously overseeing the creation of fundamental infrastructure, such as constructing the first paved roads in the new capital, Juba. The enormity of this task helps explain South Sudan's dismal performance on democracy indices and underscores the structural constraints that continue to hinder democratic consolidation<sup>33</sup>.

The quality of leadership provided by the SPLM constitutes another major constraint on effective governance in South Sudan. Since independence, the SPLM-led state has been widely characterized as a violent kleptocracy, defined as a system of state capture in which ruling networks and their commercial allies appropriate governing institutions for systematic resource extraction and regime survival, while deploying varying degrees of violence to suppress dissent. In such regimes, violence is not incidental but institutionalized as a core strategy of governance, posing grave threats to peace, security, and fundamental human rights<sup>34</sup>.

Within this political order, elite networks deliberately weaken, co-opt, or manipulate rule-of-law institutions, hollowing out their autonomy and capacity. The security and justice sectors, rather than serving their intended roles of protection, service provision, and accountability, are repurposed as instruments of predation, coercion, and political repression. This fusion of economic extraction, personalized rule, and coercive power has entrenched a system in which public authority is exercised primarily for private gain, undermining the prospects for democratic governance, institutional accountability, and sustainable peace<sup>35</sup>.

Alex de Waal characterizes the SPLM's governing strategy as a form of violent kleptocracy. He argues that South Sudan's protracted political and economic crisis has produced a system of governance driven by personalized transactions of loyalty for material reward, in which violence functions as a routine instrument within a "political marketplace," rather than as part of any linear progression toward a Weberian bureaucratic

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[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing\\_note/join/2014/522328/EXPO-AFET\\_SP%282014%29522328\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/briefing_note/join/2014/522328/EXPO-AFET_SP%282014%29522328_EN.pdf)

<sup>33</sup>[https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2PolicyBrief\\_Violent-Kleptocracies\\_EnoughProject\\_Oct2016.pdf](https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2PolicyBrief_Violent-Kleptocracies_EnoughProject_Oct2016.pdf)

<sup>34</sup>[https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2PolicyBrief\\_Violent-Kleptocracies\\_EnoughProject\\_Oct2016.pdf](https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2PolicyBrief_Violent-Kleptocracies_EnoughProject_Oct2016.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> See "A Hijacked State: Violent kleptocracy in South Sudan". <https://enoughproject.org/blog/defining-violent-kleptocracy-east-and-central-africa>

state<sup>36</sup>. De Waal further describes South Sudan's governance order as a collapsed political marketplace, structured by competitive, militarized clientelism in which access to oil rents is exchanged for political allegiance. In this context, kleptocracy is marked by political insolvency and economic stagnation that mutually reinforce one another, undermining peace and stability<sup>37</sup>.

Examples of the SPLM's kleptocratic practices are widespread and well documented. A frequently cited case concerns Bol Mel, a presidential envoy who is widely regarded as the regime's most powerful commercial intermediary. He reportedly enjoys unrestricted access to the president and has become the principal, if not exclusive, recipient of major state contracts, particularly large-scale infrastructure projects<sup>38</sup>. These contracts are routinely awarded without open and competitive bidding, effectively excluding other South Sudanese contractors and business actors and constituting a clear conflict of interest between political authority and private accumulation<sup>39</sup>.

The power-sharing arrangements established under the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS) have further widened the kleptocratic circle. To accommodate rival elites, the agreement produced an excessively large and costly state apparatus, including an expanded parliament of nearly 600 members, a bloated and fragmented security sector, and a cabinet comprising more than forty ministers. While the peace agreement succeeded in temporarily silencing armed conflict, it did so at an extraordinarily high political and economic cost. As critics have noted, the settlement has largely entrenched elite privilege by elevating former belligerents into lucrative government positions, while the broader population continues to face deepening poverty, institutional decay, and pervasive insecurity<sup>40</sup>.

The entrenched predatory economic networks play a central role in South Sudan's protracted conflict, as violence is frequently used by political elites to renegotiate their share of politico-economic power. The

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<sup>36</sup> Alex De Waal (2015). *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, war and the business of power*. Cambridge: Polity Press

<sup>37</sup> F. Onditi, K. Sabala & S. Wassara (2018). Power-sharing consociationalism in resolving South Sudan's ethnopolitical conflict in the post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement era. *African Journal on Conflict Resolution*, 18(1).

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/305-oil-or-nothing-dealing-south-sudans>

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Dr Jok Madut Jok, *supra* note 24.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

close nexus between corruption, political competition, and human rights violations is well documented. In its fourth report to the Human Rights Council, the UN Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan underscores that corruption and elite rivalry are major drivers of ethnic violence, noting that “exchanges of influence are structured along kinship and ethnic lines, creating a situation in which the state becomes the primary source of income and resources, and public offices and the bureaucracy become arenas of ethnic competition.”<sup>41</sup>

The fragile peacebuilding process faces significant risks, foremost among them a deep trust deficit among the parties forming the Revitalized Transitional Government of National Unity (RT-GoNU). Although the peace agreement has so far held among the principal signatories, violence has continued to proliferate –driven both by actors excluded from the coalition and by abuses committed by state security forces. The UN Commission has extensively documented atrocities linked to political competition involving SPLM-IG, SPLM/A-IO, and other SPLM factions, often taking overtly ethnic forms. The persistence of impunity for such crimes connects South Sudan’s pre- and post-independence trajectories of violence. The state’s inability to provide basic security, compounded by the proliferation of armed groups and the slow implementation of security-sector reform, remains acute. One of the core benchmarks of the peace agreement, the unification of security forces, remains largely unmet, with even coalition partners agreeing on modalities only as late as April 2022.

In the absence of effective state protection, communities have increasingly resorted to self-help and group-based security arrangements, intensifying cycles of communal violence. The virulent rise of the White Army militia and its implications in inter-ethnic communal violence and against the government is situated within this broader national security crisis. As one research participant observed, insecurity has rendered travel to places such as Malakal nearly impossible, forcing institutions like the University of Upper Nile to relocate. Once a cosmopolitan hub, the city now epitomizes the broader security dilemma: as the state fails to protect citizens, groups arm themselves for self-defense, triggering further intercommunal conflict<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Sonja Theron (2022). *Leadership, Nation-building and War in South Sudan: The Problems of Statehood and Collective Will*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Augustino Ting Mayai, Managing Director of the Sudd Institute, December 8, 2023

Civic space in independent South Sudan is similarly constricted. Reflecting a siege mentality and intolerance of dissent, independent media and civil society actors are routinely portrayed as enemies of both the ruling SPLM-IG and the state itself. Central to this repression is the extensive use of the National Security Service (NSS) as a coercive instrument<sup>43</sup>. Modeled in many respects on Sudan's former National Intelligence and Security Service (NISS), the NSS operates under the direct authority of the presidency, with little oversight or accountability.

Victims of abuses committed by NSS agents have virtually no access to judicial remedies. Civil society organizations across the country are routinely required to obtain prior "clearance" from the NSS to hold meetings or conduct activities, a practice that has extended even to village and community leaders<sup>44</sup>. Academic freedom has also suffered: scholars and journalists face intimidation, dismissal, or worse for engaging in critical debate, particularly on sensitive issues such as federalism or state violence. As the UN Commission has warned, the concentration of unaccountable power and resources in a single security institution is fundamentally incompatible with democratic values and poses a serious threat to the credibility of future elections and constitution-making processes<sup>45</sup>.

### **6.3 South Sudan's Democratic Challenges**

South Sudan's profound democratic deficits stem from multiple factors that are interconnected. As discussed below, these factors are: (i) the difficulties of building a state from scratch in spite of inflows of development and development aid, (ii) the nature of the political regime that is based on factional politics that characterizes rebel groups, (iii) mismanagement of diversity and divisive nation-building, (iv) the resource curse and kleptocracy linked to oil, and (v) sustained external interference.

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<sup>43</sup><https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/south-sudan-abusive-surveillance-by-national-security-service-climate-of-fear/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.un.org/>

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Jok, *supra* note 24.

### 6.3.1 Institutional vacuum and the limits of donor-driven state building

Neither colonial rule nor the CPA interregnum equipped South Sudan to function as a fully-fledged state. At independence, the country faced the monumental task of constructing institutions, legal frameworks, public services, and infrastructure from a near-zero base. Recognizing this institutional vacuum, the international community channeled substantial “capacity building” support, largely through the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). Beyond peace consolidation, UNMISS was tasked with assisting the government to develop security capabilities, strengthen the rule of law, and build functional justice and governance institutions. Juba’s ability to mobilize extensive international assistance was facilitated in part by a powerful South Sudanese advocacy network in the United States, which successfully framed the liberation struggle in terms of racial marginalization and Christian persecution under Khartoum’s rule. While this narrative generated significant diplomatic and financial support, it also contributed to weak scrutiny over post-independence governance practices<sup>46</sup>.

This support had deep roots in the CPA period, with estimates suggesting that South Sudan received over USD 9 billion. Aid allocations spiked in the early years of independence, totaling USD 1.4 billion in the first year alone<sup>47</sup>. Donor interventions ranged from infrastructure and social service provision to institution building in areas such as the judiciary, law enforcement, and governance. Hundreds of international experts were embedded in government ministries to transfer knowledge and support capacity development.

Despite these investments, results were limited, with infrastructure often the only tangible success. At the core of South Sudan’s kleptocratic political economy, there lie large inflows of development and humanitarian aid, particularly in the early years of independence, which proved highly vulnerable to elite capture. Growing donor frustration reflects the perception that substantial aid flows have inadvertently sustained a predatory elite rather than strengthening accountable institutions<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.csis.org/ /accessing-south-sudan-humanitarian-aid-time-crisis>

<sup>47</sup> Manrique, *supra* note 32.

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org//africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/305-oil-or-nothing-dealing-south-sudans-bleeding-finances>

The failure of externally driven, fast-tracked state-building initiatives reflects an entrenched “aid orthodoxy” centered on transplanting “best practices” through foreign experts, rather than nurturing locally grounded institutions. Little knowledge was transferred, and South Sudanese institutions remained largely a façade, appearing functional but lacking real capacity. Manuel Manrique<sup>49</sup> attributes this to a “capability trap,” which combines two dynamics: *isomorphic mimicry*, where organizations maintain legitimacy by imitating modern institutional forms without delivering functionality, and *premature load bearing*, in which excessive external pressure overloads nascent institutions, preventing the organic emergence of effective governance structures. In short, donor-led interventions inadvertently reinforced dependency while undermining the development of homegrown institutional capacity.

### **6.3.2 SPLM – A fractious rebel organization in power and factional politics**

A growing body of literature on rebel movements emphasizes that the behavior of armed groups during wartime profoundly shapes their ability to transition into effective governance in peacetime. Ana Arjona (2017)<sup>50</sup> offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between wartime civilian-combatant dynamics and post-conflict governance outcomes. She uses the concept of a social contract to classify how rebel organizations interact with civilian populations during conflict, distinguishing three scenarios: (i) Rebelocracy, broad intervention in civilian affairs, establishing a social contract and asserting control; (ii) Aliocracy, minimal intervention, often due to strong local institutions or competing governance actors, and (iii) Disorder, absence of a social contract, with rebels neglecting civilian governance.

Arjona argues that armed groups with long-term horizons that are invested in future outcomes have incentives to establish a social contract, maintain order, and cultivate civilian cooperation. By contrast, groups with short-term horizons prioritize immediate gains over long-term stability, making disorder a likely outcome. Disorder undermines civilian cooperation, weakens territorial control, and hampers prospects for post-conflict state-building.

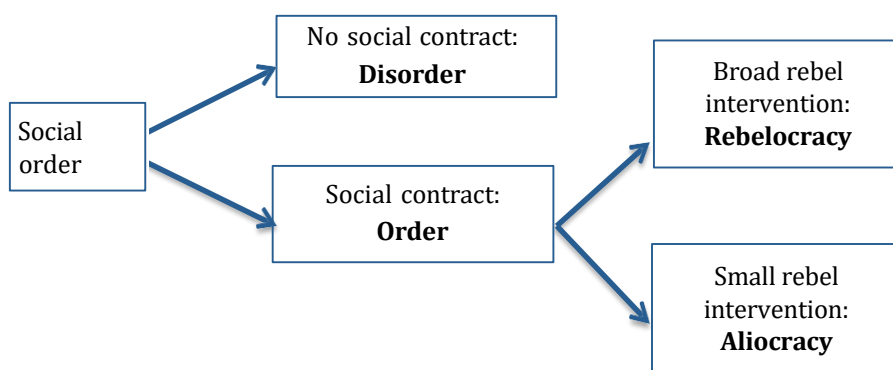
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<sup>49</sup> Manrique, *supra* note 32.

<sup>50</sup> Ana Arjona (2017). “Rebelocracy: A Theory of Social Order in Civil War”. Kellogg Institute for International Studies. *Working Paper #422 – June 2017*  
<https://cdi.mecon.gob.ar/bases/doc/kellogg/wp422.pdf>

Three conditions, Arjona notes, push armed groups toward short-term focus and disorder: group indiscipline, armed competition, and shifts in the macro-politics of the war. In these contexts, combatants pursue immediate spoils rather than long-term stability, compromising the formation of effective institutions. This framework helps explain the SPLM’s trajectory, which shows that its wartime practices, internal fragmentation, and short-term strategic choices have profoundly shaped South Sudan’s post-independence governance challenges.

**Figure 1. Arjona’s typology of wartime social orders**



In Arjona’s typology, the SPLA clearly fits the category of ‘disorder’, given its chronic indiscipline, predatory practices, and, at times, outright punitive violence against local populations. This behavior was often driven by competition with splinter armed groups and armed factions supported by Khartoum’s counterinsurgency strategies. These patterns persisted for over two decades, from the start of the second liberation war in 1983 until the various factions were largely unified under the SPLA mainstream in 2002, enabling a consolidated position in the lead-up to the CPA in 2005.

As a former SPLA commander observed, the movement “instead of being a genuine national liberation force, turned into an agent of plunder, pillage, and destructive conquest. The solidarity between soldiers and civilians was completely absent. The SPLA became like an army of occupation in areas it controlled, driving people away”.<sup>51</sup> Jok and Hutchinson similarly highlighted South-on-South violence, noting that “ever since the SPLA split into two warring factions in August 1991, rural

<sup>51</sup> Peter Adwok Nyaba (1997). *Politics of Liberation in South Sudan: An insider’s view* (Fountain Publishers, Kampala), p. 51.

Nuer and Dinka communities have been grappling with a deepening subculture of ethnicized violence.”<sup>52</sup>

The SPLA’s factional politics fueled some of the most extreme disconnects with the population, including its ‘war’ with the eastern Jikany Nuer along the South Sudan–Ethiopia border<sup>53</sup>. Numerous studies corroborate this alienation, showing that much of the second civil war revolved around resource capture. While Khartoum sought oil, cheap labor, and cattle, southern actors, including the SPLA, splinter factions, and government-affiliated militias, engaged in looting, theft of relief supplies, and other exploitative trades to enrich themselves<sup>54</sup>.

In this regard, the SPLA differed markedly from other rebel movements in the Horn of Africa, such as Eritrea’s EPLF<sup>55</sup> and Ethiopia’s TPLF, which managed to establish functional relations with the populations under their control, creating a modicum of social contract that often carried over when they transitioned to government in 1991<sup>56</sup>. By contrast, the SPLA/SPLM remains the most fractured liberation movement in the region. While other movements, including the EPLF, Ethiopia’s EPRDF, and Uganda’s NRM, also experienced splits, none match the SPLM’s persistent fragmentation during wartime and post-conflict periods. Today, the SPLM exists in multiple political incarnations, reflecting both its historical legacy and ongoing factionalism: SPLM-IG (In Government), SPLM-IO (In Opposition), SPLM-FD (Former Detainees), R-SPLM (Real SPLM), and SPLM-DC (SPLM for Democratic Change). This proliferation illustrates how the SPLM brand continues to symbolize South Sudan’s arduous struggle for liberation, even as it struggles to maintain internal cohesion.

South Sudan’s political history has been dominated by the SPLM/A for over four decades. Unlike its predecessor, the Anya-Nya movement, which clearly pursued South Sudanese independence, the SPLM wavered

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<sup>52</sup> Jok Madut and Sharon Hutchinson (1999). Sudan’s prolonged second civil war and the militarization of Nuer and Dinka ethnic identities. *African Studies review*.

<sup>53</sup> John Gatluak Kam (2006). Root causes of unhealthy relations between SPLA, and Nuer population. <https://sudantribune.com/article14670/>

<sup>54</sup> Clemence Pinaud (2014). “South Sudan: Civil war, predation and the making of a military aristocracy”. *African Affairs*, Volume 113, Issue 451, April 2014

<sup>55</sup> Paulos Tesfagiorgis (2015). “What Went Wrong? The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front from Armed Opposition to State Governance. A Personal Observation”. Occasional Paper. <https://sites.tufts.edu/wp/files/2017/05/What-Went-Wrong.pdf>

<sup>56</sup> John Young (2006). *Peasant revolution in Ethiopia. The Tigray People’s Liberation Front, 1975-1991*. Cambridge University Press.

between the goal of secession and John Garang's vision of a democratic "New Sudan," a fundamental source of internal splits<sup>57</sup>. These divisions were exacerbated by power struggles rooted in ethnic mobilization and Khartoum's counter-insurgency strategy of divide and rule. The result has been the SPLA's intense political violence and repressive governance, with devastating consequences for civilians, including widespread human rights violations.

Political failings of key leaders were carried over into independent South Sudan, as the SPLM assumed state power without introducing fresh leadership. "Contribution to liberation" and the vanguardism connected to it remain core to SPLM's political legitimacy, acting as a shield from criticism and accountability<sup>58</sup>. These patterns underpin failures to implement transitional justice obligations under the Revitalized Agreement, which might otherwise subject SPLM to independent scrutiny. Vanguardism also shapes political competition among SPLM factions, with internal debates often revolving around whose liberation credentials justify leadership, as captured in interviews with former SPLM members and government officials:

The freedom project was lost to SPLM leaders a long time ago. This is not just because of greed, but also this sense of personal entitlement to power without being visionary. The sense of entitlement comes from the 'contribution to the liberation of South Sudan'. For Kiir and Machar, one of the objects of the struggle is also power in and of itself. It is related to ego (the self-understanding) as the true liberator or implementer of the freedom project. But neither Kiir nor Machar is fit for the Freedom Project. The South Sudan vision died when Garang died. Lam Akol came close to that vision when he established a separate party called NDM – National Democratic Movement. But then there was a question of Garang's ... being heavy-handed .... Now the issue has degenerated from freedom to masculine politics – who is the real man? Kiir is on record ridiculing G10 detainees for being 'lousy coup makers' in 2013, as they were caught in the streets of Juba, not in the field fighting! He said this when he met them during the

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<sup>57</sup> Mengistu shaped Garang's ideology of New Sudan because of the Eritrean secession movement. Those who opted for secession did not have external backing. As a result, they made peace with Khartoum. That is why we established SSDF (South Sudan Democratic Forum)– a third option. Interview with Yien Thiang Luony, deputy head of SSDF, December 27, 2023

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Augustino Ting Mayai, *supra* note 42.

