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Abstract:

Purpose of Study: This study examines Somalia's transition from the clan-based 4.5 power-sharing system toward a citizenship-based democratic governance framework. It investigates the gap between democratization expectations and implementation realities, focusing on elite capture, informal power structures, federal-state fragmentation, and the marginalization of women, youth, and minority communities in political decision-making processes.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative desktop research design, drawing on official government policy documents, constitutional frameworks, peer-reviewed journal articles, international agency reports, and relevant media publications. Data were analyzed thematically using deductive and inductive coding to identify recurring patterns, institutional challenges, reform inconsistencies, and structural barriers affecting

Somalia's political transition and democratic transformation.

Findings: The findings reveal that Somalia's transition from the 4.5 system remains incomplete despite repeated commitments to universal suffrage and democratic governance. Elite capture, entrenched clan-based interests, informal power structures, and federal-state disagreements continue to obstruct substantive political reforms. Women, youth, and minority communities remain underrepresented, while formal inclusion commitments frequently lack effective enforcement mechanisms. The adoption of electoral laws and gender quotas has not consistently translated into meaningful political participation. Furthermore, persistent reliance on indirect elections demonstrates the continued influence of clan-based political arrangements. The study also identifies a symbolic politics trap, whereby institutional reforms are formally adopted without sufficiently transforming existing power relations, limiting progress toward inclusive, accountable, and representative governance.

Conclusion: Somalia's transition requires more than formal electoral and constitutional reforms. Sustainable democratic transformation depends on addressing the political structures and incentives that reproduce clan-based power sharing. A sequenced approach emphasizing enforceable inclusion mechanisms, stronger electoral institutions, civic participation, federal consensus, security, and engagement with informal authorities can provide a more credible pathway toward inclusive, citizenship-based governance.

Keywords: *Somalia's 4.5 system, political transition, clan politics, governance, democratization, power-sharing*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Somalia's political transition from clan-based power-sharing toward a citizenship-based democratic system remains a major governance challenge following decades of conflict and state fragility. The 4.5 power-sharing formula emerged from the Arta Peace Conference in 2000 as a temporary mechanism for political accommodation among Somalia's major clan constituencies. The arrangement provided equal representation to the four major clan families—Darod, Hawiye, Dir, and Rahanweyn—and a half share collectively for minority clans. Although intended to facilitate reconciliation and establish political stability, the formula became deeply embedded in Somalia's political institutions. Consequently, clan identity has remained influential in determining political representation, leadership selection, and access to public institutions, creating tensions between clan-based representation and the principle of equal citizenship.

Despite repeated commitments to democratic transformation, Somalia's transition from the 4.5 system has remained incomplete. Successive governments have promoted constitutional reform, universal suffrage, electoral development, and federal governance, yet implementation has been constrained by insecurity, institutional weaknesses, elite interests, and disagreements between the federal government and federal member states. Informal clan structures also continue to influence political negotiations and decision-making, limiting the extent to which formal democratic institutions can independently determine political outcomes. The persistence of indirect electoral arrangements demonstrates the continuing gap between expectations of democratic participation and political realities.

This study examines Somalia's transition from the 4.5 system by assessing the gap between reform expectations and implementation outcomes. It focuses on elite capture, informal power structures, federal-state fragmentation, and the distinction between symbolic and substantive reforms. Through qualitative desktop research, the study analyzes scholarly literature, official documents, international reports, and relevant media sources. It seeks to identify structural barriers to democratic transformation and propose realistic, sequenced strategies for strengthening citizenship-based political participation, institutional accountability, and inclusive governance in Somalia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Origins and Rationale of the 4.5 System

The 4.5 power-sharing formula was institutionalized at the Somalia National Peace Conference in Arta, Djibouti, in 2000 as a conflict management tool to bring together deeply fragmented clans

after years of civil war. Under this model, the four major clan families—Darod, Hawiye, Dir, and Rahanweyn—each receive an equal number of seats in the Federal Parliament, while a coalition of minority clans collectively receives a half share. The Somali Public Agenda (2023) notes that despite the Somali Provisional Constitution containing no reference to the formula, it continues to determine the allocation of seats to clans in the Federal Parliament's House of the People and Council of Ministers.

