

Two-way Traffic: Conflict and Democratization in the Horn of Africa

Policy Brief



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.

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NURTURING DEMOCRACY

Introduction

The relationship between conflict and democratization is inherently dynamic because conflict erodes the foundations for democratization. With regard to institutional frameworks, violent conflict leads to the securitization of politics which gives priority to regime survival and territorial control rather than democratic governance, thereby constraining political pluralism and civic space. Where armed resistance successfully topples an authoritarian regime, rebels-turned-leaders often strive towards transition to civilian, inclusive governance. However, they tend to carry over the imperatives of centralization and tight control that they had developed while they were conducting insurgency, and they tend to replicate a centralized ‘command and control’ paradigm into the structures of the new government.

Under certain contexts, Rustow’s theory of the origin of democracy (1970)¹ suggests that conflict can also catalyze democratization. In particular, such contexts

are expressed through sustained, nonviolent struggles between state and societal forces. This envisages grassroots empowerment that forces parties (including the state and political parties) to aim at rational discourse, mutual benefits and accommodation. On the positive front, the balance of power that comes out of such struggles, efforts and discourse can lead to negotiated settlements and foster a culture of compromise that is essential for establishing and sustaining democratic governance. On the other hand, while democratization can serve as a mechanism for conflict resolution, it may also generate new tensions or exacerbate existing ones, especially in deeply divided societies. As Donald Horowitz (1993)² argues, democracy is challenging in deeply divided societies as political competition tends to align with entrenched identity cleavages, intensifying polarization and making compromise more difficult, thereby necessitating the design of deliberate integrative institutions.

¹ Dankwart A. Rustow. 1970. “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model”. *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2(3).

² Donald Horowitz. 1993. “Democracy in divided societies”. *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 4, No. 4 October 1993



This policy brief highlights the nexus between conflict and democratization in the context of the Horn of Africa. It calls for simultaneous engagement in *peace-building* and *democracy support* so that these dual pursuits can be mutually reinforcing under a positive feedback loop of reciprocal causation. It is intended to support policymakers, development partners, and civil society organizations in their efforts to advance democratic governance while simultaneously contributing to sustainable peacebuilding pursuits. In addition to indicating the interplay between democracy and conflict in the Horn of Africa, this policy brief offers practical recommendations that can be translated into programs and projects.

The Problems of Conflict and Political Fragility that Adversely Affect Democratization Trajectories

Violent conflict and fragility fundamentally reshape the pathways and prospects for democratization in the Horn. In conflict-affected contexts, governments often prioritize regime survival and territorial control over democratic reform. This leads to the securitization of politics and restrictions on civil liberties. Conflict disrupts civic action. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and grassroots movements face operational constraints, security risks, and resource limitations.

Where state authority is contested, political actors may resort to armed mobilization rather than institutional channels. This undermines electoral processes, weakens political parties, and reduces trust in formal institutions. Prolonged conflict also leads to the erosion of institutional capacity, weakening state institutions and undermining their perceived

neutrality. Electoral bodies, courts, and legislatures may be viewed as partisan or ineffective, reducing public confidence and participation in democratic processes.

Conflict often reinforces identity-based mobilization and polarization. While such dynamics can facilitate political participation and representation, they also tend to deepen divisions and hinder the development of inclusive, programmatic politics. This pattern is particularly pronounced in less competitive or authoritarian political systems, where ruling elites have incentives to entrench identity cleavages as a strategy of control. By contrast, more competitive political environments can create opportunities for alternative forms of mobilization. For instance, Kenya's recent, albeit still incipient, shift in voter mobilization suggests a potentially positive path from identity-based to more issue-based politics.

The Horn of Africa remains one of the most conflict-affected regions globally, characterized by overlapping layers of violence, political instability, and regional rivalries. The following themes deal with *conflict trends in the Horn of Africa*. Recent conflict trends point to four interrelated dynamics that involve (i) the crisis in statehood, (ii) the crisis of nationhood, (iii) cycles of fragile political transitions, and (iv) regional spillovers and geopolitical competition. The four themes are followed by a concluding paragraph and nine recommendations.