2018 peace agreement. This sounds like a joke, but it gives insight into the governing elites' lingo: 'We thought you were men who would fight out in the field.'<sup>59</sup>

We thought of democracy as jargon without a deep understanding of what it means. SPLA was a politico-military machinery meant to win the war, not as a democratic organization. No wonder that we failed to make the transition from being a rebel organization to a democratic government. The result is SPLM patronage and a vanguard to lead the people. The slightest forms of criticism and freedom of expression, even by its former members such as Machar, are not tolerated. The 2013 civil war could have been avoided with a minimum democratic dispensation. The problem started when Machar's right to criticize the government was silenced and considered treason. In so doing, SPLM operated as a rebel organization. Freedom of thought and speech is curtailed by the National Security Act (2015). We never had a democratic gestation period. The CPA lacked democratic exercise partly because Khartoum would not allow it, [and] also because SPLA focused on the referendum. We all put democracy on the back burner. We could not be democratic overnight when we became independent.<sup>60</sup>

The failure to transition from a liberation movement to a democratic political party has led some South Sudanese to argue for the dissolution of SPLM, which has outlived its original purpose:

SPLM has an outdated or already achieved mission that was a total liberation of the people and land of South Sudan. Independence was brought about by a liberation movement carried [out] by all South Sudanese people. This memorable and sacrificial work of all people from all walks of life, from all creeds, faiths, and genders cannot be narrowed to a single membership-based entity. SPLM has become a source of conflicts, political bullying, and divisions, with some cadres claiming they are the 'real liberators' and questioning the patriotism of others who contributed to the struggle just like them. As an SPLM [ordinary] member, I believe that for change to occur, SPLM must be repositioned, reconfigured, and refocused. I also believe that a political party must be ideologically

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Jok, *supra* note 24.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Yien Thieng Lony, Deputy Chairman of South Sudan Democratic Forum, December 27, 2023.

driven and that the membership of the party should reflect alignment with its ideology.<sup>61</sup>

As the SPLM transitioned into a ruling party, its armed wing, the SPLA, was transformed into the national army, consolidating a firm grip over governance structures. The military's pervasive influence across government has led one analyst to remark that "South Sudan is not a country with a military. Rather, it is a military with a country."<sup>62</sup> Lacking a distinct and autonomous civil authority, the military receives disproportionate resources. Approximately 41% of GDP is allocated to defense, coming at the expense of education, healthcare, and other critical social services<sup>63</sup>.

### **6.3.3 A flawed nation-building project**

The following statement by one of South Sudanese leading scholars throws light onto the country's nation-building crisis:

The country's governance has become deeply divisive, with South Sudanese increasingly polarized along ethnic and regional lines. This bodes poorly for the nation's future, as many citizens feel alienated from the state. Political leaders exploit ethnic loyalties to maintain power, using identity as a substitute for civic mechanisms like elections. Members of a leader's ethnic group are often pressured to defend the leader's position as if their collective survival depends on it, reinforcing a cycle where ethnicity, rather than citizenship or democratic processes, determines political allegiance<sup>64</sup>.

National unity is widely recognized as a fundamental prerequisite for democratization. In its absence, attempts at democracy risk deepening polarization or even prompting secession.<sup>65</sup> Postcolonial African states have frequently failed to manage societal diversity effectively, embarking on flawed nation-building projects that often-mirrored colonial state structures. In South Sudan, both the SPLM and its development partners have prioritized state-building over nation-building, i.e., constructing a

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<sup>61</sup> John Adoor. 'Why SPLM should not be a political party'? <https://sudantribune.com/>

<sup>62</sup> Jeremy Astill-Brown (2014). *South Sudan's Slide into Conflict: Revisiting the Past and Reassessing Partnerships*, (Research paper: Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs): 4

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.cfc.forces.gc.ca//259/290/301/305/hladik.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Jok, *supra* note 24.

<sup>65</sup> Dankwart A. Rustow (1970). "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model". *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Apr., 1970).

functional government rather than fostering a sense of shared national identity. Interviews conducted for this study reveal that the most significant impediment to national cohesion is widespread exclusion from the national platform, particularly along ethnic lines. Corruption, nepotism, and limited access to government positions were also identified as persistent barriers preventing citizens from feeling invested in the nation.

Insecurity, especially rooted in ongoing ethnic conflicts across multiple states, further undermines national unity. As one participant observed,

At the moment, South Sudan is only slightly more than a geographical expression. It contains more than sixty cultural and linguistic groups, each of which has a stronger sense of citizenship in its tribes than in the nation. The main glue that binds the country's multiple ethnicities together is the history of their struggle for freedom and collective opposition to the North. However, South Sudan's unity remains undefined: at independence, the country found itself with only a hazy notion of a collective national identity beyond its unified opposition to the North, making its viability as a nation a matter of speculation.<sup>66</sup>

Given the history of internal political rivalries along ethnic lines, the state's inability to deliver the highly anticipated peace dividends and the fruits of independence has further stalled nation-building. The following observations of a research participant highlight the tension between formal mechanisms of inclusion, such as the national dialogue, and the reality of power consolidation, where political agreements have often prioritized expanding the bureaucracy over genuinely fostering national cohesion:

Nation-building has been put on the back burner because of the intervening issues, such as the conflict, and it happens that the conflict coincided with ... other issues, such as the global economic crisis. Facing the conflict and lack of resources, the government could not easily move forward with nation-building efforts, but that's not to say there have not been any efforts in place. For example, in 2016, the government inaugurated the national dialogue process, bringing citizens on board to articulate what had gone wrong with the leadership and how that could be resolved, so that people could move forward with different aspects of development and stabilization programs. But with the new

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Yien Thieng Lony, *supra* note 60.

agreement being signed, the government was not forced to come back to the table and accommodate the opposition, except for the massive expansion of the government and the bureaucracy.<sup>67</sup>

Even more concerning is the discourse around the ethnic capture of the South Sudanese state, particularly by Dinka elites. Whether perception or reality, many non-Dinka South Sudanese, especially Nuer and Equatorians, believe that the government is dominated by the Dinka. This perception is reinforced by demographics: the Dinka are South Sudan's largest ethnic group, comprising roughly 40 percent of the population, while the Nuer, the second largest, make up about 16 percent. Dinka's demographic advantage is further amplified by their widespread settlement across several states.

The relationship between Dinka and Nuer is historically complex. Traditionally, these rival pastoralist groups competed over grazing land and water for cattle. Such local clashes rarely resulted in large-scale fatalities, but the proliferation of small arms during the civil wars and the broader militarization of South Sudanese society transformed these conflicts into increasingly predatory and deadly encounters. Khartoum's counter-insurgency strategies further exacerbated these tensions by exploiting hostilities among South Sudanese groups to weaken the SPLA, resulting in much of the wartime violence occurring between Dinka and Nuer communities.

The ethnicization of South Sudan's civil wars reached its peak in 2013, when President Salva Kiir and his former deputy Riek Machar mobilized their respective ethnic bases to commit mass atrocities against communities aligned with the other. Many Dinka elites also assert a sense of greater entitlement to the state, citing their disproportionate contributions to the SPLA's liberation struggle. This sense of primacy is reflected in the overrepresentation of Dinka in government and SPLM-IG leadership, which is widely perceived to translate into preferential access to national resources, government positions, and influence over language and policy decisions<sup>68</sup>.

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Augustino Ting Mayai, *supra* note 42.

<sup>68</sup> Jacob Dut Chol Riak and Santo A. Kuac (2025). 'Political Conflicts and Ethnic Cleavages in South Sudan: The Case of Dinka and Nuer'. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*. Volume-9, Issue-1, January-March-2025.

With regard to the Equatorians, the third-largest ethnic/regional group, their sense of marginalization is rooted in a precolonial political identity. They were part of the historic Lado Kingdom, which spanned areas of present-day South Sudan, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. As one Equatorian academic observed, “Since the founding of Southern Sudan, first as a region and later as a country, the Dinka tribe has continued to exercise absolute control and domination”, and “Dinka-led governments in South Sudan [do not] accept any system of governance which will not leave them in charge of leadership of the country, and this will inevitably push the Equatorians to opt to secede to form their own country.”<sup>69</sup>

Equatorians also feel that their substantial contributions to the first liberation movement (Any-Nya) have been overlooked. Consequently, many advocate for a federal arrangement based on the colonial-era administrative divisions of Upper Nile, Bahr el Ghazal, and Equatoria. Alan Boswell (2021) highlights the specificity of their demands:

The war in Equatoria does not fit neatly into the simplified narratives of South Sudan’s war as a power struggle for the center; nor will it be addressed by peacebuilding strategies built off those precepts. Most Equatorians, a collection of diverse minority ethnic groups, are fighting for more autonomy, local or regional, and a remedy to what is perceived as (primarily) Dinka hegemony.<sup>70</sup>

Non-Dinka South Sudanese are quick to highlight Dinka dominance in key government positions beyond the presidency. A case in point is the Director General of the Internal Security Bureau (ISB), General Akol Koor Kuc, who has overseen the rise of the notorious NSS into one of South Sudan’s most powerful state institutions. A research participant from the Dinka community states the realities on the ground:

The issue of Dinka domination is not a mere perception. It is very real, though it is difficult to talk about it openly. This is partly because the Dinka are the largest. They could even be a slim majority. They do not have to hide behind the rules so much. The evidence for Dinka domination would be to see the list of officers or key minister posts who are mostly Dinka, with one or two non-Dinka. They do not bother to hide it. This has flamed inter-

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<sup>69</sup> Benjamin Goro Gimba (2018). “Why Equatoria Region in South Sudan may opt to secede”. *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations*. Vol. 12(8), 155-166

<sup>70</sup>[https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/sr\\_493-conflict\\_and\\_crisis\\_in\\_south\\_sudans\\_equatoria.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/sr_493-conflict_and_crisis_in_south_sudans_equatoria.pdf)

communal tension. The Dinka are more armed because of their differential access to power; this is where the interface between political power and its dividends for communities close to power lies. And it feels unfair. Dinka cattle keepers are as armed as the army. That is where they get their arms from. This is not a coincidence. Then the dispute becomes not only anger against political arrangements at the national level, but it trickles down, or is perceived as such, at the local level in a tangible way. There are many minorities. However, the grand feud has been between the Dinka and the Nuer.<sup>71</sup>

While many Dinka may take the issue of “Dinka domination” for granted, citing both South Sudan’s demographics and the Dinka’s perceived greater contribution to the liberation struggle, others offer important nuances on how this dominance emerged and its implications for national cohesion:

... Nation-building ... involves a lot of national conversation, a lot of national bargaining, and approaches are different. Nation-building is an intergenerational project. But at the end of it, it is difficult to quantify what this Dinka domination is, but, of course, as the logic goes, democracy is an exercise in numbers. And in the context of Africa, which is predominantly fractured along ethnic lines that [is reflected] even in an election, a particular ethnic group might be well-positioned by nature to have some kind of demographic dominance. But then it becomes toxic if there is no vision, you know, directing the country and dealing with some of this, because there are instances where it is overlapped.<sup>72</sup>

Other research participants highlighted how South Sudan’s electoral system could further complicate nation-building and the protection of minority voices:

In terms of creating new avenues and new pathways for democratic representation outside the majoritarian approach, those [avenues] should be built into constitutions and electoral laws. In South Sudan, I have not seen that in the Constitution. It is my conviction and belief that the conventional approach of ‘winner takes all’ is

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<sup>71</sup> Research participants were interviewed on November 28, 2023.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Dr Majak D’ Agoôt, the former Deputy Chief of the Sudanese Intelligence and South Sudan’s Defence Minister and has formerly held the role of Senior analyst at the Changing Horizon Institute for Strategic Policy Analysis (CHI-SPA). December 4, 2023.

not helpful in a lot of ways. And this is not what democracy is all about. Democracy is about voices, whether you have a deep, deafening voice or you have a small voice, but that small voice is part of our voice, you know. It must be heard anyway. So, these are some of the challenges that need to be addressed<sup>73</sup>.

The International Crisis Group (ICG) has long argued along similar lines, emphasizing the need for a consensus-oriented rather than a majoritarian democracy, as majoritarian systems can fuel marginalization and undermine national cohesion. It suggests that if the December 2026 elections, the first since 2010, take place, South Sudan should avoid a pure ‘winner-takes-all’ model. To this end, ICG’s observations show that “power sharing in South Sudan normally happens ... through informal negotiations, but in practice, brinkmanship is expected in the run-up to the election by the losers to be accommodated, involving bargaining, violent and nonviolent acts, which take place as part of that.”<sup>74</sup>

ICG even recommends that constitutional or electoral reforms could guarantee representation for runners-up, whether parties or individual candidates, reducing the sense that elections are a zero-sum, majoritarian contest. This is especially critical in South Sudan, which represents an almost worst-case scenario for majoritarianism: the Dinka, estimated at 40–50 percent of the population, are close to or at a demographic majority<sup>75</sup>. Under a pure 50+1 system, there is little incentive for coalition-building, and other groups are likely to feel permanently marginalized. Such a scenario risks entrenching perceptions of Dinka domination and perpetuating ethnopolitical tensions<sup>76</sup>.

A functional ruling party might have managed this diversity, the original idea behind the SPLM, but that framework has largely collapsed. In a system based solely on 50+1 majorities, coalition-building is discouraged, and marginalized groups are left without meaningful avenues to influence national politics. This underscores the need for decentralization and a formalized power-sharing arrangement. While national elections are important to reinvigorate political institutions, local elections also matter deeply in South Sudan, where democratic traditions

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with a woman leader of a CSO, December 12, 2023.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with senior ICG researcher, March 30, 2025

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Alan Boswell, ICG Horn of Africa Project Director, January 5, 2024.

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/300-toward-viable-future-south-sudan>

at the community level remain strong and communities continue to elect their leaders.

#### **6.3.4 South Sudan's oily kleptocracy**

Oil was discovered in the then Sudan in 1999, most of which lies in present-day South Sudan. Under the CPA, the newly created Government of Southern Sudan (GoSS) received 50 percent of revenues from oil produced in the South, after a 2 percent allocation to the producing state and a deduction for an Oil Stabilization Fund. Upon independence in 2011, South Sudan retained 75 percent of the oil reserves formerly controlled by Sudan, though the North retained ownership of the pipeline to the Red Sea. This oil windfall dramatically boosted South Sudan's revenue, increasing it from USD 120 million in 2004 to USD 1.7 billion in 2006<sup>77</sup>.

Oil and democracy are often incompatible, particularly in countries that lack established democratic institutions before exploitation begins. A growing body of research has linked large oil rents to authoritarianism. Lucas I. Gonzalez, in his article *Oil Rents and Patronage*<sup>78</sup>, highlights the causal connection between abundant oil wealth and the consolidation of authoritarian rule. Oil rents allow governments to expand political machines through patronage and clientelism, buy political loyalty, and strengthen repressive apparatuses to suppress dissent. Simply put, oil gives authoritarian regimes the financial means to placate citizens, reducing incentives for democratization.

However, this relationship is not inevitable. Countries such as Norway and Canada have avoided the "resource curse" because robust accountability systems and democratic institutions ensure that oil wealth benefits society rather than entrenching authoritarianism. In contrast, authoritarian governments often nationalize oil industries, granting themselves exclusive control over highly valuable resources. This enables them to extract "rents", wealth derived not from productive activity, but from control over scarce resources, fueling patronage networks, repression, and kleptocratic governance. In South Sudan, this dynamic has been central to the emergence of a kleptocratic political order, where oil rents are monopolized by ruling elites rather than used for public development or democratic consolidation.

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<sup>77</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2011/01/the-comprehensive-peace-agreement?lang=en>

<sup>78</sup> L. I. González (2018). Oil rents and patronage: the fiscal effects of oil booms in the Argentine provinces. *Comparative Politics*, 51(1), 101-126.

Nondemocratic, oil-rich countries are far from being more prosperous; they are often more authoritarian, corrupt, and prone to violence. As Alex de Waal noted, in South Sudan, oil revenue has rapidly transformed the country into a political marketplace, where politics is increasingly monetized, providing the SPLA with the economic resources to consolidate and entrench its autocratic rule. The International Crisis Group (ICG, 2021) also highlighted the link between oil and autocracy:

The pot of oil revenues claimed by those atop South Sudan's system dramatically raises the stakes of holding power, accentuating the winner-take-all nature of South Sudanese politics. This centralized contest for oil money thus also obstructs the political reforms South Sudan so desperately needs, including the adoption of a more consensual form of national governance and devolution of authority and resources.<sup>79</sup>

President Kiir maintains a tight grip on the oil sector, around which he has built a powerful patronage network: "South Sudan's petroleum politics empower the elite most resistant to change. Kiir's government has spent the bulk of oil funds that did reach the budget on the military and the security sector, instead of building basic services that could alleviate the population's suffering."<sup>80</sup>

The link between oil and civil war is also evident in South Sudan. The 2013 civil war erupted when oil revenue dwindled following a dispute over the oil pipeline with Sudan, resulting in a shutdown and a scramble over scarce resources<sup>81</sup>. The March 2025 rift between Kiir and Machar is also partly related to the loss of oil revenue and fewer resources for the patronage politics ever since a civil war broke out in the Sudan that affected South Sudan's ability to export oil. South Sudan relies on oil for more than 90 percent of its government revenues, and the country depends entirely on Sudan to export the precious resource because of its dependence on the latter's oil pipeline.

Juba's kleptocracy is no longer adequately "oiled," prompting factions to compete over the limited revenue from the oil sector. The main faction of the governing elite, SPLM-IG, continues to control the oil through the National Petroleum Company, even though the Minister of Petroleum is from SPLM-IO. According to The Sentry, "South Sudan's state-owned oil

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<sup>79</sup><https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/south-sudan/305-oil-or-nothing-dealing-south-sudans-bleeding-finances>

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Jok, *supra* note 24.

company has been captured by predatory elites and was used to fund the country's civil war (2013-2018), including a government-aligned militia accused of human rights abuses” and “millions of dollars in oil revenue are being funneled from Nile Petroleum into the nation's national security service, footing the bill for the war.”<sup>82</sup> The report noted that more than \$80 million was paid in 2018 to South Sudanese politicians, military officials, government agencies, and companies owned by politicians and their families.

Numerous studies have documented the embezzlement of oil revenue through SPLM’s patronage networks orchestrated by President Kiir. As Alex de Waal observed,

President Kiir’s strategy for remaining on top of his diverse, fractious and quarrelsome generals, and other members of a kleptocratic elite, was a ‘big tent’ policy: he paid them all off by allowing them to steal from state coffers. Vast sums of oil money disappeared into private pockets or were recycled lower down the food chain into patronage payoffs.<sup>83</sup>

Despite South Sudan’s enormous potential for commercial agriculture, the country remains heavily dependent on oil, which continues to fuel patronage, conflict, and authoritarian rule.

### **6.3.5 The role of external actors**

While domestic conditions are unfavorable for democratization, external actors have often exacerbated civil wars and deepened political crises in South Sudan. Since independence, the country has been subjected to intense interference, particularly from its northern neighbor, Sudan. Grudgingly accepting the CPA, Khartoum actively sought to shape the outcome of the 2011 independence referendum by providing political and financial support to armed groups opposed to the SPLM. At the core of Sudan’s interest in South Sudan is the region’s oil wealth, which accounts for 75 percent of all reserves. For Khartoum, the CPA’s wealth-sharing provisions foreshadowed what might occur if South Sudan became

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<sup>82</sup><https://thesentry.org/2018/03/05/1862/associated-press-south-sudan-oil-money-corruptly-funds-civil-war-say-reports/>

<sup>83</sup> Alex de Waal (2016). South Sudan’s corrupt elite have driven a debt-free and oil-rich country to ruin. <https://sites.tufts.edu/reinventingpeace/2016/07/15/conflict-south-sudans-corrupt-elite-have-driven-a-debt-free-and-oil-rich-country-to-ruin/>

independent. Despite these interventions, the overwhelming majority of South Sudanese voted for independence<sup>84</sup>.

Relations between the two countries have since been marked by repeated conflict over the disputed oil-rich Abyei region, which was excluded from the 2011 referendum and has been administered by the UN peacekeeping mission, UNISFA. In January 2012, South Sudan shut down all its oil fields over a disagreement with Sudan regarding pipeline transit fees. Sudan demanded \$32 per barrel, which Juba considered “extortion,” while offering \$1 per barrel, still among the highest pipeline fees globally. These fees, agreed between Juba and Khartoum, were worth \$1–1.5 billion annually. When Sudan threatened to block the pipeline, South Sudan halted production, signaling its insistence on sovereignty over its resources.