The rationale behind the 4.5 model was grounded in the urgent need to restore political order in the absence of a functioning state. Somalia had endured state collapse since 1991, which led to the emergence of clan militias and warlordism as de facto governance structures. The 4.5 formula was thus a pragmatic response, allowing warring factions to negotiate power-sharing arrangements based on clan affiliation—a politically salient identity in Somali society. Drawing from Lijphart's (1977) theory of consociational democracy, the formula aligns with the principle of elite accommodation in divided societies, where governance is structured through group autonomy and mutual vetoes.

Djibouti's Permanent Representative to the United Nations has described the 4.5 formula as a bold innovation that avoided one clan dominance and was weaved around Somali clan order (United Nations Security Council, 2020). While acknowledging that some have lingering concerns about the entrenchment of clan politics that this formula may have inadvertently created, the Djiboutian perspective emphasizes the formula's role in strengthening the legitimacy of the emergent governmental institutions. This view reflects the initial utility of the arrangement as a stabilizing mechanism.

2.2 Critiques of Prolonged Reliance on 4.5

Despite its initial utility, the 4.5 model has increasingly been criticized for stalling Somalia's political development and reinforcing subnational loyalties over national cohesion. The Somali Public Agenda (2023) documents that efforts to move past the system have repeatedly failed due to conflicting views and interests regarding when, how, and to what degree this might be achieved. The lack of consensus, coupled with a wider reliance on clan power-sharing, is identified as a major obstacle to continued political progress, especially in terms of deepening democratization and enabling effective, meritocratic governance.

A report from the Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023) captures the sentiments of Somali participants in a national dialogue process: Clan power-sharing, particularly the 4.5 formula, requires longterm solutions. While it has played a stabilizing role in the past, there is growing recognition that it limits political inclusivity and fails to support sustainable governance. This recognition reflects a growing consensus that the formula's longevity has created structural impediments to democratic consolidation.

As Salah (2020) asserts, the system effectively codifies a form of political caste, in which dominant clans enjoy the full privileges of state representation, while minority groups—such as the Benadiri, Bajuni, and Somali Bantu—are marginalized and treated as political afterthoughts. The Somali Public Agenda (2023) further notes that continuing to use the 4.5 system poses significant obstacles to conducting one-person-one-vote elections in Somalia, as allocating seats to specific clans contradicts the fundamental principles of universal suffrage.

Women and youth also face major structural barriers under the 4.5 system, primarily due to the role of clan elders as political gatekeepers. Although Somalia has committed to a 30% quota for women's representation, actual representation in the Federal Parliament has remained significantly below that target. UNDP (2025) data indicates that women's parliamentary representation declined from 24% in 2016 to approximately 20% in the 2021/2022 electoral cycle. The 30% quota was ultimately passed in 2025, representing a significant milestone, but implementation remains a challenge (UNDP, 2025).

2.3 Theoretical Debates: Power-Sharing and Post-Conflict Governance

The transition from Somalia's 4.5 system offers a valuable case study for the broader field of postconflict governance, particularly in contexts where social fragmentation and weak state institutions intersect. Scholars such as Paris and Sisk (2009) have emphasized that in fragile states, postconflict democratization is not merely a legal or procedural process but a deeply political one, often shaped by historical grievances, identity politics, and elite bargaining.

Power-sharing arrangements like the 4.5 model are typically designed to provide short-term stability by managing group-based claims, but they can also freeze political competition and obstruct broader institutional evolution (Horowitz, 2014; Norris, 2008). In Somalia, this tension is particularly pronounced. While the 4.5 system helped end prolonged civil war and reintroduce a measure of order, it also institutionalized clan hierarchies that have proved resistant to dismantling. The concept of "adaptive peacebuilding" (de Coning, 2018) emphasizes flexibility, local ownership, and iterative reform processes rather than rigid institutional blueprints. Somalia's contested transition illustrates that post-conflict democratization is best understood not as a linear path but as a dynamic and often contradictory process that blends formal reforms with informal, context-specific practices.