The Crisis of Statehood

One of the central drivers of conflict in the Horn of Africa is the combination of autocratic governance, weak institutions, and contested state legitimacy. These dynamics are historically grounded. The coercive and centralizing nature of the colonial state—and, in Ethiopia's case, the imperial state—was



largely inherited by postcolonial and post-imperial regimes, producing a persistent imbalance between state and societal forces and leaving shallow democratic foundations (Semir 2022)³. The military's enduring role as a political "guardian" in Sudan, recurrent tensions generated by political centralization in Ethiopia, and the dominance of Kenya's political dynasties illustrate this pattern.

This imbalance has weakened social contracts between state and society, as governments have repressed dissenting voices and struggled to deliver services and maintain legitimacy, resulting in fragmented authority. In many cases, states face armed resistance and lack full territorial control or a monopoly over the legitimate use of force. This, in turn, generates a vicious cycle where peaceful avenues for political contestation are constrained. Under this context, conflicts between state and societal actors tend to take violent forms, or what Semir (ibid) calls 'negative contestation'. These dynamics often culminate either in the emergence of new autocracies, as seen in Eritrea and South Sudan, or in the entrenchment of incumbents through electoral autocracy, as observed across much of the region, with partial exceptions of Kenya's relatively more robust democratic institutions and Somaliland's hybrid democracy that blends traditional frameworks and modern institutions.

State legitimacy is further undermined by contested and often poorly demarcated borders. Various borders in the Horn are contested and porous, giving rise to recurrent disputes over both land (e.g., Ethiopia–

Eritrea, Eritrea–Djibouti, Ethiopia–Sudan, South Sudan–Kenya) and maritime spaces (e.g., Somalia–Kenya). Borderland populations who live at the center of these disputes are frequently marginalized in terms of political representation and access to national resources. Their distance from central authorities is not only geographic but also socio-economic and cultural. Much of the Horn's borderlands are inhabited by pastoralist communities, while political power is often concentrated in agrarian highland regions. This divergence in livelihoods and identities reinforces exclusion and creates fertile ground for insurgent movements, which can exploit cross-border social networks and mobility.

The Horn is also characterized by what Clapham (1996)⁴ describes as "competing territorial logics": state-centric nationalism, pastoral mobility across porous borders, and ethno-national, or clan-based spatial borders. These overlapping and often conflicting spatial logics further complicate state-building, governance, and conflict resolution in the Horn.

Crisis of Nationhood

African politics, particularly in the Horn, can be broadly understood through two distinct variants in relation to national identity. The *first variant* corresponds to what Gurr (1993)⁵ describes as "*communal contenders*," while the *second variant* can be referred to as "competing nationalisms".

In the *first variant*, the identity of the state itself is not fundamentally contested because no singular core nation-building project has been fully imposed. Instead, ethnicity or

³ Semir Yusuf. 2022. "Ethiopia's democratic predicaments: state–society dynamics and the balance of power". ISS Monograph.

⁴ Christopher Clapham. 1996. "Boundary and Territory in the Horn of Africa". In: P. Nugent and

A.I. Asiwaju (eds.). *African Boundaries: barriers, conduits and opportunities*. London: Pinter.

⁵ Tedd Gurr. 1993. "Why Minorities Rebel: A Global Analysis of Communal Mobilization and Conflict since 1945". *International Political Science Review*. Vol. 14, No. 2.



cultural difference is mobilized as a means of accessing and controlling state power. Politics thus assumes a centripetal form, revolving around competition over who governs the state and who benefits from its resources and privileges. Much of African politics reflects this pattern, shaped by the legacy of colonial rule. Postcolonial states largely inherited colonial administrative structures, including systems of divide-and-rule and unequal access to political and economic resources. These dynamics have reproduced enduring inequalities and identity-based competition.