Simultaneously, Juba signed a memorandum of understanding with Kenya to construct an alternative pipeline through Lamu Port. Ironically, this bold move hurt South Sudan’s economy more than Sudan’s, given the country’s extreme reliance on oil revenue. The dispute briefly escalated into a border war over Heglig, with South Sudan initially seizing the area before Sudan regained control. Oil production resumed after six months but was halted again in December 2013 with the outbreak of the civil war, only restarting after the 2018 peace agreement. Khartoum, with significant stakes in South Sudan’s economy, also interfered in the civil war, supporting Kiir while maintaining some connections with his rival, Machar<sup>85</sup>. The outbreak of civil war in Sudan in April 2023 and the continued destruction have further hurt South Sudan’s oil economy. The two warring factions of the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) led by General Burhan and the Rapid Sudan Forces (RSF) led by General Hemeditti have also interfered in South Sudan’s politics, each variously supporting either Kiir’s SPLM-IG or Machar’s SPL-IO.

Uganda played a similarly consequential role in South Sudan’s political conflicts, deploying 2,000 troops to support the government during the 2013 civil war. Uganda justified its intervention on the grounds of protecting its nationals, preventing state collapse, and responding to a formal request from Kiir. However, in practice, Kampala’s involvement emboldened the SPLM-IG, fostering a belief that military victory, or at least dominance, was achievable, rather than pursuing a negotiated

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<sup>84</sup> Is Sudan’s CPA being dishonored? [https://sudantribune.com/article/34137#google\\_vignette](https://sudantribune.com/article/34137#google_vignette)

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/26/south-sudan-shuts-oil-wells>

political settlement, thereby weakening IGAD's diplomatic pressure for political concessions. This dynamic directly contradicted the logic of mediation, which depends on a relative balance of power and the perception that no party can win outright. Uganda's military involvement has raised serious cross-border governance issues, and sovereignty itself has become highly negotiated. In effect, South Sudanese security is outsourced, and new forms of transnational governance are emerging beyond the state<sup>86</sup>. The Ugandan military is acting with impunity, at times even clashing with the South Sudanese Defense Force.

Other regional actors, including Egypt, Ethiopia, and Kenya, also had stakes in South Sudan. Cairo sought to secure its water rights over the White Nile while isolating Addis Ababa from regional hydropolitics. Nairobi, in contrast, aimed to enhance its diplomatic influence relative to Kampala and advance economic interests, particularly by promoting an alternative pipeline through Kenyan ports<sup>87</sup>. Neither EAC nor IGAD was able to broker a durable peace in South Sudan, as succinctly explained by a research participant:

What we are seeing in South Sudan is a regional stress test ... . The crisis has exposed the weakness of IGAD, arguably the weakest regional bloc in Africa. Peace processes have been driven by national interests rather than collective responsibility. The post 2013 Addis Ababa agreement failed, and after 2016, mediation shifted to Khartoum, where Machar was effectively coerced into compliance and has since been unable to operate freely. Despite this, the region maintains the fiction of a 'peace agreement,' even though one key signatory is confined belligerent, Ethiopia has retreated, and Kenya's role has waned.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Emanuel Louis, advisor with the Conflict Sensitivity Resource Facility, December 23, 2025.

<sup>87</sup> Lupus De Belo (2014). Ugandan intervention holds little hope for South Sudan conflict <https://theconversation.com/ugandan-intervention-holds-little-hope-for-south-sudan-conflict-22371>

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Emanuel Louis, *supra* note 86.

## **6.4 Prospects for Democratization in South Sudan**

South Sudan stands at a critical juncture, with the events leading up to the December 2026 elections likely to determine whether the country can embark on a genuine democratic transition or whether the current leadership will secure a renewed mandate to further entrench authoritarian practices. Amidst a generally bleak political landscape, there are nonetheless encouraging signs that democratic actors could leverage to advance South Sudan's complex tasks of state-building and nation-building, establishing a just and peaceful society, and consolidating democratic governance. The following sections highlight some of these positive developments and potential opportunities that could enhance the prospects for a democratic transition in the country.

### **6.4.1 The peace agreement is still holding**

Although a comprehensive peace agreement encompassing all parties to the conflict has yet to be achieved, as reflected in persistent communal violence and periodic clashes between armed groups and government forces, the R-ARCSS has largely been observed by its signatories. There have been no major breakdowns to date, an achievement in a context marked by repeatedly violated peace accords. The agreement has averted a return to the large-scale, pre-2018 confrontations, particularly between SPLM-IG and SPLM-IO, even though the detention of Riek Machar since March 2025 has significantly heightened the fragility of the peace. Nonetheless, R-ARCSS continues to function as the central frame of reference for national politics, and modest peace dividends are evident, including the gradual return of businesses and economic activity to Juba.

Sustaining and deepening this relative peace will require a genuine reconciliation process, measurable economic development, and the equitable provision of basic services. The coalition government (RT-GoNU), though often cumbersome and limited in effectiveness, nonetheless represents a power-sharing arrangement that could serve as a foundation for consensus-based democracy. Indeed, despite the stark power asymmetry between SPLM-IG and other political forces within the coalition, there is some hope among opposition actors that the 2026 elections could produce a more inclusive government, as SPLM-IG remains unpopular in certain constituencies where alternative parties are expected to perform strongly.

However, the current arrangement exhibits many characteristics of a negative peace. While open conflict has largely subsided, simmering

tensions persist both among the main warring factions and with groups excluded from the negotiations, such as the National Salvation Front and the South Sudan United Front. Strengthening political will, building mutual trust between SPLM-IG and SPLM-IO, and making peace processes more inclusive are urgent priorities. The lack of commitment to creating conditions conducive to a democratic transition remains one of the most significant obstacles to holding free and fair elections.

#### **6.4.2 Modest opening of the civic space**

Notwithstanding the prevailing repressive political climate, President Kiir has initiated two notable civic engagement processes: one before the peace agreement (the National Dialogue) and the other after the peace agreement (transitional justice consultations). When launching the National Dialogue (ND) in 2017, he explicitly assured that the “government will guarantee safety and freedom” for all participants, including those in opposition. Despite an atmosphere clouded by fear, consultations were held without major incidents. The dialogue lasted for four years (2016–2020). Although the ND lacked a concrete implementation plan, it significantly enhanced civic engagement in the political process, creating a democratic exercise in which citizens felt their voices mattered.

The outreach of the ND was impressive. More than 200 grassroots meetings were held, along with three regional conferences comprised of 300 to 400 delegates each, and consultations with over 1,200 refugees and diaspora members in neighboring countries. The national conference convened more than 520 delegates from South Sudan’s 79 counties. In total, over 20,000 South Sudanese participated in the dialogue –a level of civic engagement far surpassing other national political consultations in the country. During the November 2020 national conference, participants ranged from community leaders to farmers, women, youth, and religious figures, giving voice to broad segments of society<sup>89</sup>.

A notable feature of the ND was its space for open criticism and truth-telling. Citizens provided a remarkably candid assessment of South Sudan’s political condition and proposed measures for improvement. Dialogue resolutions addressed governance, the military, state formation, resource sharing, violence, elections, and reconciliation. Participants spoke frankly about leadership failures, dysfunctional institutions, rampant corruption, hate speech, ethnic violence, and impunity for human rights

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<sup>89</sup> <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/04/south-sudans-people-have-spoken-peace-anyone-listening>

violations. A consensus also emerged on adopting a federal system of government and introducing presidential term limits. The Commissioners even recommended that the two rival leaders, Kiir and Machar, step down to allow a peaceful transition of leadership, citing their involvement in atrocities and the potential for violent contestation of upcoming elections. Kiir rejected this recommendation, stating that the ND had “overstepped its mandate.” Nevertheless, the process produced an unprecedented record of public voice that can be leveraged to identify areas for future democratic support<sup>90</sup>.

Building on this, the government initiated another national process on April 5, 2022, with public consultations to inform the enabling laws for the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing (CTRH). Unlike the ND, Chapter V of the peace agreement mandates RT-GoNU to establish three transitional justice institutions: the CTRH, the Hybrid Court for South Sudan (HCSS), and the Compensation and Reparation Authority (CRA). CTRH is tasked with addressing the legacy of conflicts, promoting peace, reconciliation, and healing. The HCSS is an independent hybrid judicial body, established with the African Union Commission, to investigate and prosecute international crimes, including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and gender-based crimes, committed from 15 December 2013 through the end of the Transitional Period. The Court will also oversee reparations. The CRA is mandated to administer funds for compensation and support to victims of conflict-related destruction and assist in rebuilding livelihoods.<sup>91</sup>

The Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs established a Technical Committee to conduct public consultations from May 6 to June 2, 2022, covering 37 locations across South Sudan’s ten states and two administrative areas. The Committee engaged 3,080 men and 1,463 women (a total of 4,543) from diverse societal groups. The final report incorporated recommendations on the CTRH’s mandate, commissioner selection criteria, public participation, victim and witness protection, financing, and coordination with other mechanisms, including traditional justice systems. In May 2023, the government convened a conference to review progress on transitional justice mechanisms, draw lessons from regional experiences, and build consensus on draft bills to establish the

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<sup>90</sup> David Deng. ‘South Sudan’s other (more hopeful) peace process’.

<https://africanarguments.org//2021/06/south-sudans-other-more-hopeful-peace-process/>

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Augustino Ting Mayai, *supra* note 42.

CTRH and CRA<sup>92</sup>. In late 2024, South Sudan passed laws establishing the CTRH and CRA, but their implementation remains difficult, with civil society pushing for victim-centered approaches and international pressure mounting to operationalize the long-delayed Hybrid Court amid ongoing conflict and humanitarian crises.

As these state-driven processes have unfolded, government interests have dominated, undermining a truly people-centered agenda for reconciliation and transitional justice. Civil society organizations and development partners must safeguard these openings, as simultaneous engagement in peace and justice is critical for democratic consolidation<sup>93</sup>.

### **6.4.3 Prospects for democratic elections and constitution-making**

All eyes are now on South Sudan's upcoming election, scheduled for December 2026, the first since the 2010 polls. However, many observers doubt not only whether the election will take place, but also whether it could be free and fair. Most of the conditions for a democratic election, as stipulated in the A-ARCSS, remain unimplemented. These include essential democratic institution-building, such as an independent electoral commission, an autonomous judiciary, and countervailing institutions like a human rights commission; the unification of security forces; conducting a census; and, crucially, the adoption of a permanent constitution.

A central debate revolves around whether these conditions must be fully met before the election, or whether postponing the election until all conditions are satisfied risks giving the current government further opportunities to entrench its authoritarian control. One research participant highlighted this tension:

A range of issues would have to be addressed to bring about a democratic transition in South Sudan. Without a permanent Constitution in place, you do not have elections. The constitution-making process requires broader popular participation, and this is where civil society comes in. What we see today is that much of that is being run in Juba and largely by elites. So, where do the voices of the regular citizens as well as in civil society that are rooted within the population, feature in this? There's very little of that. Consultations are not happening because the government is

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<sup>92</sup> Interview with Jok, *supra* note 24.

<sup>93</sup> [https://www.un.org//sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/report/entrenched-repression-systematic-curtailement-of-the-democratic-and-civic-space-in-south-sudan/A\\_HRC\\_54\\_CRP.6.pdf](https://www.un.org//sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/report/entrenched-repression-systematic-curtailement-of-the-democratic-and-civic-space-in-south-sudan/A_HRC_54_CRP.6.pdf)

unable to produce the funds. You have the international community that is completely disillusioned with the government.<sup>94</sup>

An alternative explanation frames the forthcoming election not as a pathway to democratic transition but as a new instrument for SPLM-IG to retain power, marking a shift from what has been described as a “government of agreements” to a form of electoral authoritarianism. As one research participant observed:

South Sudanese politicians use peace agreements to extend their time in power. They push an agreement, stretch it to its limits, then let it collapse and replace it with another. That is why the SPLM government is called ‘the government of agreements’. But this time, the context is different. The first extension served Kiir’s strategy. At the time, figures like Machar and others were presented as reformers. But their performance, and the way state and IGAD-aligned media portrayed them, eroded that image. Many South Sudanese now see them as opportunists who leveraged popular grievances for personal gain. That shifted public sentiment. Now the president needs elections to gain legitimacy –not to govern better, but to legitimize continued extraction and control. The strategy now is a partial election. They claim that while general elections are not feasible due to population uncertainty, a presidential election is possible. That’s the direction they’re heading.<sup>95</sup>

From this perspective, elections are less about democratic renewal than about recalibrating legitimacy, using a tightly managed electoral process to entrench incumbency while preserving the underlying structures of power and resource extraction. A more optimistic perspective argues that South Sudanese should not get bogged down in debates over sequencing but instead make the best of what is possible. This view is reinforced by the possibility that the upcoming election could produce a genuinely democratically elected coalition government, in contrast to the current coalition, which was formed primarily out of political expedience and the imperatives of ending the civil war. Alongside this, concentrated pressure from the international community could help ensure a negotiated power-sharing settlement.

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<sup>94</sup> Interview with head of a South Sudanese think-tank, December 8, 2023

<sup>95</sup> Interview with Emanuel Louis, *supra* note 86.

We cannot afford to endlessly wait and postpone the election. Better an imperfect election than no election. An oversight over the electoral process will inevitably lead to a coalition government. War has made this a reality. SPLM-IG is not dominant in all areas. Some regions go to the opposition. We do not have the time and political will to generate consensus on the electoral system. We better go for the majoritarian system because, despite its disproportional power and greater resources at its disposal, SPLM is not going to win it all. We could still generate that consensus in the future, but not now. RT-GoNU is a functional coalition government, and the one that will come after the election is going to be an even more genuine coalition government. A coalition government is good for South Sudan because it creates the feeling among many groups of being represented.<sup>96</sup>

This perspective emphasizes pragmatism: even an imperfect election could strengthen representation, reinforce coalition politics, and provide an opportunity to expand democratic practices incrementally over time.

#### **6.4.4 Emerging democratic actors**

Traumatized by protracted civil wars and subjected to severe repression by a kleptocratic regime, the appetite for democratic action among ordinary South Sudanese citizens has been muted, including within the civil society community. Yet, amidst this subdued environment, there are encouraging signs of active engagement from various segments of South Sudanese society, particularly the youth.

South Sudan is young not only in its history as the world's newest independent country but also demographically: it has a median age of 19 years, with 72 percent of its population under the age of 30<sup>97</sup>. This sheer youthfulness makes young people a pivotal group in peace, conflict, and democratization processes. While youth have been at the forefront of the country's protracted civil wars, they have also been among the most affected. A UNDP study notes: "Regardless of by whom (opposition, government, or traditional leaders), South Sudanese youth feel they have been the object of continuous political exploitation. They also now feel they face the options of continuing to be exploited or of taking matters into their own hands (either by violent or peaceful means)."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Yien Thieng Lony, *supra* note 60.

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.edc.org/usaaid-south-sudan-youth-empowerment-activity#:~:text=>

<sup>98</sup> UNDP. 2020. Understanding youth subcultures in South Sudan: implications for peace and development.

Recognizing this predicament, South Sudanese youth have engaged actively in peace activism, particularly during the negotiations leading to the 2018 R-ARCSS peace agreement in Addis Ababa. In his study on the role of youth in the R-ARCSS, Patrick Godi (2018)<sup>99</sup> categorizes their engagement as participation “in the room,” “around the room,” “outside the room,” and in the digital public sphere.

*In the room*, youth representatives brought “new ideas, experiences and high energy to the negotiations.” A symbolic act exemplifying their influence was the hanging of a painting depicting a rolling carpet, representing the closure of South Sudan’s dark chapter of war, disease, hunger, human rights abuses, and killings, and the beginning of a new era of hope, peace, and development. Youth delegates exerted political and moral pressure on the warring parties, particularly during the early, intransigent phases of the negotiations. By building working relationships with actors both inside and outside the room, the youth effectively provided an information hub for the public, increasing transparency and accountability in the process. “Amplified voices of young South Sudanese prompted the political actors and negotiators to take young people’s issues seriously and commit to addressing them within the framework for peace.” This commitment was translated into formal inclusion of youth in the implementation phase of the peace agreement, symbolically reflected in their recognition as signatories. The process also achieved affirmative action for women, guaranteeing 35% representation.

*Outside the room*, the youth engaged through alternative formats, asserting strong ownership over the peace process. The South Sudan Civil Society Forum, for instance, ran a creative social media campaign using the hashtag #SouthSudanIsWatching, encouraging the public to act as peace observers and watchdogs. Another notable initiative, the youth-led movement #Anataban, established an e-delegate platform, a *virtual interactive space* where youth delegates provided updates on the peace process.

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<sup>99</sup> Patrick Godi (2018). The Role and Contributions of South Sudanese Youth in the Signing of the 2018 Peace Agreement.  
[https://jlfic.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Patrick-Godi\\_January-2023.pdf](https://jlfic.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Patrick-Godi_January-2023.pdf)

Youth peace activism has continued unabated after the peace agreement, focusing on the implementation of its key provisions. The energy and mobilization exhibited by young people during the peace process have contributed to setting a national peace agenda and creating a broad peace constituency. This exemplary youth engagement offers a powerful resource that can be leveraged to support democratization, particularly in the lead-up to the December 2026 elections and beyond.

There is also a budding South Sudanese women's movement that has been active in the peace process. Although the RT-GoNU has enhanced women's political representation through measures such as a 30% quota, these provisions do not extend to the forthcoming elections, as there is no legal obligation for political parties to ensure minimum participation of women. Instead, women's rights advocacy is being driven by a younger generation of committed women activists, who are pushing for greater space for their voices, not only in parliament but also at peace negotiation tables and in addressing pervasive gender-based violence exacerbated by conflict. Protecting this advocacy is critical, especially given emerging generational divisions and leadership rivalries.

As one of the authors of the research report *"Breaking Barriers – Empowering Women in Peace Mediation for Lasting Peace in South Sudan"* (2023) noted:

In 2013, there was no women's rights organization, but now it is full of women networks and academics. When the fighting started again [2016], the women were the ones who pushed the warring parties to come together. And then they were pushed out of the dialogue, but they forced their way in. As a result, many women networks were signatories of the 2018 peace agreement. Unfortunately, there are signs of division between the older and younger generations of women leaders. The Women's Bloc, for instance, is split between two leaders, one side recognized and supported by IGAD. The reasons for the split range from political differences to personality differences. But there are other networks that are really pushing. ... The pre-CPA generation became part of the government, and most of them have already been co-opted. The post-CPA generation is more assertive and speaks out, very brave. They are in their mid-20s and early 30s. Most are angry and fed up. Some openly say enough is enough. There is so much potential for peacebuilding and democratization. ..."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Interview, December 15, 2023.

This testimony highlights both the promise and the challenges of women's engagement in South Sudan. The post-CPA generation of women leaders represents a vital force for peacebuilding and democratization, yet they must navigate entrenched patriarchy and intra-generational tensions to assert their influence effectively.

Despite formidable challenges, South Sudanese women activists have employed key strategies to secure inclusion in the peace negotiations and ensure their priorities are recognized. These strategies included collaborating across organizational lines to identify common interests, physically attending peace talks, or, when excluded, holding side meetings to influence the official discussions, finding champions for women's movements within local, regional, and international institutions, and leveraging policy and legal instruments to prioritize women's issues in peace mediation. A series of consultations convened by the Eve Organization, for instance, led to the creation of the South Sudan Women Coalition for Peace, which eventually became one of the signatories of the R-ARCSS. This coalition was deliberately inclusive, bringing together more than 50 women's organizations from across South Sudan and the region. Lopidia (2019)<sup>101</sup> credits the coalition with "opening up the space for women organizations to take part in the revitalization process as direct negotiators and as a technical support team, improving coordination between the women activists and other groups."