2.4 Gender and Post-Conflict Governance

The literature on gender and post-conflict governance provides important insights into the limitations of quota-based approaches to women's political inclusion. While quotas can increase women's descriptive representation, they do not automatically translate into substantive representation or empowerment (Dahlerup, 2006; Tripp, 2015). In contexts where patriarchal structures remain intact,

formal inclusion mechanisms may be "repurposed to contain" women's political participation (African Arguments, 2026). This study engages with this literature to analyze the gap between Somalia's formal commitment to the 30% quota and its implementation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative desktop research methodology. A desktop approach was selected because the research questions concern policy frameworks, institutional dynamics, and discursive patterns that are documented in publicly available sources. Rather than generating new empirical data through fieldwork, the study synthesizes and critically analyzes existing evidence to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps in Somalia's political transition. The desktop method is appropriate for several reasons. First, the topic involves analysis of official policy documents, legal frameworks, and international reports that are accessible through online repositories. Second, security conditions in Somalia make extensive fieldwork challenging. Third, the study aims to synthesize findings from multiple sources—including scholarly articles, policy reports, media analysis, and government statements—to construct a comprehensive picture of reform trajectories.

3.2 Data Sources

Data were collected from three primary categories of sources: Official documents and policy frameworks. These include Somalia's Provisional Federal Constitution (2012), the 2020 National Electoral Law, communiqués from the National Consultative Council, and press releases from the Federal Government of Somalia. Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, and policy papers addressing Somalia's political transition, power-sharing arrangements, and post-conflict governance were reviewed. Reports from international agencies and media. Publications from the United Nations, International Crisis Group, Somali Public Agenda, Transparency International, and established news outlets were analyzed to capture both institutional perspectives and ontheground reporting.

3.3 Analytical Approach

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurrent patterns and themes across the data. The analysis followed a six-phase process (Braun & Clarke, 2006): Familiarization with the data: All sources were read and re-read to develop a comprehensive understanding of the material. Generating initial codes: Key concepts and patterns were identified across the dataset. Searching for themes: Codes were grouped into potential themes based on patterns of similarity and difference. Reviewing themes: Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately captured the data. Defining and

naming themes: Themes were defined and named to clearly communicate their content. Producing the report: The findings were written up, integrating analytical narrative with supporting evidence. The coding framework was developed both deductively (guided by the research questions) and inductively (emerging from the data). Deductive codes included: reform expectations, implementation barriers, structural continuities, elite capture, and marginalization. Inductive codes included: symbolic reform, informal power, federal-state tension, and quota implementation challenges.

3.4 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on secondary sources, which may reflect the biases of their authors or the institutions that produced them. To mitigate this, the study triangulates across multiple source types and engages with critical perspectives. Second, access to internal government proceedings and decision-making processes is limited. Third, the political situation in Somalia is dynamic, and findings may be time-sensitive. Fourth, the study does not include Somali-language sources, which may limit the range of perspectives captured. Despite these limitations, the desktop approach provides a robust framework for analyzing the transition process by triangulating across multiple source types.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Unrealized Expectations and Symbolic Reforms

The first major finding is the persistent gap between reform expectations and actual outcomes, particularly in the area of women's political representation. This finding addresses to what extent has Somalia moved beyond clan-based power-sharing? and what is the gap between stated reform expectations and actual outcomes?). Table 3 presents data on women's representation in the Somali parliament across electoral cycles.