Examples across the Horn illustrate this clearly. In Uganda, the historic North–South divide and the protracted insurgency of the Lord’s Resistance Army reflect the marginalization of the Acholi population from the national political project. In Djibouti, political and economic dominance by the Issa Somali elite has marginalized Afar communities, generating persistent tensions. In South Sudan, Dinka-led state formation has weakened national cohesion and fueled recurrent violent rivalry with Nuer elites. Eritrea achieved a degree of national unity through a prolonged liberation struggle. Yet, this cohesion has come at the cost of political repression and the concentration of power among Tigrinya-speaking highlanders, leaving peripheral grievances unresolved.

Despite relative ethnic homogeneity, Somalia remains deeply fragmented along clan lines, with persistent discrimination against minority groups such as the Bantu. Even in Somaliland, non-Isaaq clans have faced exclusion, particularly in the Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn (SSC) regions, leading to recurring instability.

Economic and policy choices have further reinforced these divisions. In Kenya, for example, state-led development strategies prioritized already “productive” regions, deepening spatial and social inequalities. Across the Horn, the failure to ensure equitable resource distribution, inclusive governance, and integrative national narratives has undermined both state legitimacy and democratic institutions.

The *second variant* in national identity reflects what Kymlicka (2006)⁶ characterizes as *competing nationalisms*. This occurs where a dominant group successfully implements a core nation-building project, often through cultural assimilation and political centralization. In such contexts, marginalized groups respond with demands for autonomy or outright secession. Politics therefore, takes a centrifugal form, resembling the historical trajectory of nation-state formation in Europe. Ethiopia and Sudan exemplify this pattern. In both cases, state-building projects privileged the culture, language, and identity of dominant core groups. In Ethiopia, imperial regimes promoted linguistic and cultural homogenization rooted in the northern highlands. In Sudan, riverine Arab elites institutionalized Arabic and Islam as the official language and religion, shaping the state in exclusionary ways.

These projects produced a classic “core–periphery” structure, generating sustained ethnonational mobilization in marginalized regions while leaving the political center itself internally divided. As Kymlicka argues, where such core nation-building projects are imposed, political mobilization tends to follow ethnonational lines, and multinational

⁶ Will Kymlicka. 2006. „Emerging western models of multinational federalism: Are they relevant for Africa?“ In: D. Turton (ed.). *Ethnic federalism: The*

Ethiopian experience in comparative perspective. Oxford: James Currey.



federalism emerges as a potential institutional response. Ethiopia illustrates this trajectory.

In both cases, a central impediment to democratization in the region is the absence of what Rustow termed the “single background condition” for democratic transition: national unity. Across much of the Horn, a shared sense of political community remains fragile or contested. Diversity has often been managed through coercion rather than accommodation, producing recurring disputes over belonging, representation, and sovereignty.

The implications for democratization are profound. Where national identity and state legitimacy are contested, politics becomes existential. Democratic competition risks devolving into zero-sum struggles for survival rather than institutionalized and regulated contestation. Under such conditions, elections may intensify conflict rather than mitigate it. Comparative experience suggests that inclusive national identity and integrative governance are essential preconditions for democratic consolidation. Mechanisms such as power-sharing arrangements, robust local representation, federalism, and cultural autonomy can help manage diversity while preserving state unity.

These dilemmas are particularly acute in the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia continues to struggle to reconcile post-imperial diversity with central authority. Sudan has fragmented along entrenched center–periphery fault lines. South Sudan risks reproducing similar patterns under ethnically concentrated governance and the scramble of political elites for resource capture. Djibouti remains marked by ethnic dominance, and Somalia continues to grapple with deep clan fragmentation. Across the region, the absence of an inclusive national compact remains the

central obstacle, leaving democratization efforts on fragile and contested foundations.