Professional associations and think tanks are also emerging as important democratic actors. While South Sudan's professional associations are not yet as vibrant as those in neighboring Sudan, there are promising developments. The South Sudan Law Society (SSLS), founded in 1994 and based in Juba, is a key example. During the second civil war (1983–2005), it was at the forefront of rights advocacy. It has continued to influence governance, notably advocating for the release of political detainees as part of the 2018 peace agreement and their inclusion as SPLM-FD in RT-GoNU. The SSLS manages programs in legal aid, paralegal training, human rights awareness, and capacity-building for legal professionals, traditional authorities, and government institutions<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>101</sup> Rita M. Lopidia. *South Sudanese Women at the Peace Table Violence, Advocacy, Achievement and Beyond*.  
[http://www.zambakari.org/uploads/8/4/8/9/84899028/11\\_south-sudanese-women-at-the-peace-table.pdf](http://www.zambakari.org/uploads/8/4/8/9/84899028/11_south-sudanese-women-at-the-peace-table.pdf)

<sup>102</sup> Interview with the head of a think tank, November 19, 2023.

Think tanks are also playing a crucial role in democratization. The Sudd Institute and the Ebony Centre for Strategic Studies stand out as credible institutions. The Sudd Institute conducts research and training to inform public policy, stimulate debate, and improve analytical capacity, aiming to promote a more peaceful, just, and prosperous South Sudan. Similarly, the Ebony Centre undertakes policy studies across areas including institutional strengthening, oil and gas, and financial sector development. Both prioritize constructive critique and alternative policy solutions. As the Director of the Sudd Institute noted:

What is urgently needed is the establishment of a regional network of think tanks. There ... the Southern Voices Network, supported by the Wilson Centre, which is not very active. Over the years, we have published more broadly on democracy and rule of law. The key issue is not about philosophical or theoretical niceties regarding what democracy is and is not, but about getting our hands together and saving lives and livelihoods. ... Instead of a Hobbesian scenario, they do something to keep going. This needs to be coherently recorded. That is what think tanks should focus on.<sup>103</sup>

There are also positive developments in financial accountability. Donor pressure, particularly from the IMF, has led to the introduction of an accountability matrix for public finance. Loans are now disbursed under mechanisms that ensure monitoring and oversight, unlike the early years of independence when funds flowed freely into kleptocratic networks. As a research participant explained:

That has created some semblance of accountability. The government is now saying, 'Yeah, things are bad, but we're doing the best we can to make sure that a new system is instituted.' That has been happening since 2020, with the public financial management system involving the South Sudanese government, civil society, and the international community. So far, the money is still disappearing –from non-oil to oil revenues. There are leakages all over the place, and individuals are drawing from the

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<sup>103</sup> The Southern Voices Network for Peacebuilding (SVNP) is a network of 22 African policy, research, and academic organizations that works with the Wilson Center's Africa Program to attain the most appropriate, cohesive, and inclusive policy frameworks and approaches for achieving sustainable peace in Africa.

public coffers for their own benefit. Yeah, there's a little bit of effort in place, but corruption is still a problem<sup>104</sup>.

These examples demonstrate that, despite persistent challenges, women activists, professional associations, think tanks, and incremental reforms in financial oversight are emerging as critical groups who are actors towards democratization. These actors are indeed capable of supporting South Sudan's democratization and institutional development.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Unresolved tensions in South Sudan within the ruling elite, weak and personalized institutions, and the absence of a shared national vision produced a violent power struggle that plunged the country into conflict. In this sense, South Sudan represents a unique and tragic case of state failure occurring before institutional statehood and democratic governance could be consolidated, severely undermining prospects for peace, nation-building, and democratization.

Major international and regional indices show that South Sudan's performance is consistently at or near the bottom in global ranking. This dismal record is attributable to the absence of institutional foundations, leadership crises, and the persistence of SPLA's autocratic norms during both wartime and post-conflict governance. SPLM leadership is characterized as a violent kleptocracy, unable to translate the immense sacrifices of the population into a meaningful democratic transition.

These challenges are intertwined with the structural obstacles to democratization that include institutional vacuum, the limits of donor-driven state building, factional politics under a rebel organization in power, a flawed nation-building project, the resource curse that nurtures kleptocracy and the effect of various regional actors. External interventions focused on technical fixes without meaningful capacity transfer, reinforcing institutional weaknesses. SPLA/M carried autocratic norms from the liberation struggle into post-CPA governance, and internal divisions triggered recurring civil wars. Oil dependency entrenched elite capture and weakened accountability, while discriminatory practices and marginalization undermined national unity. Regional interference further exacerbated conflict, prolonging peace processes and deepening the human toll.

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with head of a civil society organization. December 20, 2023.

Despite persistent challenges, there are some developments that provide entry points for democratic progress. The 2018 Revitalized Peace Agreement among major political actors continues to hold, offering a framework, albeit limited, for stability; and a modestly expanded civic space has enabled important national processes, including the national dialogue, which, even without a fully developed implementation framework, represents a participatory democratic exercise. Efforts to establish transitional justice mechanisms and strengthen the legal framework signal potential progress toward reconciliation in a deeply polarized and traumatized society. Although critical conditions of the peace agreement remain unmet, such as a permanent constitution, unified security forces, and a national census, South Sudan is preparing for the first national elections in 2026 since its independence. Encouragingly, new democratic actors are emerging, including youth peace movements, women’s rights organizations, professional associations, and policy-oriented think tanks, which are contributing ideas, advocating reforms, and holding authorities accountable.

Key among interventions to support democratization in South Sudan include the need for renewed and principled international engagement at this critical juncture, coupled with a shift away from conventional externally driven “capacity-building” programs toward problem-driven, iterative, and adaptive approaches to state-building. A more inclusive peace process is also needed that brings into the fold political actors previously excluded from the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in South Sudan (R-ARCSS). Strengthening democratic institutions is central, particularly through an inclusive constitution-making process and electoral reform, including a move from winner-takes-all systems to proportional representation. Equally important is advocating for the implementation of outcomes from the national dialogue, establishing participatory transitional justice mechanisms, and reforming the oil sector to ensure transparency, accountability, and broader public benefit. If pursued consistently, these interventions could lay the foundation for a more peaceful, just, and democratic South Sudan.

Democratization in South Sudan indeed faces formidable challenges. Years of civil conflict, fragmented political authority, entrenched ethnic divisions, weak institutions, and a history of authoritarian governance have severely constrained the development of inclusive political processes. Civic and political spaces remain limited, and the dominance of military and elite interests continues to undermine state-building, nation-building and democratization.

At the same time, there are cautious opportunities for progress. Peace agreements, transitional governance structures, and ongoing international engagement offer potential entry points to strengthen institutions, promote accountability, and expand political participation. However, these prospects are fragile. Without sustained commitment from both domestic actors and external partners, democratization efforts risk being derailed, potentially exacerbating insecurity and social fragmentation. The future of democracy in South Sudan will thus depend on the ability to balance power-sharing, institutional reform, and reconciliation in a deeply divided and conflict-affected society.

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## Chapter 7

# The Strains of Somaliland's Hybrid Democracy

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### Introduction

This chapter examines democratization in Somaliland which presents a distinctive and often overlooked democratic experience in the Horn of Africa despite or because of its complicated status as a de facto state. Since declaring independence from Somalia in 1991, it has developed a relatively stable, locally rooted system of governance that blends modern democratic institutions with customary authority.

At the core of Somaliland's democracy is a hybrid political system. Formal institutions –an elected president, a parliament (House of Representatives), and multiparty elections– operate alongside traditional clan-based structures, most notably the House of Elders. This hybrid system, among others, serves as a second parliamentary chamber that has played a crucial role in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and political mediation, especially during the post-war period, thereby lending legitimacy and stability to the political order. As such, democracy in Somaliland is best understood not as an ideal-type liberal concept, but as a

context-specific, negotiated political order. Its relative success lies in its ability to adapt democratic principles to local realities, even as it continues to grapple with the issues of inclusion, institutional reform, and long-term sustainability.

Despite these achievements, Somaliland's democracy faces significant challenges and contradictions. Electoral delays, executive dominance, and the extended mandates of institutions, particularly the House of Elders, whose members are unelected, raise concerns about accountability and democratic depth. Under the constitution, the members have six-year terms, but in reality, the first House of Elders has continued to extend its term. Clan influence, while stabilizing, can also limit inclusivity, especially for women, youth, and marginalized groups. Moreover, restrictions on political parties and civil society periodically strain democratic freedoms.

The analysis proceeds in five sections. Section 7.1 situates Somaliland within its historical and political context, tracing its evolution as an anomalous *de facto* state. It examines the colonial legacy, the brief period of independence in 1960, the voluntary union with Somalia, and the subsequent collapse of the Somali state in 1991. The section highlights how Somaliland's withdrawal from the union and its reconstruction through locally driven peace processes produced a functioning political order without international recognition. By foregrounding this history, the section establishes the foundations upon which Somaliland's distinctive statehood and democratic trajectory have been built.

Section 7.2 analyzes Somaliland's hybrid democracy, which combines clan-based traditional governance with formal electoral institutions. This model was exemplified by the peaceful transfer of power from the Somali National Movement (SNM) to civilian rule in the early 1990s. Institutionally, it rests on a bicameral parliament composed of the House of Elders (*Guurti*) and an elected House of Representatives, with the *Guurti* playing a key legislative and peacebuilding role. Business elites and the diaspora have also been central to state formation and democratization. This hybrid system emerged from the strength of traditional institutions under British indirect rule, the SNM's reliance on domestic resources due to limited external support, and the absence of international recognition and large-scale aid, which forced ongoing negotiation between state and society. These dynamics reflect broader theories of democratization that emphasize a balanced distribution of power between state and societal actors as essential for democratic consolidation.

Section 7.3 analyzes the key challenges to democratization in Somaliland, focusing on the growing dysfunction within its hybrid democratic model. Although clan elders were central to peacebuilding in the 1990s, their autonomy has since been eroded through co-option, while the *Guurti* has retained disproportionate influence, often undermining democratic accountability through mandate extensions and unelected, hereditary membership. Democratic inclusion also remains limited, particularly for women and occupational minorities. Democratization has been further weakened by majoritarian, winner-takes-all politics, rising external finance, and Somaliland's growing geopolitical significance, which have heightened zero-sum competition, encouraged autocratic tendencies, and contributed to electoral delays and securitization of politics. Finally, uneven commitment to the Somaliland project across clan lines, especially between Isaaq and non-Isaaq communities, has generated competing political identities, perceptions of marginalization, and insurgencies, eroding the negotiated and inclusive foundations of Somaliland's nascent democratic order.

Section 7.4 presents Somaliland's performance in democratic indices. Often praised as an oasis of stability in one of the world's most conflict-prone regions, Somaliland's post-1991 efforts in peacebuilding, state-building, and democratization represent a unique political, social, and cultural experiment in the Horn of Africa. While lack of international recognition complicates formal assessment, existing measures of democracy and civil liberties rank Somaliland as "partly free," often second only to Kenya in the region, an enviable position compared to its neighbors. Between 2001 (when the constitution was adopted) and 2025, ten elections (four presidential, two parliamentary, and four local council) have reinforced democratic gains and fostered citizen and civil society participation. However, the gradual erosion of consociational elements in its hybrid democracy and the rise of autocratic tendencies, particularly since the 2017 election, threaten its reputation as a stable and democratic polity. The rise of secessionist movements in recent years is partly connected to this democratic deficit.

Section 7.5 examines current trends in Somaliland, followed by a conclusion. The analysis in the section includes the election in 2024, the challenges in nation-building (including conflicts and border issues) and the geopolitical tension that affects the pace of its international recognition.

## 7.1 Somaliland as an Anomalous Political Entity: The Journey to a De Facto State

Located in the northwest of the Horn of Africa at the junction of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, Somaliland is inhabited by people who are part of the wider Somali cultural nation. The territory of Somaliland is divided between three main clans: the Dir in the western region (Gadabursi and Issa), the Isaaq in the central region and the Darood (Dhulbahante and Warsangali) in the eastern region. The Isaaq clan is the largest and holds most political power<sup>1</sup>.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Somali inhabited territories of the Horn of Africa region were divided into five parts: Italian Somaliland (Southern and Northeastern Somalia); British Somaliland (Somaliland); French Somaliland (present-day Djibouti shared with the Afar); Northeast Frontier District (Northern Kenya), and the Somali region of Ethiopia. Somaliland's colonial history dates to 1887, when local clans signed protection treaties with Britain amid concerns over Ethiopian expansion under Emperor Menelik II. Britain's interests in the region were limited, viewing it primarily as a strategic supply zone for its base in Aden rather than as a site for deep colonial investment. The protectorate was established to secure trade routes, curb the slave trade, and prevent foreign intervention, earning Somaliland the nickname "Aden's butcher's shop" for its role in supplying meat to Aden. British administration remained largely confined to the coast, creating a colonial experience markedly different from the more interventionist Italian rule in southern Somalia<sup>2</sup>.

The first political election in Somaliland took place in February 1960, when a Legislative Council was formed under British colonial administration. On 26 June 1960, British Somaliland gained independence as the State of Somaliland and was recognized by thirty-four United Nations member states. After five days as an independent state, Somaliland voluntarily unified with the Trust Territory of Somalia (former Italian Somaliland) on 1 July 1960 to form the Somali Republic. The decision to unite was made by the Legislative Council and reflected the broader

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nationalia.info/profile/62/somaliland>

<sup>2</sup> Abdi Ismael Samatar (1989). *The State and Rural Transformation in Northern Somalia (1884-1986)*. The University of Wisconsin Press

political project of “Greater Somalia,” which sought to bring all Somali-speaking territories in the Horn of Africa under a single nation-state.<sup>3</sup>

The independence constitution of the Somali Republic, approved by referendum in 1961, established a parliamentary system of government. Somalia experienced nearly a decade of parliamentary democracy, widely regarded as producing Africa’s first peaceful democratic transfer of power. The 1960 constitution, which remained in force until the military takeover in 1969, guaranteed most of the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including multiparty elections, universal suffrage, and freedom of political association.

Despite these democratic foundations, growing rivalry among political elites, declining national cohesion, and widespread corruption gradually weakened state institutions. As public demand for change intensified, the military seized the opportunity to intervene. In 1969, General Mohamed Siad Barre overthrew the civilian government of President al-Rashid Mohamed and Prime Minister Haji Ibrahim Egal, who would later become Somaliland’s second president, and established a military dictatorship that lasted until his violent overthrow in 1991.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the Republic of Somalia’s fledgling democracy, tensions within the union surfaced early, particularly in the former Somaliland, which increasingly experienced political and economic marginalization. At independence, southern Somalia, centered on Mogadishu, was significantly more developed than Somaliland. Italian colonial rule in the south had involved direct administration, investment in infrastructure, and the establishment of settler agriculture, while British rule in Somaliland was minimal and largely indirect<sup>5</sup>.

Following unification, power-sharing arrangements in the new Somali Republic disproportionately favored the south. Mogadishu remained the capital, the south held roughly two-thirds of parliamentary seats, and both the presidency and prime ministership were occupied by southern elites. Italian remained the administrative language, and key state institutions were geographically and politically distant from Somaliland. In the

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<sup>3</sup> Stig Jarle Hansen and Mark Bradbury (2007). “Somaliland: A New Democracy in the Horn of Africa?” *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 34, no. 113, 2007, pp. 461–76. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20406419>. Accessed 15 May 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed Ali M Khayre, Somalia: An Overview of the Historical and Current Situation (April 27, 2016). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2771125> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2771125>

<sup>5</sup> <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2024/06/27/somalia-and-somaliland-a-complex-relationship-in-the-horn-of-africa/>

absence of adequate transport links between north and south, access to public-sector employment and state resources for northerners was severely limited. As a result, Somaliland quickly became a marginalized region within the Somali Republic.<sup>6</sup>

Somaliland's political elite nonetheless played a prominent role in post-independence Somali politics, and the leaders of political parties in today's Somaliland were previously senior civil servants or influential politicians within the Somali state. In its early years, Siad Barre's military regime initially attracted some support from northerners, partly due to its reformist "scientific socialist" ideology and its revival of the Greater Somalia project, which had been abandoned by the civilian government in 1967<sup>7</sup>.

Over time, however, northern grievances toward the union intensified as Somali society came increasingly under the control of the military junta. Barre's regime criminalized expressions of clan identity, banning family names and promoting the use of the title *jaalle* (comrade) as part of its campaign known as *Dabargoynta Qabyalaadda* (the elimination of tribalism). While officially aimed at fostering national unity, these policies deepened alienation in the north and coincided with the regime's aggressive pursuit of the Greater Somalia agenda, further exacerbating tensions between Somaliland and the Somali state.<sup>8</sup>

Barre's ambitions to realize the Greater Somalia project were decisively crushed when Somalia suffered a devastating defeat at the hands of Ethiopia in the Ogaden War (1977–1978). The loss triggered a rapid decline in both the regime's popularity and the national economy. In the war's aftermath, approximately 250,000 refugees, mostly ethnic Somalis from Ethiopia's Ogaden region, were resettled in northern Somalia, largely among Isaaq communities, intensifying local tensions<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> David Laitin (1976). "The Political Economy of Military Rule in Somalia". *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3

<sup>7</sup> Dominik Balthasar (2018). "State Making in Somalia under Siyad Barre: Scrutinizing Historical Amnesia and Normative Bias". *International Journal of African Historical Studies* Vol. 51, No. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Suhaib Mohamoud (2023). 'Understanding the Succession of Somaliland. History of the Formation and Failure of the Somali State (1960-1991)'. *Almuntaq*, vol. 6, N.1, pp. 8- 26.

<https://almuntaqa.dohainstitute.org/en/issue012/Documents/Almuntaqa-6-1-2023.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.faf.ae/ /home/2025/2/10/how-did-the-ogadani-refugees-contribute-to-the-tensions-leading-to-the-isaaq-genocide>

The defeat shattered Somali nationalism, which Barre had relied upon as a unifying ideology to suppress clan rivalries and mask deepening inequalities. The Ogaden War proved a critical turning point, not only sealing the political fate of Siad Barre but also accelerating the processes that led to state collapse. Deeply shaken by the defeat and fearing a military coup, Barre responded with extreme repression, executing an estimated forty senior military officers, a move that ultimately created a self-fulfilling prophecy of instability and further weakened the regime.<sup>10</sup>

The first armed opposition movement to challenge the Siad Barre regime was the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), led by Abdullahi Yusuf. Although disgruntled military officers launched rebellions in both the south and the north, Barre increasingly relied on his own Darood clan for political survival, further deepening clan-based exclusion. In Somaliland, political disaffection was reinforced by persistent socio-economic marginalization, culminating in the formation of the Somali National Movement (SNM) in London in 1981<sup>11</sup>.

As several Somaliland scholars have noted<sup>12</sup>, the emergence of the SNM was not initially driven by a singular traumatic event, and the movement remained weak and lacked broad popular support for much of the 1980s. Its political fortunes changed dramatically in 1988, following a peace agreement between Ethiopia and Somalia. Under the terms of the agreement, Barre withdrew support for the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF) in exchange for Ethiopia's commitment to expel the SNM. Anticipating its expulsion, the SNM crossed into Somaliland before the agreement was implemented and launched surprise attacks on government targets in Hargeisa and Burao, marking the beginning of sustained armed insurgency in the north.

Barre responded to the SNM insurgency with indiscriminate airstrikes and heavy artillery, targeting civilians he perceived as sympathetic to the rebels and leveling roughly 90% of Hargeisa<sup>13</sup>. Estimates of the death toll vary, ranging from 50,000 to 100,000, with some reports claiming up to 200,000 civilians were killed. The military campaign also displaced hundreds of thousands, creating at the time the world's largest refugee camp along the Ethiopian border. Humanitarian organizations have

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Markus Hohene, April 28, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Markus Hoehene, Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Marleen Renders (2012). "The Emergence of the Somali National Movement as a Clan-Supported Opposition Force". In: *Consider Somaliland*. Brill.