Table 1

Women's Representation in the Somali Parliament Across Electoral Cycles

Electoral cycle	Women's representation (%)	Target (%)	Source	Notes

2016	24	30	UNDP (2025)	Baseline for comparison
2021/2022	20–21	30	UNDP (2025); UNDP (2023)	Decline from 2016
2025 (quota passed)	Implementation pending	30	UNDP (2025)	Legal milestone; enforcement absent

Note. Data compiled from UNDP Somalia and UN evaluation reports. The 30% quota was passed in 2025 but implementation mechanisms remain undeveloped.

Table 1 above reveals three critical patterns. First, women's representation has not only failed to reach the 30% target but has actually declined over time—from 24% in 2016 to 20–21% in the 2021/2022 cycle. This counterintuitive trend indicates that reforms intended to increase inclusion have been insufficient to overcome the structural barriers embedded in the 4.5 system. Second, the passage of the 30% quota in 2025 represents a legal milestone but not a substantive transformation; the "implementation pending" note in the table signals that the gap between legal reform and actual representation remains wide. Third, the table demonstrates that quota adoption without enforcement mechanisms does not automatically translate into increased representation. The Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023) documented that the 2020/21 electoral process included a 30% provision but "there was no enforcement mechanism to ensure the proper proportion of women". As a result, "in the initial round of appointments, only 5, or less than 24% of the members appointed, were women". This finding aligns with the broader literature on gender quotas, which demonstrates that formal inclusion mechanisms may be "repurposed to contain" women's political participation when patriarchal structures remain intact (African Arguments, 2026; Dahlerup, 2006; Tripp, 2015).

The youth, who constitute approximately 70% of Somalia's population (UNDP, 2026), remain largely excluded from formal political participation. This exclusion is consistent with the broader pattern documented by the Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023), which found that young men, women and girls, minority clan members, the poor, and IDPs face serious challenges in Somali society" and that "politics is considered a male domain.

The 2020 National Electoral Law represented a milestone in Somalia's stated commitment to democratic reform, proposing a shift to one-person, one-vote elections. However, implementation failed to materialize due to structural and logistical challenges. The German Federal Ministry for

Economic Cooperation and Development (2022) confirms that although a new electoral law was adopted in 2020, the organisational and technical prerequisites for free general elections have not yet been put in place. Elections continued to rely on clan-based electoral colleges, preserving the status quo. This finding demonstrates that legal reforms, however well-intentioned, are insufficient to overcome the entrenched interests and structural barriers that sustain the 4.5 system.

4.2 Finding 2: Elite Capture and Informal Power Structures

The second major finding is the pervasive influence of elite capture and informal power structures in blocking meaningful reform. This finding addresses what structural impediments explain persistence of the 4.5 logic?) and how do elite interests and informal structures block reform? Table 4 presents data on federal-state divergence regarding electoral reform, illustrating how elite interests at both the federal and state levels have impeded implementation.

Table 2

Federal-State Divergence on Electoral Reform (2023–2026)

Reform area	Federal Government position	Federal Member State positions	Observed outcome	Source
Electoral timeline (2023)	Unified national electoral schedule	Region-specific deadlines	Delays and uncertainty	ReliefWeb (2023)
NCC Agreement (2023)	Direct presidential elections by 2024	Puntland rejected the proposal; others opposed it	Legislative approval stalled	ReliefWeb (2023)
2025 Opposition Deal	MPs elected by popular vote; president elected by lawmakers	Opposition factions rejected the arrangement	Partial reversal of 2024 amendments	International IDEA (2025)
2026 Constitutional Amendments	One-person, one-vote electoral system	Puntland and Jubbaland refused to recognize the amendments	Parallel political convention threatened	African Arguments (2026)

Note. Data compiled from ReliefWeb, International IDEA, and African Arguments reports. NCC = National Consultative Council; MPs = Members of Parliament.