Cycles of Fragile Political Transitions

Several countries in the Horn of Africa have undergone, or attempted, political transitions that initially raised expectations for reform, liberalization, and more inclusive governance. Yet these transitions have rarely followed a linear trajectory toward democratization. Instead, they tend to unfold in recurrent cycles of opening and closure, shaped by deep structural constraints.

At the core of this fragility are historically rooted imbalances between state and societal forces. In many cases, the state has remained highly centralized and coercive, while social and political organizations capable of sustaining democratic pressure are weak, fragmented, or systematically repressed. This asymmetry limits the capacity of reform coalitions to consolidate gains during transitional openings. At the same time, elite fragmentation, often along ethnic, regional, or factional lines, undermines the formation of stable governing coalitions, turning transitions into arenas of intense competition rather than negotiated transformation.

The dominance of the security sector further complicates these processes. Military and intelligence institutions frequently act as autonomous political actors, either directly intervening in transitions or shaping outcomes behind the scenes. Where transitions threaten entrenched interests, security elites often reassert control, reversing or hollowing out reform efforts. The recurrence of political violence, whether through insurgency, communal conflict, or state repression, reinforces this dynamic, creating a permissive environment for authoritarian entrenchment in the name of stability.

Compounding these challenges is the limited space for nonviolent political



contestation. Restrictions on opposition parties, civil society, and independent media constrain peaceful avenues for dissent and political change. In such contexts, opposition movements that seek meaningful influence often find that armed struggle is more effective than electoral or institutional engagement. However, this strategy carries long-term consequences: it militarizes politics, legitimizes violence as a tool of political negotiation, and entrenches patterns of exclusion and coercion.

There is a paradox that emerges when armed movements succeed in capturing state power. In most cases, former rebel groups struggle to transition from insurgent organizations into inclusive, rule-bound governing institutions. Instead, they tend to reproduce the centralized, hierarchical, and command-oriented structures that sustained them during conflict. This results in highly personalized systems of rule, weak institutionalization, and limited tolerance for pluralism, thereby ultimately undermining democratic consolidation.

The experience of so-called “movement governments” in countries such as Uganda, Eritrea, South Sudan and Ethiopia (under EPRDF) illustrates this pattern. In each case, liberation or insurgent movements that came to power maintained tight political control and restricted competitive politics, prioritizing regime survival over institutional pluralism.

Taken together, these dynamics produce a self-reinforcing cycle. Even though fragile openings raise expectations, they lack institutional depth, and the ensuing instability or conflict justifies renewed centralization. In the cyclic loop, the closure of political space pushes opposition toward extra-institutional, and often violent, forms of struggle. Breaking this cycle requires not only political liberalization but also deeper transformations

in state–society relations, security sector governance, and the institutional foundations of inclusive politics.

Regional Spillovers and Geopolitical Competition

Conflicts in the Horn of Africa are rarely confined to national borders, making the region a classic example of a regional security complex. Cross-border insurgencies, large-scale refugee flows, and proxy interventions by neighboring states have produced a deeply interconnected conflict system. Strategic corridors, port access, and resource-rich territories further intensify geopolitical competition, reinforcing cycles of instability.

The Horn’s location along the western flank of the Red Sea places it among one of the world’s most critical maritime routes. This geostrategic position has long drawn the region into wider global rivalries. At the same time, external patronage networks have deepened regional polarization. In Somalia, for instance, state-building efforts remain fragile due to sustained involvement of external actors that support competing political authorities at both national and subnational levels. A similar pattern is evident in Sudan, where the ongoing civil war between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has become heavily internationalized because both armed forces have their respective external supporters.

Prior to the escalation of the US–Israel–Iran war, the Horn was already entangled in Gulf competition. This rivalry divided the region into competing camps, aggravating existing tensions, which include the fragile relationship between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the intensification of Sudan’s civil war, and renewed friction between the Ethiopian federal government and the Tigray regional



leadership. These tensions have been compounded by growing disputes between Ethiopia and Sudan, including mutual accusations of supporting rebel groups and disagreements over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), partly at the behest of Egypt, which views the project as a strategic threat.