<sup>13</sup> Crisis Group, "Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership," *Africa Report*, no. 110, 23/5/2006, accessed on 28/4/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/30YCqUL>

referred to these events as the “Hargeisa Holocaust” and the “Dresden of Africa.”<sup>14</sup> A 2001 UN-commissioned investigation into past human rights violations in Somalia concluded that acts of genocide were committed against the Isaaq population<sup>15</sup>.

The atrocities in Hargeisa and Berbera were pivotal in consolidating support for the SNM, particularly among the Isaaq clans. By 1989, the SNM had established control over much of northern Somalia. In the south, other armed movements, including the United Somali Congress (USC) and the Somali Patriotic Movement (SPM), also challenged Barre’s rule, ultimately forcing him to flee to Nigeria on 16 January 1991. Shortly thereafter, on 18 May, the SNM declared the secession of the north, while the rest of Somalia descended into a protracted civil war among competing factions. Somalia thus became a paradigmatic “failed state,” providing Somaliland with a key reference point to justify its claim to independence<sup>16</sup>.

In February 1991, SNM leaders engaged northern clan elders to negotiate a ceasefire with other militias and secure local consent for SNM political authority. This process culminated in the Grand Conference of Northern Clans in Burao (April–May 1991). At the conclusion of the conference, Somaliland declared its independence, encompassing six regions largely aligned with clan territories: Sahl, Marodi Jeh, and Togdheer inhabited by the Isaaq; Awdal by the Gadabursi and Issa; and Sanaag and Sool by the Darod clans of Dulbahante and Warsengeli.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mohamed Haji Ingiriis (2016), “We Swallowed the State as the State Swallowed Us: The Genesis, Genealogies, and Geographies of Genocides in Somalia.” *African Security*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 237-258

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Mark Bradbury, a leading scholar on Somaliland history and politics. Addis Ababa, November 14, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



The Hargeisa massacre fueled deep resentment among Somaliland's population, particularly the Isaaq clan, generating popular pressure on the SNM to pursue independence. Within the SNM leadership, secession was not initially the dominant agenda, but the collapse of the Somali state in Mogadishu made the risk of southern violence spilling north undeniable. Consequently, the SNM declared Somaliland's independence, with Abdirahman Ali Tuur appointed as its first president. Despite these developments, the region's lack of international recognition has left Somaliland in the anomalous position of a de facto state.<sup>18</sup>

In its first two years as a de facto state, Somaliland was highly unstable, with various clan militias vying for power amid the SNM's inexperience in governance. In 1992, clashes erupted in Berbera and Burao between the two main Isaaq sub-clans, the Habar Yunis (Garhajis) and Habar Awal, after President Tuur attempted to create a national military to disarm militias. The resulting struggle over the control of Berbera Port and other key infrastructure mirrored the warlord conflicts in southern Somalia. The October 1992 Sheikh Clan Conference ended the fighting in Berbera and set guiding principles for a broader peace conference in Boorama, establishing a framework for formalized clan participation in governance.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Markus Hohene, *supra* note 10.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

The January–May 1993 Boorama Clan Conference consolidated both a peace charter and a national charter for Somaliland. The charters established a bicameral legislature, with an elected House of Representatives and a non-elected House of Elders (Guurti), alongside an elected presidential executive and an independent judiciary. The peace charter also mandated the disbandment of all militias and the surrender of their weapons to the government. Boorama marked the transition from SNM rule to civilian administration: nearly two-thirds of the 150 delegates voted President Abdirahman Ali Tuur out of office, and Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal became Somaliland’s second president, with Abdirahman Aw Ali (Gadabursi) appointed vice president in a transitional government. This peaceful transfer of power from a rebel movement to civilian rule was unprecedented in Africa, contrasting sharply with experiences in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, South Sudan, and elsewhere, where former insurgent groups often retained political dominance and a sense of vanguard entitlement.<sup>20</sup>

This anomaly was possible in part because the SNM lacked governance experience, raising fears that Somaliland might follow the violent trajectory of southern Somalia, as the clan conflicts of 1991–1993 suggested. At the time, traditional authorities (clan elders) wielded greater peace-making capacity than the SNM and pressured it to transfer power to the experienced non-SNM politician, Mohamed Haji Ibrahim Egal. Egal had served as Somaliland’s first Prime Minister during its brief five-day independence in 1960, as the Somali Republic’s Prime Minister in 1960 and again from 1967–1969, and later became President of Somaliland from 1993 until his death in 2002, succeeded by Vice President Dahir Rayale. Egal’s leadership was crucial in stabilizing the nascent state, guiding it through a tense and uncertain early period.<sup>21</sup>

In May 2001, Somaliland held a constitutional referendum in which around 97 percent of voters ratified the constitution, formally establishing a multiparty system. The first municipal and national elections were held between 2002 and 2005. In April 2003, the first presidential election was held, returning incumbent Dahir Rayale Kahin by a thin margin. The second presidential election in June 2010 saw Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo defeat Kahin. In November 2017, Silanyo’s term ended, and Musa Bihi

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<sup>20</sup> Walls Michael (2009). “The Emergence of a Somali State: Building Peace from Civil War in Somaliland.” *African Affairs*, vol. 108, no. 432.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Moustafa Ahmed, researcher with the Rift Valley Institute and former researcher with the International Crisis Group (ICG), Hargeissa, November 13, 2023.

Abdi was elected president with an outright majority in elections praised by international observers as generally orderly and peaceful, despite minor flaws<sup>22</sup>.

Somaliland has long hoped that successive peaceful and democratic elections would secure international recognition as a sovereign state<sup>23</sup>. While the Horn of Africa has seen the recognition of Eritrea and South Sudan, Somaliland has been consistently denied recognition, partly due to concerns about exacerbating Somalia's state fragility. Unlike Eritrea and South Sudan, whose secessions were backed by the former "mother states" (Ethiopia and Sudan, respectively), in the absence of such backing from Somalia, Somaliland has relied on its argument for recognition based on colonial borders and political continuity. From its perspective, Somaliland did not secede but restored sovereignty, invoking its distinct history as a British protectorate and brief independence in 1960, albeit recognized internationally for only five days.<sup>24</sup>

## 7.2 Somaliland's Hybrid Democracy

### 7.2.1 Major features

Somaliland's political system is often described as a "hybrid democracy." Hybrid political orders are defined by the coexistence of socio-political structures rooted both in indigenous, non-state institutions and in formal state systems. Such arrangements can be particularly effective and legitimate because they leverage the multiplicity of existing political orders rather than imposing a single model<sup>25</sup>. This approach highlights the importance of customary and other non-democratically legitimized institutions, which often play critical roles in specific contexts and can deliver effective local governance. As Tobias Hagmann and Markus Hoehne note, scholars trained in state-centric disciplines struggle to imagine governance without the state, yet in practice, alternative actors often perform core state functions in areas abandoned by formal

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<sup>22</sup> S. Hansen and Mark Bradbury (2007). "Somaliland: A New Democracy in the Horn of Africa?" *Review of African Political Economy*, 34 (113).

<sup>23</sup> 'Brief Timeline of Events', *When There Was No Aid: War and Peace in Somaliland* (Ithaca, NY, 2020; online edn, Cornell Scholarship Online, 17 Sept. 2020)

<sup>24</sup> Mark Bradbury, *et al.* (2003). "Somaliland: Choosing Politics over Violence." *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 30, no. 97.

<sup>25</sup> V Boege, M. Brown and K. Clements (2009). "Hybrid Political Orders, Not Fragile States". *Peace Review*, 21(1).

institutions<sup>26</sup>. This perspective challenges Eurocentric assumptions that equate the state with the necessary foundation for sociopolitical order.<sup>27</sup>

What makes Somaliland's political system a hybrid democracy is the coexistence of clan and party politics, traditional authorities, and democratically elected leaders. The 1993 Boorama conference and national charter established a two-tier legislature: an elected House of Representatives, a non-elected House of Elders (Guurti), an elected presidential executive, and an independent judiciary. The first Guurti had seventy-five members selected along clan lines and was tasked with national security, conflict resolution, and the protection of customary law and Islamic values. Its initial mandate included demobilizing clan militias, overseeing local security councils and police forces, and incorporating them into a national police system.

Decisions at Boorama were based on consensus rather than majority vote, a process that lasted over five months but ensured legitimacy and durability<sup>28</sup>. The 2001 constitution formalized the Guurti as the Upper House of Parliament. Clan elders have been central to Somaliland's stabilization and peacemaking, giving the polity a uniquely peaceful character<sup>29</sup>. Over time, the Guurti also gained influence in electoral politics, reflecting its dual role as both a traditional and political institution.

Electoral politics in Somaliland was institutionalized in 2001 with the ratification of the constitution, marking a transition from selected to elected representation in four stages. In May 2001, a plebiscite approved the constitution, establishing the framework for a democratic political system. This was followed by district council elections in December 2002, the formation of three national parties, presidential elections in April 2003, and elections to the House of Representatives in September 2005. International observers generally considered these elections free and fair<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.somalilandlaw.com/somaliland\\_national\\_chartercha.htm](http://www.somalilandlaw.com/somaliland_national_chartercha.htm)

<sup>27</sup> Tobias Hagmann and Markus V. Hoehne (2007). "Failed State or Failed Debate? Multiple Somal Political Orders within and beyond the Nation-State", in: *Politorbis. Zeitschrift zur Aussenpolitik*, 42, 20-26.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Philips (2016). "When less was more: external assistance and the political settlement in Somaliland". *International Affairs*, Volume 92, Issue 3.

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.somalilandlaw.com/body\\_somaliland\\_constitution.htm](http://www.somalilandlaw.com/body_somaliland_constitution.htm)

<sup>30</sup> A. Y. Aboker et al (2006). "Further steps in democracy". *The Somaliland parliamentary elections*. London: Progressio.

The constitution limits the number of political parties to three, encouraging cross-clan collaboration and national platforms. Of the six political organizations that fielded candidates in the 2002 district elections, UDUB (United Democratic People's Party), Kulmiye (Unity Party), and UCID (Justice and Welfare Party) emerged as accredited national parties, a licensing process unique to Somaliland<sup>31</sup>. Parties are prohibited from forming along regional or religious lines; they must include representatives from all regions and cannot pursue Islamist or religious agendas. For example, in 2012, the government banned a religious cleric from establishing a party, Xisbullah, to contest local elections<sup>32</sup>.

In all three presidential elections, UDUB, the party founded by the late President Mohamed Ibrahim Egal and later led by Dahir Rayale Kahin, maintained a dominant role, winning the 2003 presidential race by a narrow margin, holding the largest share of district council seats, but losing its parliamentary majority. These competitive dynamic highlights Somaliland's hybrid democracy, which fosters high levels of political contestation. The second presidential election, held in June 2010, saw Kulmiye candidate Ahmed Mohamed Mohamud Silanyo defeat Kahin, followed by the November 2017 election in which Kulmiye's Musa Bihi Abdi became president<sup>33</sup>.

Overall, Somaliland's national government is a unique hybrid, combining a US-style presidency, a British-style bicameral legislature, and traditional Somali clan leadership. The lower house and the president are directly elected, while the upper house (the Guurti) comprises traditional clan elders, with the National Charter establishing the executive, judiciary, and bicameral legislature<sup>34</sup>.

A central feature of Somaliland's democratic project is its close link to the pursuit of international recognition. Successive governments have sought to demonstrate that Somaliland is both peaceful and democratic,

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Mark Bradbury, *supra* note 16.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Dr. Abdirhaman Usman Gaas, Program Manager, The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) Somaliland Office, Hargeisa, November 11, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Dominik Helling (2010). "Tillyan Footprints Beyond Europe: War-Making and State-Making in the Case of Somaliland." *St Antony's International Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Secession, Sovereignty, and the Quest for Legitimacy, pp. 103-123.

<sup>34</sup> Nicholas Eubank (2011). "Taxation, Political Accountability, and Foreign Aid: Lessons from Somaliland". *The Journal of Development Studies*, March 2011, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1621374>

frequently contrasting itself with the violently collapsed Somali state to the south. As a senior Somaliland politician noted:

Somaliland has numerous political, security and economic challenges. Still, it was able to maintain a stable polity in the Horn of Africa, holding multiple democratic elections. The 2020 parliamentary elections were observed and commended by international observers. However, there is growing discontent with the democratization process. We had to democratize to get recognition and to show we are a beacon of stability in the region. However, the achievement wasn't rewarded by the international community.<sup>35</sup>

This statement underscores how Somaliland's commitment to democracy is both a domestic governance project and a strategic tool in its quest for formal statehood.

### **7.2.2 Conditions for the emergence of Somaliland's hybrid democracy**

Somaliland's political trajectory is notable for its hybrid democracy, shaped by its British colonial past, which preserved local clan structures and allowed traditional authorities to guide the post-1990s political order<sup>36</sup>. In contrast, Italian colonial rule in southern Somalia disrupted local institutions. After unification in 1960, post-colonial elites and later President Siad Barre's socialist regime marginalized traditional structures. Yet, northern clan elders continued to mediate disputes, laying the foundation for Somaliland's hybrid system.

The Somali National Movement (SNM) built on this legacy, integrating clan-based governance with modern state institutions. Its peaceful transfer of power to a civilian government under Muhammad Haji Ibrahim Egal in 1993 was exceptional regionally and globally. As SNM veterans note, the movement's internal political culture of participation and accountability directly informed Somaliland's democratic institutions, making the transition from armed movement to civilian governance a cornerstone of its enduring hybrid democracy<sup>37</sup>.

The absence of substantial external interference was another critical factor in shaping Somaliland's hybrid democracy. Unlike neighboring

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Dr. Mohammed Usman, political advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hargeisa, November 15, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Annalisa Urbano (2017). A "Grandiose Future for Italian Somalia": Colonial Developmentalist Discourse, Agricultural Planning, and Forced Labor (1900–1940). *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 92, pp. 69-88

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Seid Shukuri Hussein, an SNM Veteran, Hargeisa, November 15, 2023.

insurgent movements, such as the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in Eritrea, the TPLF in Ethiopia, or the SPLA in South Sudan, which relied heavily on foreign backing, the SNM depended primarily on domestic resources. Although Ethiopia and Libya offered limited assistance, SNM remained largely self-reliant. External actors even pressured it to merge with other anti-Barre groups under a unified Somalia, but the SNM instead mobilized local communities through clan networks, particularly among the Issaq, who provided leadership, recruits, and funding for the insurgency, especially in the wake of the Hargeisa massacre.<sup>38</sup>

The origins of the current Guurti trace back to 1988–1989, when prominent Issaq elders gathered in Cadaroosh, near the Ethiopian border, to declare support for the SNM. These elders mediated leadership disputes within the SNM, including conflicts over the chairmanship and tensions between the chairman and the executive committees. By successfully resolving such disputes, the Guurti became the SNM's de facto conflict-resolution body. In 1990, the SNM held a grand conference in Baligubadle (60 km southwest of Hargeisa) and drafted a charter, with Article 2 formally recognizing a role for the Guurti. Within the movement, the Guurti became an equal partner to the Central Committee, the SNM's legislative organ, helping to broaden the movement's popular mandate beyond its core Issaq base and incorporating representatives from all Somaliland clans<sup>39</sup>.

Shortly before and after Somaliland's declaration of independence in January 1991, traditional authorities across the northwest actively engaged in local conflict resolution, laying the foundation for social and political reconstruction. The SNM-Guurti was subsequently expanded to include non-Isaaq clan representatives and institutionalized at the Borama clan conference in 1993. Today, political competition with Puntland has further reinforced the relevance of clan leaders in border regions, where traditional authorities continue to wield significant influence in governance and local conflict management.<sup>40</sup>

As Sarah Phillips observes, “the interclan conferences that took place in Somaliland between 1991 and 1997 were the most important forums in which north-western elites negotiated the rules of Somaliland's formal

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Markus Hoehne (2015). *Between Somaliland and Puntland. Marginalization, militarization and conflicting political visions*. <https://www.eth.mpg.de>

political system. It was at these conferences that the frameworks for national security, political representation, and the constitution were established.”<sup>41</sup> The participants drew on existing norms and practices, while granting each clan autonomy and responsibility within its territory. These traditional norms and practices include: proportional representation for clans (beel), xeer (customary law and mediation), consensus over majority voting, and xalaydhalay (forgiving complex or catastrophic injustices where compensation could not be calculated).<sup>42</sup> Yet, they applied these traditions in innovative ways, creating new structures of authority. Central to all the conferences was the overriding aim of shielding Somalilanders from the violence engulfing the rest of Somalia; all other objectives were secondary to that goal<sup>43</sup>.

The sizeable Issaq diaspora played a crucial role in funding the SNM insurgency and the broader independence movement. The Issaq business elite also emerged as a powerful societal force, supporting independence while fiercely defending its economic interests. British indirect colonial rule had facilitated the formation of this elite during the commercialization of pastoralism, and Berbera evolved into a key hub for transnational livestock trade from the Horn of Africa to the Gulf. The Barre regime’s nationalization of northern livestock markets, particularly in Berbera, prompted export traders to provide significant financial assistance to the SNM, funding both the clan conferences and the transitional government<sup>44</sup>.

At the same time, the business elite resisted the emergence of a strong state that might interfere with their trade: “Separation from Mogadishu and limitations on Somaliland state power are both in the very interest of the dominating traders. To secure these economic interests, much effort is invested into keeping state power marginal.”<sup>45</sup> This appears to be a balancing act, keeping the state functioning but not too strong. This tension manifested in conflicts over strategic economic assets<sup>46</sup>. The 1991–1993 struggle over the port of Berbera, dubbed the “sheep war” after a livestock

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<sup>41</sup> Sarah Philips, *supra* note 28.

<sup>42</sup> Michael W, ‘The Emergence of a Somali State’. *supra* note 20

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Mark Bradbury, *supra* note 16.

<sup>44</sup> A. Musa and C. Horst (2019). “State formation and economic development in post-war Somaliland: the impact of the private sector in an unrecognized state.” *Conflict, Security & Development*, 19(1).

<sup>45</sup> Tabea Zierau (2003). State Building without Sovereignty: The Somaliland Republic. *Dans Mondes en développement*. De Boeck Université, vol. 123(3), pages 57-62. <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-mondes-en-developpement-2003-3-page-57?lang=en>

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

convoy, and the 1994 clash over Hargeisa airport, the “airport war,” were both economically motivated, involving trade monopolies and control over revenue streams<sup>47</sup>. In each case, negotiation led to compromise: the business elite gained protection and greater political representation, while the government secured port and airport revenues. These dynamics illustrate how SNM’s reliance on domestic resources forced successive Somaliland governments to remain accountable to societal forces such as traditional authorities and business elites, shaping the country’s distinctive hybrid democracy<sup>48</sup>.

Somaliland has also inadvertently benefited from neglect by the international community. In this regard, Sarah Philips states that “[t]he dearth of external interest in Somaliland’s wars gave its people the time and political space to establish locally responsive and contextually appropriate (though not necessarily inclusive) governance institutions”, while such “space was not available to other Somalis, who instead had to contend with a multitude of often conflicting political patrons, sources of revenue, and normative expectations about what a peaceful Somali state should look like.”<sup>49</sup>

As a research participant observed:

One of the major factors ... was the entity’s willingness to provide a stable and democratic alternative to chaotic and violent Somali political groups. Somaliland refused to take part in any reconciliation conference for Somali political actors. Over the years, Somaliland capitalized on the success of elections and peaceful transfer of power. One term I usually hear is ‘indhihii caalamka ayaa na eegaya’ - the world is watching us.<sup>50</sup>

Neglect by external actors created a rare window for Somalilanders to build institutions tailored to their social and political realities. By focusing on locally grounded governance and consistently demonstrating democratic credibility, Somaliland positioned itself as a stable, self-reliant polity in contrast to the broader violence and fragmentation in Somalia. The conscious pursuit of a peaceful, democratic path, coupled with

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Mark Bradbury, *supra* note 16.