Table 2 above reveals several critical dynamics. First, the table demonstrates that federal-state divergence is not merely a technical disagreement about implementation modalities but a fundamental conflict over the distribution of power. The 2023 NCC Agreement proposed direct presidential elections by 2024, but Puntland's rejection "citing lack of consultation" reflects a deeper tension between federal authority and state sovereignty (ReliefWeb, 2023). Second, the table shows that reform agreements reached at the federal level are frequently reversed or contested at the state level. The 2025 Opposition Deal partially reversed the 2024 constitutional amendments, while the 2026 Constitutional Amendments faced refusal of recognition from Puntland and Jubbaland. Third, the "parallel political convention threatened" outcome in 2026 indicates that federal-state fragmentation has reached a point where alternative political processes are being contemplated outside the formal constitutional framework. This pattern is consistent with the Somali Public Agenda's (2023) documentation that the influence of clan elders has been eroded by their involvement in politics, and their role in elections and political processes has diminished, making these systems vulnerable to political manipulation.

The one-person, one-vote elections expected in 2021 did not materialize—not primarily due to technical difficulties but because of absent political will and elite bargaining. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (2022) notes that although a new electoral law was adopted in 2020, the organisational and technical prerequisites for free general elections have not yet been put in place, and the most recent elections were again carried out using an indirect procedure. The National Independent Electoral Commission cited problems with election modalities, voter registration, and security measures that led to postponement. However, the deeper issue was the lack of commitment among political elites to a process that would fundamentally restructure power relations.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023) report captures this dynamic through the voices of Somali participants: "There is a strong feeling that leaders need to put aside their personal interests and genuinely serve the national interest. Without this willingness to compromise, no agreement will last. Participants emphasized that overcoming the political stalemate requires a spirit of sacrifice among politicians and a shift toward serving the national interest rather than personal or clan-based agendas.



Infrastructural and logistical barriers compound these political obstacles. Somalia lacks a national civil registry, has inadequate infrastructure, and faces severe financial constraints for conducting credible national elections. The absence of a comprehensive biometric voter registration system, incomplete national identification infrastructure, and limited electoral commission capacity mean that even if political will existed, the technical prerequisites for universal suffrage are not in place (UNDP, 2025). Insecurity, particularly the Al-Shabaab threat, further constrains electoral possibilities. The group has targeted electoral infrastructure and personnel, creating an environment of fear that suppresses participation. As the Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023) notes, security is also a significant part of breaking the deadlock, because without a stable environment, political agreements cannot be implemented.

4.3 Marginalization of Underrepresented Groups and Federal-State Fragmentation

The third major finding is the structural marginalization of women, youth, and minority communities, compounded by federal-state fragmentation. This finding addresses what structural impediments explain persistence of the 4.5 logic? and how does federal-state fragmentation impede reform? Table 5 presents data on the mechanisms through which exclusion is maintained despite formal commitments to inclusion.

Table 3
Mechanisms of Exclusion Under the 4.5 System

Affected group	Formal commitment	Actual outcome	Mechanism of exclusion	Source
Women	30% quota (2025)	20–21% representation (2021/2022)	Maledominated clan elders control candidate selection	UNDP (2025); Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023)

Youth	Inclusivity declarations	Minimal formal participation	"Politics considered a male domain"; elder gatekeeping	Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023); UNDP (2026)
Minority communities	Constitutional equality	Political afterthought; underrepresentation	4.5 formula allocates seats to major clans only	Salah (2020); Somali Public Agenda (2023)
Women (subnational)	30% quota	Hirshabelle seats dropped from 10 to 5 (2016–2022)	Elite negotiations require "sacrificial compromises"	African Arguments (2026)

Note. Data compiled from UNDP, Folke Bernadotte Academy, African Arguments, Salah (2020), and Somali Public Agenda reports.