Ethiopia's recent demand for maritime access to the Red Sea as the world's most populous landlocked country, and the memorandum of understanding in 2024 with Somaliland triggered sharp tensions with Somalia, which continues to assert sovereignty over the territory. Likewise, various factors, including the discourse in Ethiopia's historical claims relating to the port of Assab, have unraveled the fragile rapprochement between Ethiopia and Eritrea. The two states have reverted to patterns of mutual suspicion and indirect confrontation.

Conclusion, and Conflict-Sensitive Recommendations for Democracy Support Programs

Democratization in the Horn of Africa is deeply intertwined with conflict dynamics and political and social fragility. Effective democracy support requires a nuanced understanding of these dynamics, a commitment to conflict sensitivity, and the willingness to engage with complexity. By prioritizing locally grounded approaches and adaptive strategies, democracy and peace-building actors like HCD can contribute meaningfully to more inclusive and sustainable political processes in the region.

To effectively support democratization and civic action in the Horn of Africa, CSOs, think tanks and development partners should adopt the following adaptive, context-driven and conflict-sensitive approaches:

- *Prioritize political economy and conflict analysis:*

All programming requires robust, regularly updated analyses of local, national and regional conflict dynamics and political settlements, and it needs to move beyond formal institutions in order to understand informal power structures and networks.

- *Focus on state-building, nation-building, and peace-building processes:*

Democratization cannot be pursued in isolation from state-building, nation-building, and peace-building processes. Effective and legitimate governance depends on a cohesive sense of national identity, inclusive political arrangements, functional institutions, and broadly accepted structures of authority. Without these foundations, ostensible democratic reforms risk remaining superficial, fragile, or even intensifying existing conflicts. This underscores the need for an integrated approach in which state-building, nation-building, peace-building and democratization are coordinated rather than pursued in silos.

- *Support inclusive and locally rooted civic action:*

There is a need to invest in grassroots organizations and community-based initiatives that have local legitimacy and facilitate platforms for dialogue across divides (both national and local), including marginalized groups (youth, women, minorities).

- *Safeguard civic space strategically:*

It is necessary to provide legal, technical, and financial support to CSOs operating under restrictive conditions. Towards that end, such support requires context-sensitive approaches by recognizing that strategies must be adapted to what is feasible and effective in specific settings. There is a need to avoid overtly adversarial positioning that may



trigger authoritarian backlash. This necessitates priority to calibrated engagement that protects civic actors while minimizing the risk of further restrictions on political and civic space.

- *Strengthen resilience rather than impose models:*

There should be a focus on building the resilience of democratic practices (e.g., local dispute resolution, participatory governance) rather than replicating institutional templates. Such support governance arrangements combine traditional and formal institutions.

- *Adopt flexible and adaptive programs:*

There is the need to design programs with built-in flexibility to respond to changing conditions and use iterative learning approaches and feedback loops to adjust interventions in real time.

- *Integrate conflict sensitivity across all interventions:*

Integrating conflict sensitivity requires the application of “do no harm” principles systematically and ensuring that program benefits are equitably distributed and do not reinforce existing grievances.

- *Engage with state and non-state actors pragmatically:*

Where possible, there is a need to work with reform-minded actors within the state while maintaining independence and recognizing the role of traditional and informal authorities in governance and conflict resolution.

- *Support to regional integration efforts:*

Synergy and mutually beneficial regional integration can transform the Horn’s security architecture from the current zero-sum dynamic into one that promotes economic cooperation and collective security. Regional Economic Communities (RECs), such as the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and continental institutions like the African Union (AU) should thus assume a more proactive role in peace and security. At the same time, they can help articulate a unified regional voice, enabling countries in the Horn to leverage their growing geopolitical significance in engaging global and emerging powers for development gains, rather than being drawn into proxy roles within great-power and geopolitical rivalries.