<sup>48</sup> Tobias Gandrup (2016). Enter and exit: everyday state practices at Somaliland’s Hargeisa Egal International Airport. Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS WP, 2016:3.

<sup>49</sup> Sarah Philips, *supra* note 28, p.6

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Moustafa Ahmed, *supra* note 21.

international scrutiny, became a central driver of its political legitimacy and institutional resilience.

Lack of international recognition and exclusion from global financial institutions has meant that, throughout its existence, and particularly during its first decade or so, the governments of Somaliland have been more reliant on their ability to access internal revenue than governments in most developing countries. The independence discourse assigns meaning to that lack of external intervention, particularly the notion that it made Somalilanders more self-reliant and that, as a result, the peace that they forged is more resilient than it might otherwise have been.

However, this discourse is Janus-faced: it portrays autonomy from the international system as a source of strength while simultaneously pursuing recognition, leveraging the image of a peaceful and democratic polity to gain legitimacy and support abroad. In other words, Somaliland's self-reliance is both a practical necessity and a strategic narrative, highlighting resilience internally while appealing for validation externally<sup>51</sup>.

The specter of war and the urgent need to nurture peace are central to Somaliland's national identity, within which its hybrid political order is situated. Among societal forces and political actors alike, peace is widely regarded as a national public good and the foundation of political legitimacy. This resonates with Charles Tilly's thesis on war and state formation, but with a distinct twist. The European states Tilly examined achieved stronger extractive capacity, more effective institutions, and greater government accountability through continuous warfare, as societal actors cooperated with the state in exchange for negotiating power. This also echoes Rustow's theory of democratic transition, which emphasizes a dynamic struggle between state and societal forces.

In Somaliland, however, the role of war in state formation played out in two unique ways. *First*, the construction of national identity relies heavily on the reference to a violent "other", i.e., Southern Somalia, where the state collapsed amid protracted conflict. Somaliland has, in contrast, defined itself as a peaceful and democratic polity through constant comparison to this violent neighbor. As in many identity constructions, the Somaliland self is relational: its self-understanding is shaped less by intrinsic traits than by contrasts with those considered different. As Sarah Philips observes:

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<sup>51</sup> Sarah Philips. *supra* note 28, 629–645

References to peace are everywhere. The title of the national anthem is ‘Long Life with Peace’ (Samo ku waar). Peace is mentioned six times in the Constitution, which designates it as the basis of the national political system while defining the protection of the peace as one of the president’s constitutional responsibilities. But a preoccupation with peace tells of an intimacy with war.<sup>52</sup>

*Second*, Somaliland’s history itself is marked by violence, which continues to inform its political order. The trauma of the 1988 Hargeisa massacre, along with subsequent inter-clan conflicts and clashes between clan-based militias and government forces, underscores this point. Struggles over critical infrastructure, such as the battles for Hargeisa airport and Berbera port, mirror the contests over resources and authority that characterized southern Somalia, yet in Somaliland, these conflicts were largely resolved through negotiation, compromise, and incorporation of societal forces into governance.

The quest for peace and stability is deeply embedded in Somaliland’s hybrid democracy, creating a convergence of values among otherwise disparate political actors and societal forces. As one observer notes, “it is not the dual institutions of the state and clan which produced Somaliland’s relative stability but rather the spectre of violence.”<sup>53</sup> For instance, businesses paid taxes not because of the coercive capacity of state institutions but because the government framed peace as a precondition for commerce.

The post-2003 electoral crisis exemplifies this dynamic. Kulmiye’s candidate, Ahmed Mohamed Silanyo, lost the presidential race by a mere 80 votes. Rather than challenge the results, he conceded, prioritizing the preservation of peace, a central pillar of political legitimacy in Somaliland. Dahir Rayale of the UDUB party was declared the winner, while the other candidate, Faisal Ali Warabe, similarly accepted the outcome, adhering to norms of nonviolent contestation embedded in the independence discourse<sup>54</sup>. This discourse functions both as a political asset and a liability: it underpins civil order, particularly among the Issaq, whose loyalty to Somaliland is broadly unquestioned, but has also produced communities in north-eastern and southern regions, whose commitment to an independent Somaliland may be aligned with external interests such as Puntland or Somalia.

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<sup>52</sup> Sarah Philips, *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Mark Bradbury, *supra* note 16.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

### 7.3 Somaliland in Democratic Indices

Somaliland has been widely praised as an oasis of stability in one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world, largely avoiding the state collapse and civil war that engulfed southern Somalia. Its post-1991 efforts in peacebuilding, state-building, and democratization constitute a unique political, social, legal, economic, and cultural experiment in the Horn of Africa. However, the lack of international recognition has made it difficult to comprehensively evaluate the quality of Somaliland's hybrid democracy. Nevertheless, in the assessments conducted by international organizations on democracy and civil liberties, Somaliland has performed well, often ranking just below Kenya in the region and earning the designation of "partly free", a distinction that contrasts sharply with its other neighbors, which have consistently received lower ratings. Since 1991, Somaliland has conducted ten elections – three presidential, two parliamentary, and four local council elections – strengthening democratic institutions and fostering active participation among citizens, civil society, and political actors.

It is not only Somaliland's electoral process that is hailed as exemplary. Unlike neighboring countries, where ruling parties often secure more than 95 percent of parliamentary seats, Somaliland's elections are more competitive and tightly contested. In the 2017 presidential election, for example, Muuse Biixi of Kulmiye received 55.1 percent of the votes, Cabduraxmaan Cirro of the opposition Wadani garnered 40.73 percent, and Faysal Cali Waraabe of UCID obtained 4.17 percent, with a voter turnout of 80.32 percent<sup>55</sup>. In the 2024 election, Cabduraxmaan Cirro won by 60 %, whereas the incumbent Biixi lost by 34.5 %.

Somaliland's electoral system is also distinctive<sup>56</sup>. While it follows a majoritarian framework, elections do not conclude with the announcement of a winner; political negotiation continues into the selection of the president's cabinet. For much of Somaliland's history, both victors and defeated parties have negotiated inclusive cabinets to ensure representation of all clan constituencies<sup>57</sup>. As such, Somaliland has witnessed multiple

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.saferworld-global.org/multimedia/somaliland-decides>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.electionguide.org/elections/id/3031/>

<sup>57</sup> Moustafa Ahmad. Somaliland: Retreating from the Edge.

<https://somalilandchronicle.com/2024/05/02/somaliland-retreating-from-the-edge/>

peaceful transfers of power. However, this level of political inclusivity and negotiation has not always been consistent throughout its history<sup>58</sup>.

Somaliland has also been at the forefront of integrating technology into its electoral processes. For the first time in its history, and among the first globally, biometric technology, in the form of iris scanners, was deployed during the November 2017 presidential election to reduce instances of multiple voting<sup>59</sup>. The May 2021 parliamentary and local district elections further strengthened Somaliland's democratic credentials. These elections, considered a robust illustration of Somaliland's theoretical case for international recognition, unfolded peacefully and were judged free, fair, and credible by South Africa's Brenthurst Foundation<sup>60</sup>. In a significant outcome, the two opposition parties – the Somaliland National Party (Waddani) and the Justice and Welfare Party (UCID) – won a majority of the parliamentary seats, marking the first parliamentary election in 16 years. The International Crisis Group (ICG) hailed the process as “a milestone on Somaliland's road to democratization, despite years of delays, revealing both the strength of Somaliland's democratic culture and the limits of efforts to include under-represented constituencies in high-level politics.”<sup>61</sup>

The graph and table below, sourced from V-Dem Democracy, indicate a positive trend in democratization in Somaliland. V-Dem's democracy indices show that electoral democracy in Somaliland has improved since it declared independence in 1991, with a marked increase following the country's first elections in 2003. Since then, Somaliland's scores have consistently remained above the East African regional average.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Ken Menkhaus (2006). Governance without Government in Somalia.

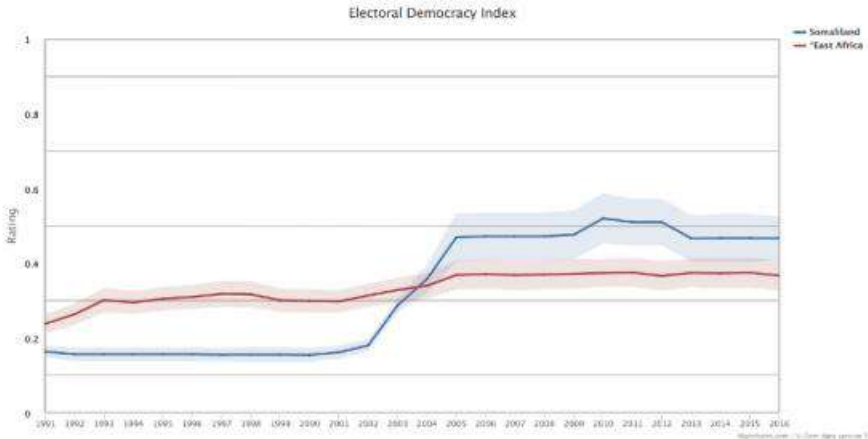
[https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/is3103\\_pp074-106\\_menkhaus.pdf](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/is3103_pp074-106_menkhaus.pdf)

<sup>59</sup><https://www.africanews.com/2017/11/14/somaliland-is-first-in-the-world-to-use-iris-biometric-voting-system-hi-tech/>

<sup>60</sup><https://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org/publications/report-of-the-brenthurst-foundation-somaliland-election-monitoring-mission/>

<sup>61</sup><https://www.crisisgroup.org/horn-africa/somaliland/b174-building-somalilands-successful-elections>

<sup>62</sup>[https://v-dem.net/weekly\\_graph/presidential-elections-in-somaliland](https://v-dem.net/weekly_graph/presidential-elections-in-somaliland)



V-Dem Democracy Indices (14th edition), 2023/2024

Somaliland’s past democratic successes were not inevitable and cannot be guaranteed. Indeed, the erosion of the consociational elements of Somaliland’s hybrid democracy and the steadily growing autocratic tendencies, particularly since the 2017 election, have threatened to undermine its much-touted status as a “beacon of stability” and a model for democratic institution-building. The 1991–1993 political settlement is gradually unravelling, with political violence increasingly replacing the democratic dispensation. Recent scholarship has emphasized a discernible turn toward authoritarianism, contrasting with earlier studies that celebrated Somaliland’s unique experiment in hybrid democracy. As one study notes:

While democracy has been demanded and fought for from below since it declared independence in 1991, original findings unveil how cross-border oligarchic–corporate networks, linked also to the Djiboutian patron state, as well as dependence on trade and security rents, have restricted democratization, leading to the formation of an ‘oligopolistic state’ and a ‘peaceocracy’<sup>63</sup>.

This observation highlights how structural shifts such as reliance on external patronage and entrenched elite networks have limited the scope of democratization. It also underscores that Somaliland’s stability has been shaped less by broad-based institutionalization and more by elite-driven arrangements that prioritize order over participatory governance. Somaliland’s human rights organizations and media activists further

<sup>63</sup> Claire Elder (2021). “Somaliland’s authoritarian turn: oligarchic–corporate power and the political economy of de facto states. *International Affairs*, Volume 97, Issue 6, November 2021

corroborate this trend, noting a contraction of civic space alongside increasing human rights violations. As a human rights activist explains:

Illegal detention and arrest, crackdown on freedom of expression and protests are on the rise. For instance, in 2022, 23,278 people were arrested for demonstrations criticizing the government. The list included members of political parties and journalists. The current political situation in the Sool region is resulting in restrictions on political and human rights. The police and the parliament don't respond to our reports to investigate accusations of violence and torture. We get threats on social media from government officials, and police brutality is on the rise. The state-run Human Rights Commission isn't independent and is highly politicized. People have more confidence in clan systems and protections than formal institutions to deal with human rights issues. But the clan issue is a two-way street. It may protect you from human rights abuses but also protect you from accountability<sup>64</sup>.

This testimony reveals how both formal and informal institutions are failing to safeguard basic rights, illustrating a tension between clan-based protection mechanisms and state accountability. While clan systems offer a degree of social protection, they simultaneously reinforce structural impunity, highlighting the fragility of democratic norms in Somaliland.

The shrinking civic space is also evident in the media sector, where political polarization and insecurity have intensified pressures on journalists. One journalist involved in the research observes:

Political polarization and insecurity have increased the crackdown on journalists. The Las Anod conflict has heightened government sensitivity. Clan leaders and politicians have strong influence over the media, and despite relative freedom, the number of media outlets and their ownership is limited. There are only three independent newspapers, 13 television stations, and one government-owned radio station in Hargeisa. The government is very sensitive about allowing radio stations; it maintains a monopoly. Access to information has always been problematic, and the government rarely provides information to the media. We are witnessing a visible increase in intimidation, including threats to families in the case of investigative reporting. Seventeen

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Yasmin Omar H. Mohamoud, Chairperson at Somaliland Human Rights Centre, Hargeissa November 16, 2023.

journalists were detained by 2023. The current political deadlock and conflict could consolidate authoritarian features of the ruling party. The lack of consensus between the ruling party and the opposition could further undermine media space. Prolonged social mistrust and widening social cleavages are reflected in polarization within the media<sup>65</sup>.

This statement demonstrates that media repression in Somaliland is both structural and political, with constraints on ownership, access, and reporting, reflecting growing authoritarian tendencies. The journalist's account also links broader political deadlock and social polarization directly to the shrinking media space, suggesting that democratic backsliding is not only institutional but also societal.

Together, these observations paint a picture of a hybrid political system under stress. While Somaliland retains elements of democratic practice, the entrenchment of elite networks, rising human rights violations, and media repression point toward a gradual consolidation of authoritarian features. The combination of structural constraints, elite dominance, and weakening oversight suggests that the country's earlier reputation as a model of stability and democracy may be increasingly precarious. In the following section, key challenges to the viability of Somaliland's hybrid democracy are examined.

## **7.4 Key Challenges to Somaliland's Hybrid Democracy**

Somaliland stands at a crossroads regarding the sustainability of its distinctive hybrid democracy. The consensus-based political model that has long underpinned its governance is showing signs of unraveling. While some challenges stem from the original institutional design, others have emerged in response to shifting domestic sociopolitical dynamics and evolving regional and geopolitical contexts.

### **7.4.1 Dysfunctional features in Somaliland's hybrid democracy**

Somaliland's hybrid democracy has struggled to maintain a stable balance between its traditional and modern elements. Markus Höhne uses the analogy of a seesaw to describe the fluctuating power relations between these two constitutive elements - traditional, clan-based politics and formal state institutions: "Using the analogy of a seesaw, one can make the general argument that as state or formal institutions become more powerful,

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Ismael Ahmed, Executive Secretary of the Somaliland Journalists Association, Hargeisa, November 16, 2023.

informal actors become weaker, and vice versa. In between there is a moment of balance.”<sup>66</sup>

In the early stages of Somaliland’s political evolution, traditional authorities were dominant. This included both the SNM-Guurti and other clans not directly involved in the SNM. The Issaq Guurti played a crucial role during the armed struggle, especially after the SNM evolved into a mass resistance movement following the aerial bombardments of Hargeisa in 1988. During this period, all clans exercised significant influence, collectively guiding Somaliland’s bottom-up processes of peacebuilding and state formation<sup>67</sup>.

Clan elders, organized through the Guurti, played a central role in Somaliland’s state formation and the success of the Somali National Movement (SNM) against the regime of Siad Barre. Initially, Issaq elders mobilized grassroots support, resources, and fighters for the SNM while also mediating internal leadership disputes within the movement, effectively acting as a conflict-resolution body. In 1992, clan elders organized the Sheikh Conference, which produced a declaration aimed at strengthening peace and reconciliation and initiated militia disarmament. This process culminated in the Boorama Grand Conference in 1993, where representatives from all major clans agreed on a national charter that formally recognized the Guurti as the upper house of parliament and endorsed an inclusive, power-sharing political model.

The elders also ensured that Somaliland avoided a winner-takes-all outcome after the SNM’s military victory. Instead, they promoted broad clan inclusion and facilitated the peaceful transfer of power from the SNM leadership under Abdirahman Ahmed Ali Tuur to a civilian government led by Muhammad Haji Ibrahim Egal. By mediating disputes, disarming militias, and fostering reconciliation, traditional authorities laid the foundation for Somaliland’s hybrid, consensus-based political system and bottom-up state-building process<sup>68</sup>. The Guurti governance model has gradually been co-opted into the executive branch, compromising its original role as a check on presidential power. After its institutionalization in 1993, members of the Guurti increasingly aligned with the government. President Egal skillfully used a combination of incentives and pressure to influence the elders, and he leveraged several internal, and at times partly

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<sup>66</sup> Interview, April 28, 2024.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with Hohene, *supra* note 10.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Mark Bradbury, *supra* note 16.

armed, conflicts in the mid-1990s to divide the Guurti, ultimately consolidating the government's authority.

The creation of the new government structure marked the beginning of the political marginalization of clan elders as independent, pivotal actors. Nevertheless, some Guurti members, particularly its chairman, Sheekh Ibraahim, retained significant influence, able to hold the president and cabinet accountable. His death in 2004 left a noticeable gap in the political landscape, and his successor, Saleebaan Gaal, lacked the same charisma and authority. As a result, from the early 2000s onward, “the previous agents of the traditional system no longer provide input legitimacy through consultation, consensus building, and reaffirmation of authority, since they have been either sidelined or co-opted into a state machinery of quasi-institutionalism.” The transformation reflects a broader shift in Somaliland's hybrid democracy, in which traditional mechanisms of accountability and social legitimacy have been weakened by their incorporation into formal state structures.<sup>69</sup>

The Guurti, as institutionalized at the clan conference in Boorama in 1993, initially comprised 75 members. At a subsequent conference in Hargeisa in 1997, this number increased to 82, with the newly added members largely “hand-picked” by President Egal (1993–2002). While these top-down decisions about representation in the Guurti are generally expected to need the approval of the local constituencies of the traditional authorities, the practice increasingly concentrated influence in the hands of the executive<sup>70</sup>.

According to Article 58 of Somaliland's Constitution, members of the Guurti are supposed to be elected one year after the elections of the lower house, the House of Representatives. However, over the last two decades, the Guurti has faced growing criticism. There has been a steady loss of elders with traditional experience and leadership. Experienced members often leave due to illness or death and are frequently replaced by closely related family members, creating a pattern that resembles a dynastic chieftaincy. As a result, nearly half of the Guurti now consists of young men under 40 who lack experience in either traditional authority or state governance. This generational shift has made it increasingly easy for the

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<sup>69</sup> Markus Hohene (2013). ‘Limits of hybrid political orders: the case of Somaliland’. *Journal of East African Studies*, 7(2). 199-217

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/cmt/africa/somaliland/somalilands-guurti-sparks-crisis>

government to influence the Guurti, using both inexperienced and elderly members to extend election timelines and consolidate executive control.<sup>71</sup>

As Markus Höhne notes:

The hybrid political order of Somaliland has outlived its success. What is left now is an imbalanced and, in many regards, ‘crippled’ hybrid. It threatens democratic progress and undermines the authority and legitimacy of the state institutions as well as the leading traditional authorities in the region. In an imbalanced hybrid political order, either the traditional or the state system dominates.<sup>72</sup>

Initially, in Somaliland, traditional authorities led the process of peacebuilding and state formation. However, the government gradually assumed control, increasingly subordinating the traditional authorities. The result is what Höhne describes as a “crippled hybrid,” in which neither state institutions nor traditional structures function effectively, and each undermines the other. Democratic processes are hindered, and the legitimacy of traditional authority is weakened.