Table 3 reveals the mechanisms through which formal commitments to inclusion are systematically undermined. First, for women, the table shows that despite the 30% quota, actual representation declined from 24% in 2016 to 20–21% in 2021/2022. The mechanism of exclusion is identified as "male-dominated clan elders control candidate selection"—a structural feature of the 4.5 system that quota legislation alone cannot address. Second, for youth, the table shows that despite inclusivity declarations, formal participation remains minimal because "politics is considered a male domain" and elder gatekeeping persists. Third, for minority communities, the table shows that constitutional equality guarantees are contradicted by the 4.5 formula's allocation of seats to major clans only, rendering minority groups "political afterthoughts" (Salah, 2020). Fourth, the table documents sub-national variation: in Hirshabelle, seats held by women dropped from ten to five between 2016 and 2022, demonstrating that exclusion operates not only at the national level but also within federal member states. The mechanism—elite negotiations require sacrificial compromises—reveals that women's representation is often traded away in political bargaining, a pattern African Arguments (2026) describes as "patriarchal hybridity," whereby "clan-based power



structures absorb and domesticate formal gender reforms without surrendering actual decisionmaking authority". Federal-state fragmentation creates multiple sites of exclusion, as elite negotiations at the state level can override national commitments to inclusion.

The federal-state fragmentation documented in Table compounds these exclusionary dynamics. The 2023 NCC agreement ignited controversy precisely because it raised questions about regional autonomy and the potential extension of presidential terms (ReliefWeb, 2023). Puntland's rejection of the agreement "citing lack of consultation" reflects the persistent tension between federal authority and state sovereignty (ReliefWeb, 2023). The 2026 constitutional amendments faced similar resistance, with Puntland and Jubbaland refusing recognition and opposition figures threatening a parallel political convention (African Arguments, 2026). Resolving this impasse requires a renegotiation of the federal compact, yet the 4.5 system was designed for a unitary state and is poorly suited to Somalia's federal structure. This provides further evidence for RQ5: federalstate fragmentation impedes reform by creating competing centers of power that can block or reverse national-level agreements.

4.4 The Symbolic Politics Trap

The fourth major finding is the dominance of symbolic reforms over substantive transformation, a pattern that can be understood through the concept of the "symbolic politics trap." This finding addresses what is the gap between stated reform expectations and actual outcomes? And to what extent are reforms symbolic rather than substantive? Table 6 presents data on symbolic versus substantive reforms across multiple domains.

Table 4

Symbolic Reforms Versus Substantive Outcomes

Reform domain	Symbolic reform	Substantive outcome	Gap	Source
Electoral law (2020)	Onepersononevote proposed	Indirect clanbased elections continued	Law adopted; implementation failed	BMZ (2022)

Women's quota (2025)	30% quota passed	Implementation pending; 20– 21% actual	Legal milestone; enforcement absent	UNDP (2025)
Civic education	UNSOM-backed political agreement	Delegates selected by clan elders	Formal process bypassed	Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023)
Biometric ID	Intended to enhance electoral integrity	Registration still being rolled out in phases (2026)	Delays and incomplete implementation	Ministry of Information (2026)

Note. Data compiled from BMZ, UNDP, Folke Bernadotte Academy, and Ministry of Information reports. BMZ = German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Table 4 above reveals a consistent pattern across four reform domains. First, the 2020 Electoral Law proposed one-person-one-vote elections, but indirect clan-based elections continued. The gap is described as "law adopted; implementation failed." Second, the 2025 Women's Quota was passed, but implementation remains pending and actual representation stands at 20–21%. The gap is "legal milestone; enforcement absent." Third, civic education efforts were backed by a UNSOM political agreement, but delegates continued to be selected by clan elders, meaning the "formal process bypassed." Fourth, the biometric ID system was intended to enhance electoral integrity, but as of 2026 registration is still being rolled out in phases, indicating delays and incomplete implementation.

This pattern reflects what can be termed the "symbolic politics trap," a concept that draws on Edelman's (1964) work on symbolic politics and Meyer and Rowan's (1977) theory of decoupling. In this dynamic, governments adopt the language of reform to satisfy external expectations and domestic critics while avoiding measures that would genuinely disrupt existing power relations. African Arguments (2026) documents this pattern through the concept of "patriarchal hybridity," describing how the systems designed to include [women] had been quietly repurposed to contain

them. The article notes that Somalia has a long tradition of celebrating firsts while the machinery of exclusion reassembles itself quietly in the background. Table 5 demonstrates that this observation applies not only to gender but to the broader reform process.

