

The 2026 Somali Elections and the Prospects of Women's Political Participation

Context

In April 2026, Somalia is expected to hold federal parliamentary elections for the first time in four years. They come as current Somali President Hassan S. Mohamud's four-year term ends on May 15th, 2026. The elections will constitute a drastic shift in Somali politics, as on March 4th, 2026, the Somali Parliament approved a new Federal Constitution which institutes universal suffrage. This would be the first time since 1969 that direct one-person-one-vote elections are held across Somalia. Previously, Somalia's electoral model consisted of an indirect voting system based on the 4.5 clan-based power-sharing model, whereby political authority is filtered through male-dominated clan hierarchies in which elders determine candidate nominations and allocate available parliamentary seats.

The model has systematically hindered the political participation of women. Somali women were, in fact, formally included alongside minority clans within the "0.5" allocation of the 4.5 formula. In practice, however, they were often sidelined during candidate selection processes, with clan leaders arguing that their clan's limited seats should be reserved for male representatives. The shift toward direct elections could significantly reshape this dynamic by providing every citizen—and thus every woman—with one vote, enabling Somalis to directly choose their preferred candidates rather than relying on clan-mediated, male-dominated selection processes.

Nevertheless, Somali women continue to face a range of structural, social, and economic barriers to making their voices heard. Somali women remain largely marginalized from critical decision-making processes in a society dominated by male-centric clan dynamics. These exclusionary practices are reinforced by deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs and elements of Somali customary law, which impede women's political advancement. Societal discouragement, widespread insecurity and a scarcity of female role models further create a cycle of disempowerment. Household pressures regarding traditional gender norms further discourage women from political participation. Finally, financial barriers including the rising commercialization of political campaigns also prevent women from competing on equal footing with male candidates, who benefit from clan and business support.

Together, these factors make Somalia's political and cultural climate unconducive to women's meaningful political participation. Indeed, while the Somali Constitution mandates a 30% quota of women in Parliament, this commitment has never been fully realized. At present, there are only 14 women in the 54-seat Upper House, and women make up less than 20% of representatives in the 275-seat Lower House. This signals a critical gap between constitutional promise and political reality.

To further complicate matters, the elections come at a time of domestic uncertainty for Somalia. The country's federal system has gained strength since 2012: the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) has grown and so has the number of Federal Member States

(FMS). However, tensions between Mogadishu and several FMS have worsened in recent years, particularly around the new constitution and resource allocation. Puntland and Jubaland States have voiced strong opposition to the proposed electoral change. Along with influential clan-leaders, they have appealed for a return to the indirect voting model.

The primary risk is political deadlock between the FGS and FMS, which could delay or derail the electoral process. Failure to reach agreement would lead to the current government's mandate formally expiring in May. Such a scenario could trigger a repeat of the 2021 crisis, when an expired mandate led to political confrontation, institutional paralysis, and outbreaks of violence among political elites.

Against this backdrop of political uncertainty and electoral reform, the upcoming elections present a critical opportunity for Somali women to shape the country's political future. Somali women have historically played important roles in community mobilization, mediation and peacebuilding efforts, highlighting the gap between their societal contributions and their formal political representation. Indeed, it is thanks to the advocacy of Somali women, in the early 2000's, that the idea of a quota was first introduced in the country's political debate. That advocacy has not stopped, as demonstrated in the 2019 Somali Women's Charter, which called for raising the quota for leadership positions for women from 30% to 50%, across all levels of government.

The shift toward direct elections has thus the potential to expand women's political participation, strengthening the country's trajectory towards peace and stability. Yet, given Somalia's domestic political unrest, structural barriers and exclusionary practices, it remains unclear whether the one-person-one-vote reforms will translate into meaningful gains for women's political representation.

The Webinar

This webinar will explore how Somali women are navigating the changing electoral landscape ahead of the 2026 elections and what these developments could mean for the future of women's participation in shaping peace and security processes in Somalia. Bringing together experts, practitioners, and advocates working on women's political inclusion, the discussion will examine both the structural barriers that persist and the opportunities that may emerge under the evolving electoral framework. Attention will be given to how the transition toward direct voting could alter existing power dynamics within Somalia's political system and whether it might create new pathways for women to exercise political influence within their communities.

The discussion will also consider broader questions about the sustainability of recent efforts to increase women's political representation. Panelists will reflect on what mechanisms (legal, political, and social) may be necessary to ensure that gains in women's participation are not only symbolic but also enduring. In doing so, the webinar seeks to provide policymakers, civil society leaders, and international partners with a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Somali women ahead of the 2026 elections. By highlighting the perspectives and experiences of women engaged in Somali political life, the conversation



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aims to inform ongoing debates about electoral reform, governance, and inclusive political participation in Somalia.

The discussion will address several key questions, including:

- How might the transition to one-person-one-vote elections reshape opportunities for Somali women to participate in politics?
- What structural barriers continue to limit women's ability to run office or influence electoral outcomes?
- What lessons can be drawn from past electoral cycles regarding the implementation of the 30 percent quota? Are quotas helping, or not?
- If women are able to meaningfully participate in the elections, what will this mean for Somalia's prospects for peace and stability?
- How can policymakers, civil society actors, and international partners better support women's political participation ahead and beyond the 2026 elections?

Platform

You can join the webinar using this Zoom link: <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/87142501018>