Despite this weakening, the Guurti has continued to play a significant, albeit negative, role in electoral politics, particularly through delays in elections and extensions of presidential term limits. For example, through manipulations of the Upper House and claims of “national emergency,” President Kahin’s term, which officially ended in early 2008, was prolonged until May 2010<sup>73</sup>. Similarly, President Siilaanyo’s official term ended in early 2015 but was extended by over two years through comparable mechanisms. Most recently, in October 2022, the Guurti extended not only the president’s term but also their own, prolonging their tenure by another five years. These developments illustrate how the co-opted Guurti and the executive have reinforced each other, consolidating power while undermining both democratic accountability and traditional legitimacy. The “crippled hybrid” thus reflects the structural vulnerabilities of Somaliland’s once-celebrated consensus-based system.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somaliland/b174-building-somalilands-successful-elections>

<sup>72</sup> Markus Hohene, *supra* note 69.

<sup>73</sup> [https://www.sciencespo.fr/~ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/OAE\\_05\\_18.pdf](https://www.sciencespo.fr/~ceri/sites/sciencespo.fr.ceri/files/OAE_05_18.pdf)

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Sacad Mohammed, Somaliland analyst for the International Crisis Group (ICG), November 17, 2023.

Somaliland's hybrid democracy is also inherently exclusive of certain segments of society, particularly women and occupational minorities. Politics in Somaliland remains overwhelmingly male-dominated. While a few women hold ministerial positions, female representation in the Lower House is minimal. Women are largely excluded from the Guurti; one woman briefly "inherited" her husband's seat in 2012 but was later pressured to cede it to a male relative. Although the Lower House agreed to a ten percent quota for women, the Guurti refused, arguing that, according to the constitution, everyone should have the same opportunity. The very term *Guurti* denotes male elders, reflecting the institution's gendered nature<sup>75</sup>.

Attempts at legal reform to promote women's equality have repeatedly been blocked or stalled by either the Lower House or the Guurti. This illustrates a broader failure by the Somaliland government to recognize that the human rights of women and girls are integral to peacebuilding and development. While a few women have recently entered the Guurti through inheritance of their deceased husbands' seats, they remain exceptions rather than the norm. Female representation in the House of Representatives also remains low, with the ten percent quota among the lowest in the Horn of Africa, where quotas of 30 percent or higher are more common<sup>76</sup>. Despite consistent advocacy from civil society, women's groups, and international partners, Somaliland has failed to implement a binding legal quota for women in its parliament or local councils, often leading to minimal female representation.

Despite these structural barriers, women have consistently exercised their right to vote, turning out in large numbers in all three presidential elections. However, very few women have been nominated as candidates by political organizations. At the root of women's exclusion is the clan system: under prevailing clan norms, women are not considered full members of a clan – neither their father's nor their husband's – limiting their political influence and access to power within Somaliland's hybrid democratic framework.

Likewise, the Guurti and Somaliland's hybrid democracy more broadly have excluded occupational minorities, generically known as the Gaboye. These groups are stigmatized because of the work they perform, such as smithing, woodwork, weaving, and other trades, despite their essential

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<sup>75</sup> Markus Hohene. Elections in Somaliland 2017 and their aftermath.  
<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-05520355/document>

<sup>76</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/country/somaliland/freedom-world/2018>

contributions to the social and economic reproduction of Somali society. At the same time, the business elite wields disproportionate influence over the political process. As one research participant observed:

The democratization in Somaliland was more about procedure than substance. Businesspeople and the private sector control the politics and shape policy decisions by influencing politicians and clan leaders. There are no rules and norms regulating campaign and election financing, facilitating vote buying, and no regulation managing business and government relations. There is growing inequality resulting in wealth and income inequality affecting people's access to politics and decision-making<sup>77</sup>.

This concentration of political power among wealthy elites and the exclusion of marginalized occupational groups have adverse consequences. Growing economic and social inequality limits access to political participation, reduces meaningful representation, and has contributed to declining voter engagement.

#### **7.4.2 Somaliland's consensus politics unravelling: The advent of adversarial politics**

The democratic process in Somaliland has long been plagued by repeated delays, each sparking controversy and political tension. Since the introduction of party politics in 2002, local council, parliamentary, and presidential elections have been postponed 29 times. In the early instances, heightened political volatility was eventually managed through negotiated consensus among stakeholders, preventing further escalation. Over time, however, electoral disputes have grown increasingly partisan and contentious, with opposition politicians adopting a zero-sum approach to challenge what they perceive as the authoritarian practices of incumbents, sometimes including political violence.

Meanwhile, the government has expanded its dominance over other branches of the state. The Guurti, which holds the legislative power to sanction term extensions, has increasingly subordinated this authority to the executive through clientelist networks. This dynamic was evident in 2022, when both President Bihi's term and the Guurti's own tenure were extended, respectively for two and five years, overriding an earlier

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Muna Pile- Former Vice Chairperson of the Hilac Political Organization and former voter education manager at the Somaliland National Electoral Commission, Hargeisa, November 17, 2023.

National Electoral Commission (NEC) decision that had called for elections within nine months.

In Somaliland's hybrid democracy, many formal mechanisms for resolving political disputes are weak or absent, leaving significant space for negotiation and compromise. Traditionally, disputes have been resolved through pragmatic, consensus-based means, often mediated by clan elders and independent politicians, with parties conceding positions to preserve stability and democratic order. The erosion of the legitimacy and influence of clan elders has created a dual challenge: not only are formal institutions unable to fully arbitrate disputes, but the customary mechanisms that once facilitated consensus-based conflict resolution are also weakened, further undermining Somaliland's hybrid democratic system.<sup>78</sup>

During the November 2017 presidential election, both the ruling party, Kulmiye, and the main opposition party, Waddani, adopted a markedly adversarial approach, departing from the previous political culture centered on negotiation and compromise. Both parties actively mobilized their respective clan constituencies, intensifying political competition and fueling tensions among Issaq sub-clans, particularly between the pro-government Habar Awal and the opposition-aligned Garhajis. Waddani initially rejected the election results – the first presidential contest of its kind in Somaliland – but later softened its position, accepting the outcome “for the country's sake.”

As noted by Moustafa Ahmad (2024)<sup>79</sup>, Somaliland's political culture has traditionally been consensual, deliberately eschewing a winner-takes-all approach despite the use of the First-Past-the-Post electoral system:

In Somaliland, elections do not end with the announcement of a winner – political contestation carries over into the leader's selection of his cabinet. In fact, for most of its history as a state, both the victors and the defeated negotiate an inclusive cabinet that represents all clan constituencies of the country.

President Bihi, however, has departed sharply from this tradition, filling his cabinet with loyalists, primarily from his own clan. This breach of conventional power-sharing arrangements is closely linked to the brief insurgency in 2018 by the contending Garhajis clan, known as the Ga'an Libah resistance movement. Bihi's approach has accelerated the decline of

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Moustafa Ahmad, November 15, 2023

<sup>79</sup> Moustafa Ahmad, “Somaliland: Pulling back from the brink”, May 2, 2024.

<https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2024/05/02/somaliland-pulling-back-from-the-brink/>

consensus-based politics in Somaliland and increased the reliance on political coercion and violence. As state power has grown alongside state development, Somaliland's rulers have increasingly distanced themselves from dialogue and compromise, favoring force over negotiation. This, in turn, has pushed the opposition into a hardline stance on all contentious issues.

A research participant captured the gravity of this shift:

The challenge Somaliland is currently facing is how to make people feel represented – that goes beyond elections. We need to think of a mechanism to ensure fair distribution of power and resources, and ensure the fair treatment of minorities. In a country like Somaliland, the winner cannot take it all. The balance of power among clans must be kept. The elections were mostly free and fair, but elite pact is more important than elections for democracy. Now we are facing serious threats. The consensus that kept politics in balance is at risk – the balance between popular participation and the elite pact/power-sharing is fragile. Democracy wasn't working for the Sool people and minorities; and with bad decisions from Hargeisa and the involvement and intervention of regional powers, the situation is threatening Somaliland.<sup>80</sup>

This observation highlights a critical tension in Somaliland's hybrid democracy: while elections remain largely free and fair, the erosion of elite pacts and consensus-based cabinet formation undermines both political stability and inclusivity. The system's historic balance between popular participation and clan-based power sharing is now fragile, leaving minority groups and marginalized regions increasingly unrepresented and increasing the risk of conflict.

Elections also highlighted persistent challenges in Somaliland: despite the presence of a multi-party system, politics remain deeply rooted in clan affiliations, as is also the case in Somalia. While clan-based politics is not inherently problematic, combining it with a "one person, one vote" electoral system creates potential for conflict. Historically, Somaliland's politics were openly clan-based, with traditional leaders representing their constituencies and engaging in negotiations to reach consensus at general meetings. Once consensus was achieved on a political issue, most participants, and their associated descent groups, were expected to abide

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with Ayan Mohammed, former Somaliland Representative to the UK, Hargeisa, November 18, 2023.

by the elders' decision. This system of governance was widely understood, effective, and crucial for maintaining social cohesion and peace.

By contrast, the adoption of majority voting introduces a fundamentally different dynamic. Decisions are determined by “the winner takes all,” which can leave nearly half of the population, who may support the losing side, politically marginalized and potentially excluded from power or resources. This tension between traditional consensus-based decision-making and modern electoral practices underscores one of the central structural challenges facing Somaliland's hybrid democracy.<sup>81</sup>

An influx of foreign investment into Somaliland has sharply increased the premium on state power and political control, simultaneously undermining incentives for compromise. The Emirati firm DP World has invested in a multi-million-dollar expansion of the Berbera port, while other partners, including the UK, have supported the development of the Berbera corridor road connecting Somaliland to Ethiopia, boosting trade and the economy. A range of external actors are drawn to Somaliland because of its strategic location along key shipping lanes linking the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean<sup>82</sup>.

This heightened international attention has emboldened the government, reinforcing a belief that it can chart its own course both abroad and domestically, including by pursuing unilateral solutions that override long-standing traditions of consensus. The Addis Ababa Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland on 1 January 2024 has further intensified the stakes of state power. Ethiopia's offer –including a share in Ethiopian Airlines, potential recognition of Somaliland's independence, and access to a naval base and port– promised a significant financial and strategic windfall for the Somaliland state<sup>83</sup>. Israel's recognition of Somaliland in December 2025 is expected to further put a high premium on state power and the intense competition among the political elites.

The current political tensions, including the contraction of civic space for civil society organizations and critical media, must be understood within this broader context. By gaining increased autonomy and resources from external partners, the government has become less constrained by

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<sup>81</sup> Markus Hohene, *supra* note 75,

<sup>82</sup> <https://hornobserver.com/articles/2735/UAE-Investment-in-Berbera-and-Bosaso-Ports-A-Catalyst-for-Economic-Growth-and-Job-Creation-in-Somalia>

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-of-africa/somalia/overcoming-somalilands-worsening-political-crisis>

societal forces with which it previously negotiated. These forces, including clan elders, political stakeholders, and civil society, once helped sustain a political settlement oriented around peace as a national public good and the pursuit of democracy as an instrument of international legitimacy. The shift toward a more centralized, investment-driven state logic threatens to erode these traditional mechanisms of negotiation and compromise.

### **7.4.3 A deepening nation-building crisis**

For much of its existence, the SNM did not clearly articulate a vision of Somaliland as an independent polity. As noted earlier, it was largely the pressure from Issaq clan elders that pushed the SNM toward pursuing independence. As late as February 1991, SNM leaders were still in communication with other armed groups opposing the Said Barre regime, exploring potential power-sharing arrangements rather than a unilateral declaration of independence. At the same time, many non-Issaq clans, particularly the Dulbahante, who had been mobilized by the Barre regime, were not enthusiastic about the prospect of an independent Somaliland<sup>84</sup>.

The emergence of Puntland as an autonomous state within the Somali federal system in 1998 further complicated Somaliland's clan identity politics. Puntland's claims challenge Somaliland's colonial-era borders, as the Dulbahante and Warsengeli clans of eastern Somaliland share the Harti clan identity with communities across the border in Puntland. It is estimated that around 20 percent of the population rejects the notion of Somaliland's independence from Somalia<sup>85</sup>. In some areas, the sentiment is even stronger: in parts of Sool and Sanaag, 45 percent of voters in Laascaanood opposed the constitution<sup>86</sup>.

This differential incorporation into the Somaliland polity between Issaq and non-Issaq clans has been reinforced by perceptions of marginalization. Successive Somaliland governments have centralized power and economic development in Hargeisa and its immediate surroundings, while eastern regions such as Sool and Sanaag, claimed by Puntland or the former Khatumo State, and western border areas like Awdal, home to Gadabursi and Issa communities, have been largely neglected. Consequently,

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<sup>84</sup> Marleen Renders (2012). "The Emergence of the Somali National Movement as a Clan-Supported Opposition Force", in *Consider Somaliland* (Brill), pp. 59-85.  
[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004222540\\_005](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004222540_005)

<sup>85</sup> Sarah Philips (2020). "Somaliland's Relative Isolation". *When There Was No Aid: War and Peace in Somaliland*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

<sup>86</sup> <https://saxafimedia.com/initiative-referendum-somaliland-observation/>

Somaliland is not as politically inclusive as often asserted, and, over time, its governance appears to have become even less so.

The Beel system, which governs the allocation of political positions among clans, has further accentuated clan-based political discontent. The Dhulbahante and Warsangeli felt that the formalized system undermined their historical influence. Under British colonial rule, these clans were considered second only to the Issaq in terms of population and political significance. However, the settlement at Boorama assigned the vice presidency to a member of the Gadabursi clan, while the Dhulbahante were allocated the less prestigious role of parliamentary speaker. Although the Harti clans formally approved the agreements reached at Boorama, the perception of being sidelined in an independent Somaliland deepened<sup>87</sup>.

The first parliamentary elections in 2005 reinforced this imbalance. Representation for the Issaq clan increased by nine seats, reaching a total of fifty-seven out of eighty-two seats (approximately 70 percent), while the Gadabursi gained two seats, rising from eleven to thirteen. These gains came largely at the expense of the Harti clans – the Dhulbahante and Warsangeli – whose representation fell from fourteen to ten seats. These developments reinforced the perception among the Harti that the political system systematically disadvantaged them within Somaliland’s hybrid democracy.<sup>88</sup>

There has also been a persistent sense of marginalization and exclusion in the Awdal region, which has periodically sparked widespread protests. The Awdal region, created by the Siad Barre regime in 1984, is predominantly inhabited by the Gadabuursi and Issa clans. Since 1991, communities in the region have complained about political and economic marginalization by authorities in Hargeisa. Coupled with intermittent inter-clan violence, often over access to resources, the region has experienced ongoing political and security instability.

This tension increased in late 2019 with the emergence of a small, short-lived rebel group, signaling the depth of local grievances. A more dramatic political development occurred on 3 September 2023, when a conference of traditional elders and prominent members of the Gadabuursi clan in Ottawa, Canada, rejected the clan settlement arrangements established in the 1990s and called for union with Somalia. The declaration from Ottawa suggested a potential willingness among some Gadabuursi leaders, including the clan’s traditional supreme leader, Ugaas Abdirashiid Ugaas

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with a Dulbhante clan elder, Hargessa, December 1, 2023.

<sup>88</sup> [https://www.somali-jna.org/downloads/ICG on Somaliland.pdf](https://www.somali-jna.org/downloads/ICG%20on%20Somaliland.pdf)

Rooble, to consider the use of force to pursue the objective of transforming the Awdal region into a new Federal Member State.<sup>89</sup>

Since December 2022, Somaliland has witnessed an unprecedented escalation of political violence and civil unrest, sparked by the killing of a local opposition politician in Las Anod, the principal town of the Dulbahante clan in the east. This event triggered a major confrontation between the Dulbahante and the Somaliland National Army. The ensuing armed conflict, involving Somaliland forces and the Dulbahante militia now organized as the SSC-Khatumo administration, representing the regions of Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn, has been marked by heavy civilian casualties, humanitarian crises, and intensifying violence, with competing narratives over the causes of the fighting.

The conflict is underpinned by deeper structural factors that continue to shape both its trajectory and the future of the contested areas between Somaliland and Puntland. These include the legacies of colonialism and post-colonial state formation, complex clan dynamics, divergent interpretations of history and independence, economic redistribution, competing political identities, governance models, and questions of representation and marginalization. As Markus Hoehne observes, “what is at stake in the conflict over Laascaanood is the question of Somaliland’s secession versus the unity of Somalia,” involving the interplay of Somaliland authorities, Dhulbahante militias, and Puntland.

Under the self-proclaimed SSC-Khatumo administration, the Dhulbahante aspire to remain part of Somalia’s federal system rather than an independent Somaliland dominated by the Isaaq clan. Long uneasy with the political and economic ascendancy of the Isaaq, the Dhulbahante have sought alternative administrative arrangements, either integration into Puntland, where their Darod/Harti clan ties are stronger, or the establishment of a separate federal member state within Somalia.

In August 2023, the SSC-Khatumo militia achieved a decisive military victory against Somaliland forces and subsequently declared secession from Somaliland, signaling its intent to join Somalia as a federal member state. Given that the SSC area constitutes roughly one-third of Somaliland’s claimed territory, this poses a severe challenge to Somaliland’s territorial integrity. Whether Somaliland will respond with a major military counteroffensive to retake Las Anod or pursue negotiations with SSC-Khatumo, potentially drawing on the clan-based negotiation

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<sup>89</sup> <https://thesomalidigest.com/breaking-awdal-announced-it-is-breaking-away-from-somaliland/>

traditions that underpinned Somaliland's state-building in the 1990s, remains uncertain.

Somaliland, long celebrated as a haven of democracy, freedom of expression, and peace in the Horn of Africa, is increasingly witnessing the erosion of these values, with human rights abuses becoming more visible and the state trending toward autocratic rule: "Sadly, the conflict in the Sool legitimized growing crackdown on human rights abuses and media freedom. The war brought the national sovereignty and territorial integrity narrative to the forefront of the public and political spaces and justified the postponement of the election."<sup>90</sup>

This securitization of politics has particularly affected relations between the state and minority groups. As a long-time observer of Somaliland politics notes:

The Dulbahante and the Gadabursi/Issa have been claiming Somaliland as an Isaaq state and have been demanding a revision of the constitution to reflect their growing number. The two minorities have been complaining that the existing formula used for power and resource distribution does not reflect their size and current realities. They reject current power and resource allocation. The absence of a census and consensus on the size of the clans further complicates the matter. The loss of territory after the conflict in 2023 could undermine their commitment to democracy and nation building<sup>91</sup>.

This analysis underscores a critical paradox: while Somaliland has long been lauded for its hybrid democratic model, the combination of territorial conflict, minority grievances, and state securitization has eroded both the legitimacy of formal institutions and the inclusivity of the political system. What was once a carefully negotiated balance among clans now risks collapsing into exclusionary politics, raising serious questions about the sustainability of democracy in the region.

Hoehene highlights how Somaliland's hybrid democratic model, with its majoritarian and clanocratic features, has reinforced exclusion:

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Ayan Mohammed, November 18, 2023.

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Tirsit Yitbarek- Director, Somaliland Center for Africa Studies, Hargeisa, November 18, 2023.

Over the past 15 years, democratization in Somaliland has actually led to the exclusion of a considerable part of the regional population and to a 'one clan rule' (all political leaders since 2010 are Issaq –in all important positions throughout the state apparatus, including the military and the political parties). The start in Boorama was beautiful, but it was also in a way already the 'beginning of the end' (as we can say ex post, from a 2024 point of view)<sup>92</sup>.

This analysis conveys a stark warning for Somaliland's political leadership: the erosion of inclusive consensus politics, coupled with the sidelining of alternative political histories and identities, risks undermining both democratization and nation-building. Without mechanisms that genuinely accommodate minority clans and contested histories, Somaliland's fragile stability and democratic experiment could be undermined.

## **7.5 Prospects for Revitalizing Somaliland's Hybrid Democracy**

Somaliland's hybrid democracy stands at a critical crossroads. The Guurti, once central to the country's consensus-based governance, have lost much of their popular legitimacy due to progressive co-option by successive governments. At the same time, political parties have yet to foster a political settlement grounded in a genuine democratic dispensation. The repeated failures to adhere to the timetable for Guurti re-selection, party certification, and presidential elections have brought the deepening political crisis into sharp relief.

Since 1993, the same clan elders are members in the Guurti, while the ten-year license of the current legal political parties expired in 2022. The presidential election scheduled for November 2022 was delayed, and prospects for timely elections were obstructed as early as December 2021, when President Bihi began advocating for the "re-opening of political parties." According to Article 9 of the Somaliland Constitution, the number of political parties is restricted to three, and the election law provides time-specific (ten-year) licensing for party certification. The political parties' certificates officially expired on 26 December 2022, yet the Guurti postponed the presidential election to 2024.

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<sup>92</sup> Interviewed in April 28, 2024.

After protracted negotiations, the Guurti passed a new electoral law in early 2024, authorizing simultaneous political party and presidential elections for the first time. Opposition parties have endorsed the new law, viewing it as a crucial step toward creating a level playing field for the upcoming presidential election.<sup>93</sup> The elections were finally held on 13 November 2024. They were widely regarded as free and relatively fair, in which the candidate from an opposition party emerged victorious, marking the first peaceful transfer of power to an opposition party in the country's history. The elections also reflected active engagement from civil society, diaspora observers, and the National Electoral Commission (NEC). Voter turnout, while affected by lingering political tensions and regional instability, nonetheless reflected a continued commitment among Somalilanders to participate in democratic processes<sup>94</sup>.

The successful execution of the 2024 election has reinvigorated hopes for Somaliland's hybrid democracy, showing that, despite its structural weaknesses, including clan-based politics, elite capture, and exclusion of women and minorities, the country can uphold democratic norms and processes. Internationally, the election strengthens Somaliland's case for recognition by highlighting its relative political stability, functioning electoral system, and commitment to multi-party democracy in a region often plagued by conflict and authoritarianism.

Somaliland has also made some progress in its pursuit of international recognition. The claim rests on a combination of legal, historical, and normative arguments. Notably, Somaliland asserts that its case is unique because the Republic of Somaliland existed as an independent state for five days in June 1960 and was recognized by thirty-four United Nations member states, including all five permanent members of the UN Security Council<sup>95</sup>.

However, Somaliland's quest faces significant obstacles. The rest of Somalia does not consent to the termination of the 1960 union, a position supported by the AU, IGAD, UN and major global powers. Furthermore, the relative stabilization of Somalia since 2012 has strengthened Mogadishu's claims over Somaliland, reinforcing its irredentist stance and complicating Somaliland's efforts to gain formal recognition on the international stage.

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<sup>93</sup> <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/2024-elections/somaliland/>

<sup>94</sup> <https://defactostates.ut.ee//the-system-worked-somalilands-2024-presidential-and-political-party-elections/>

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.ft.dk/samling/20161/almdel/URU/bilag/265/1786944.pdf>

Somaliland's geostrategic significance has shifted dramatically since the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) began its military intervention in Yemen in 2015, and as intra-GCC disputes have increasingly played out across the Horn of Africa. Among GCC states, the UAE has gone further than any other in investing in Somaliland, particularly in infrastructure projects, effectively providing a form of de facto recognition of its sovereignty. In a more dramatic development, the January 1, 2024, Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Ethiopia and Somaliland represents perhaps the closest the country has come to formal recognition of its independence. The Somaliland government framed the deal as a diplomatic breakthrough after 33 years of isolation, asserting that it could pave the way for the country's first de jure recognition and potentially encourage other states to follow suit.<sup>96</sup>

Israel's decision to formally recognize Somaliland in December 2025 represented a watershed moment in the geopolitics of the Horn of Africa. Becoming the first United Nations member state to officially acknowledge Somaliland's sovereignty since it declared independence in 1991, Israel's move signaled a notable departure from decades of diplomatic hesitation surrounding the territory's status.

This recognition has sparked wide-ranging debate among regional governments, international policymakers, and security analysts. Supporters argue that it validates Somaliland's longstanding claims to self-governance, democratic development, and relative stability in a volatile region. Critics, however, caution that the decision could heighten tensions with Somalia's federal government, reshape alliances across the Horn, and introduce new strategic calculations involving Red Sea security, trade routes, and external powers. Despite the wide expectation that Ethiopia would follow suit, to date, it has preferred a more "wait and see" approach than immediate recognition<sup>97</sup>.

Prospects for preserving Somaliland's hybrid democracy and expanding its international recognition are increasingly overshadowed by a deepening nation-building crisis. Recent military and political developments in the east have raised serious concerns about its territorial integrity. In July 2025, an SSC (the Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn regions) conference in Las Anod proclaimed the creation of the Northeastern State (NES) as Somalia's sixth federal member state, replacing SSC-Khatumo, and was

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Sacad Mohammed, *supra* note 74.

<sup>97</sup> <https://atlasinstitute.org/israels-recognition-of-somaliland-and-its-implications-for-regional-peace-and-development/>

formally recognized by Mogadishu on 31 July. This move strengthens Somalia's sovereignty claims and directly challenges Somaliland's secessionist aspirations. Ongoing disputes with Puntland over eastern Sanaa further complicate regional stability.<sup>98</sup>

These developments in the east have also fueled the appeal of armed struggle in the western periphery and even among some disgruntled Issaq sub-clans, posing an existential threat to Somaliland's territorial integrity. The situation is further complicated by the explicitly unionist orientation of these new armed movements, which aligns them politically with Mogadishu and heightens the risk of further fragmentation.

## 7.6 Conclusion

Somaliland offers a distinctive example of hybrid democracy in Africa, combining traditional clan-based governance with modern state institutions. Its system includes multi-party elections, a bicameral legislature –the House of Representatives and the House of Elders– and a constitution that formally protects civil liberties and political pluralism. Yet this hybrid model also creates tensions. Over time, traditional authorities have increasingly been drawn into the orbit of the executive, weakening their role as neutral mediators, while political parties have struggled to maintain a level playing field amid electoral delays, term extensions, and elite dominance.

In comparative democracy rankings, Somaliland is often viewed as a relative success within the Horn of Africa. It has held several competitive elections since 2002 and performs comparatively well in areas such as political stability and civic participation. At the same time, persistent challenges –including clan-based exclusion, gender inequality, the marginalization of minority groups, and limits on civil liberties– highlight the fragility of its democratic system. Much of the political order still depends on informal bargaining and elite consensus rather than deeply institutionalized democratic practices.

Several structural pressures continue to test this system. Clan affiliations frequently dominate political competition, often overshadowing programmatic politics. Territorial tensions, including the emergence of the SSC-Khatumo and armed confrontations in the east, have also exposed the

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<sup>98</sup> [https://chs-doha.org/en/Publications/Pages/From-Las-Anood-to-the-North-Eastern-State-\(NES\)-Implications-for-Somalia-Somaliland-Mediation-and-Regional-Stability.aspx](https://chs-doha.org/en/Publications/Pages/From-Las-Anood-to-the-North-Eastern-State-(NES)-Implications-for-Somalia-Somaliland-Mediation-and-Regional-Stability.aspx)

limits of Somaliland's political institutions. Meanwhile, concerns about centralization of power, exclusion of women and minorities, and the co-option of civil society continue to complicate democratic development.

On 13 November 2024, Somaliland held a combined popular vote to elect both the president and the three official national political parties for the next ten years (there can only be a maximum of three operating political parties at a time). While this limited political pluralism is constitutionally unique, the loss of credibility of traditional authorities, co-opted into formal institutions, poses a major challenge to democratization. Ongoing nation-building crises, particularly conflicts in the east (Las Anod) and unresolved territorial disputes with Puntland in the southwest, threaten both democratic consolidation and Somaliland's territorial integrity.

Despite these challenges, there are reasons for cautious optimism. In November 2024, Somaliland successfully held a major election in which presidential and political party contests were conducted simultaneously under a new electoral law designed to improve transparency and fairness. The vote demonstrated that, even after years of delays and political disputes, Somaliland retains the capacity to organize competitive elections and manage political transitions.

Israel's recognition of Somaliland on 26 December 2025 offers opportunities for international legitimacy but also escalates tensions with Somalia and exposes Somaliland to regional rivalries, with alliances linking Somaliland to Ethiopia, the UAE, and Israel, while Somalia aligns with Egypt, Eritrea, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Looking ahead, the question of international recognition could shape the next phase of Somaliland's political trajectory. Support from countries such as Israel – and the possibility that others may follow – could strengthen Somaliland's confidence in its political project, long presented by leaders in Hargeisa as grounded in democratic governance. At the same time, recognition would likely draw Somaliland more deeply into regional geopolitical rivalries involving Gulf and Middle Eastern powers. This could provide opportunities, but also risks, potentially tying Somaliland's democratic future to external strategic interests as much as to its own domestic political development.

As the discussion in the preceding sections indicates, democratic consolidation in Somaliland requires revitalizing Somaliland's hybrid democracy through a rebalancing of power between traditional and formal democratic institutions, restoring the legitimacy of traditional authorities so they can again play a constructive role in peacebuilding and

reconciliation, and mitigating the zero-sum dynamics of emerging majoritarian politics by reintroducing consociational elements. There is also a need for a renewal of the political settlement among stakeholders around democratic rules of engagement, rebuilding the Somaliland nation on more inclusive foundations through dialogue and demilitarization, and resuming talks between Somaliland and Somalia to ease political tensions and find a sustainable solution. These efforts should be framed within a broader regional integration agenda that includes neighboring states, particularly Ethiopia, whose pursuit of access to the sea, including the Somali coast, has intensified current geopolitical tensions.

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## Chapter 8

# Conclusion and Recommendations

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### 8.1 Conclusion

Democratization in the Horn of Africa remains fragile, uneven, and structurally constrained. Major democracy indices consistently classify most countries in the region as authoritarian or hybrid regimes. Electoral processes exist across much of the region, but they are frequently undermined by weak institutions, restricted civic space, militarized politics, and dominant executives. While Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia display elements of competitive politics, consolidation remains elusive. Eritrea stands as one of the most entrenched autocracies globally, while Sudan and South Sudan continue to struggle with threats of state collapse and protracted conflict.

At the structural level, the most fundamental impediment is the unresolved nation-building crisis. Rustow's "single background condition" for democracy, national unity, is weak or contested across the region. Centralized state-building projects in Ethiopia and Sudan generated core-periphery tensions, while ethnic and clan fragmentation continues to shape politics in Kenya, Uganda, Somalia, Djibouti, and South Sudan. Questions of identity, belonging, and territorial control remain politically explosive.

Compounding this is a severe imbalance of power between state and societal forces. In most HoA countries, the state remains coercively dominant, limiting the emergence of a negotiated democratic settlement. Liberation-movement legacies (South Sudan), centralized imperial and military traditions (Ethiopia, Sudan), dynastic elite politics (Kenya), and entrenched authoritarian rule (Eritrea) all reinforce executive-heavy systems. Liberalization episodes often reflect regime vulnerability rather than durable institutional transformation.

Electoral design further intensifies divisions. Winner-takes-all systems in deeply fragmented societies heighten the stakes of political competition, incentivizing exclusion rather than compromise. The resource curse, particularly in Sudan and South Sudan, provides ruling elites with alternative revenue streams that reduce accountability and fund patronage networks. Meanwhile, external actors frequently reinforce authoritarian resilience through security partnerships, extractive investments, and

geopolitical competition, prioritizing stability and access over democratic reform.

Yet the picture is not uniformly bleak. Important democratic openings and institutional innovations have emerged. Federalism and devolution in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia have created frameworks for managing diversity, even though they pose new challenges. National dialogues, peace processes, and transitional justice initiatives, though imperfect, represent attempts to negotiate political settlements. Judicial assertiveness in Kenya, legal pluralism in Ethiopia, hybrid governance in Somaliland, and women's political mobilization in Sudan and South Sudan demonstrate institutional and societal capacities that can support democratization.

Economic growth and rapid urbanization may also generate long-term enabling conditions. While no automatic link exists between development and democracy, sustained growth, expanding middle classes, and civic mobilization in urban centers can strengthen demands for accountability. Youth-led movements, digital activism, and regional institutional reform efforts (such as IGAD's recent treaty revisions) suggest evolving political dynamics that could, over time, rebalance state-society relations.

Democratization in the Horn of Africa is yet to develop towards a linear transition because it is mostly a contested, cyclical process shaped by conflict, elite bargaining, structural inequalities, and geopolitical pressures. The most immediate prerequisite for democratic progress is conflict resolution and the creation of inclusive political settlements. Over the longer term, rebalancing power between state and society, reforming electoral systems toward consensus-based models, strengthening accountability in resource governance, and harmonizing formal and informal institutions are essential. Democracy in the Horn requires sustained negotiation, institutional adaptation, and strategic recalibration by both domestic and regional actors. The region's future hinges on whether political elites perceive democratic compromise not as a loss of power, but as a viable strategy for survival, stability, and development.

The constraints in the democratization of the Horn are attributable to intertwined structural and political factors: protracted conflict, contested nationhood, entrenched power asymmetries between state and society, geopolitical competition, economic fragility, and weak institutional integration. These realities obstruct the prospects of both contestation-based and incentive-based pathways to democracy. Moreover, the supportive socioeconomic conditions typically considered necessary for democratization have not yet been attained. Where conflict persists,

democratic bargaining cannot take root. Where states dominate society, opposition forces, whether peaceful or armed, struggle to produce sustainable institutional change. External patronage further shields regimes from domestic accountability, while economic and institutional fragmentation limits inclusive participation.

The winner-takes-all political systems have further undermined democratization by largely preventing the emergence of inclusive governance in deeply divided societies, such as countries in the Horn. Attempts at reform have often been lukewarm and lacked coordination across peace processes, state and nation-building efforts, and economic restructuring. Therefore, democratization in the region requires a long-term and context-sensitive approach that addresses both structural constraints and institutional design.

## **8.2 Recommendations**

Building on the analysis in the preceding chapters, the following recommendations are proposed to advance democratization in countries in the Horn of Africa. These recommendations recognize that democratic transition in the region cannot rely on elections alone, but must address deeper structural constraints, i.e., conflict, state–society imbalances, institutional design, economic governance, and regional dynamics. The recommendations merely envisage procedural political change, but aim at transforming the underlying conditions that shape political authority and legitimacy. They focus on strengthening accountable institutions, recalibrating power relations between states and citizens, fostering inclusive governance arrangements, enhancing economic transparency and inclusivity, and expanding the constructive role of regional and continental organizations. Taken together, these measures seek to create the political stability, institutional resilience, and social inclusion necessary for democracy to take root and endure in the Horn of Africa.

### *Priority to conflict resolution and institutional synergy*

The most urgent prerequisite for democratization is conflict resolution. Silencing the guns across the region is essential to enable peace agreements, national dialogues, and transitional justice processes. These mechanisms must not operate in isolation; greater synergy is required to ensure that peacebuilding, state-building, and reconciliation reinforce one another. Generating strategic knowledge and coordinated policy frameworks is critical to building legitimate and cohesive states, the *sine qua non* of democratization.

*Putting greater efforts to rebuild national unity on a more inclusive foundation*

The crisis of nation-building remains a central obstacle to democratization in the Horn of Africa. In several countries, the state lacks broad-based legitimacy because national identity itself is contested. Rebuilding national unity on more inclusive foundations is therefore essential for democratic consolidation. Governance reforms such as federalism in Ethiopia and Somalia, devolution in Kenya, and decentralization in Uganda represent important attempts to accommodate diversity, diffuse power, and bring government closer to citizens, even as these countries must seek to constantly evaluate and adapt their systems based on historical learning. These reforms signal recognition that centralized, majoritarian models are ill-suited to deeply plural societies. However, these governance reforms need to be implemented in a conflict-sensitive manner. What is meant as an inclusionary measure may contain exclusionary dimensions within itself, largely decentralizing conflicts and maladministration to the local level.

*Rebalance state–society power asymmetries*

Across much of the region, states remain disproportionately powerful relative to societal forces (with partial exceptions of Somalia). This imbalance stifles meaningful contestation. Where peaceful political contestation is blocked, opposition is likely to take more coercive forms, often emerging as armed resistance movements. While such movements may succeed in toppling regimes or changing governments, they frequently reproduce authoritarian patterns once in power, transferring the hierarchical and coercive practices developed during armed struggle into the structures of the new government. Rebalancing power between states and societies must occur through carefully designed incentive structures that encourage incumbents to open democratic space while safeguarding stability. These incentives will vary by country and require structured deliberative platforms bringing together intellectuals, civil society, policymakers, and regional actors to identify feasible pathways.

*Reform electoral systems and promote consensus-oriented governance*

Majoritarian, first-past-the-post systems have exacerbated exclusion in deeply divided societies. The region should consider adopting elements of consensus or consociational democracy, including proportional representation and structured power-sharing arrangements. Such reforms can reduce zero-

sum competition and lower the stakes of electoral defeat. The main challenge lies in translating such arrangements into practice. Power-sharing based on group representation can unintentionally reinforce identity divisions, especially where political institutions already organize competition along ethnic lines, such as in ethnically defined federal systems. In such contexts, formal group quotas may harden the cleavages they seek to manage. To mitigate this risk, “liberal consociationalism” gives emphasis to a broad inclusion in governance rather than rigid representation of predefined identity groups.

*Integrate traditional and state institutions*

Economic and institutional fragmentation, particularly the divide between rural customary systems and urban state structures, has marginalized large segments of the population. Constructive partnerships between traditional authorities and formal state institutions can enhance legitimacy and inclusion. Experiences such as Somaliland’s hybrid model and legal pluralism reforms in Ethiopia demonstrate possible avenues. Governments should replace co-optation strategies with legally grounded, policy-based engagement frameworks. International examples, including South Africa’s integration of traditional leadership at the local level, offer lessons on mandate clarification, participation, and resourcing. Engagement should also support reform within traditional systems, particularly regarding gender equality.

*Engage grassroots and youth democratic actors*

There is a need to engage youth-led movements and digitally enabled civic activism to represent vital democratic constituencies. In contexts such as Sudan, grassroots actors, including resistance committees, should be incorporated into formal peace and political negotiations. The exclusion of these actors risks undermining legitimacy and long-term democratic consolidation.

*Strengthen accountability in the extractive sector*

Hydrocarbon and other mineral developments risk reinforcing authoritarianism through the resource curse. Robust accountability institutions for extractive industries are essential. Governments, civil society organizations, and external partners should promote transparency in revenue management, anti-corruption safeguards, and local content policies. Capacity-building and skills development must accompany extractive governance reforms to ensure long-term economic inclusion and democratic oversight.

*Expand the democratic mandate of regional organizations*

Regional bodies such as IGAD and the EAC should strengthen their democratic engagement beyond security cooperation. Platforms for governance dialogue, human rights institutions, youth, and women's networks should be supported and institutionalized. Cross-learning, such as lessons from Kenya's judiciary or Ethiopia's reconstituted human rights commission, can enhance regional accountability norms. IGAD could also develop coordinated regional strategies for engagement with global powers, reducing zero-sum external competition. The African Union should assert a stronger and more coordinated mediation role in the Horn, particularly in contexts where fragmented "peace markets" weaken coherent negotiation frameworks. Closer coordination between the AU and IGAD is essential to restore credibility and ensure consistent regional mediation strategies.

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