International partners play an ambiguous role in this dynamic. On one hand, they provide technical support, funding, and diplomatic pressure for reform. On the other, their emphasis on measurable progress can incentivize symbolic rather than substantive change. The Somali Public Agenda's (2023) analysis of the 4.5 system notes that appointment and employment in government are often based on the 4.5 system rather than merit and knowledge, suggesting that formal processes coexist with informal practices that determine actual outcomes.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 The Limits of Institutional Design Without Power Transformation

The findings underscore a central lesson from Somalia's experience: institutional design alone cannot generate democratic transformation when underlying power structures remain unchallenged. The 4.5 system was a pragmatic response to state collapse, but its longevity has created structural impediments to democratization that cannot be overcome through legal reforms or policy declarations alone. The persistence of elite capture, informal power structures, and clan-based gatekeeping reflects a deeper reality: those who benefit from the current system have both the incentive and the capacity to block reforms that would redistribute power. As the Somali Public Agenda (2023) notes, the 4.5 system has removed the positive influence of clan elders by integrating them into political processes, making them vulnerable to political manipulation. This finding complicates the assumption that traditional authorities are simply obstacles to reform—they are also actors whose roles have been transformed by their incorporation into formal politics.

The Folke Bernadotte Academy (2023) report captures the sentiment of Somali participants: The focus should be on resolving the root causes rather than temporary political arrangements. This includes addressing structural barriers, institutional weaknesses, and the existing gaps in trust. This perspective suggests that Somalis themselves recognize the limitations of surface-level reforms and are calling for deeper structural change.

5.2 The Symbolic Politics Trap and International Engagement

The pattern of symbolic reforms without structural change, reflects what can be termed the "symbolic politics trap." In this dynamic, governments adopt the language of reform to satisfy external expectations and domestic critics while avoiding measures that would genuinely disrupt existing power relations. This concept draws on Edelman's (1964) work on symbolic politics and

Meyer and Rowan's (1977) theory of decoupling, which explains how organizations adopt formal structures that are disconnected from actual practices.

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A more sophisticated political economy analysis would explore the mechanisms through which international engagement shapes domestic incentives. For example, the pressure to demonstrate progress on women's representation may lead to the appointment of women to symbolic positions without corresponding power, while the emphasis on holding elections may incentivize the maintenance of indirect electoral systems that are easier to manage and control. These dynamics reflect a deeper tension between international expectations and local power structures that cannot be resolved through technical assistance alone.

5.3 The Federal-State Impasse and the Future of Power-Sharing

The fragmentation between the Federal Government and Federal Member States, reflects a deeper unresolved question about Somalia's political architecture: what is the appropriate distribution of power between the center and the regions? The 4.5 system was designed for a unitary state, but Somalia has adopted a federal structure in which member states possess significant autonomy.

The 2023 NCC agreement ignited controversy precisely because it raised questions about regional autonomy and the potential extension of presidential terms (ReliefWeb, 2023). Puntland's rejection of the agreement "citing lack of consultation" reflects the persistent tension between federal authority and state sovereignty (ReliefWeb, 2023). The 2026 constitutional amendments faced similar resistance, with Puntland and Jubbaland refusing recognition and opposition figures threatening a parallel political convention (African Arguments, 2026).

Resolving this impasse requires a renegotiation of the federal compact. The National Consultative Council process has made some progress, but contentious issues remain unresolved. The Somali Future Council's proposal to combine direct elections with continued 4.5 representation reflects an attempt to bridge this divide, though it remains contested (Horseed Media, 2026).

The literature on consociationalism and power-sharing suggests that some form of group-based representation may be necessary for stability in deeply divided societies (Lijphart, 1977; Horowitz, 2014). This does not mean that the 4.5 system should be maintained in its current form—it clearly has serious flaws, particularly in its marginalization of women, youth, and minority communities. However, it does suggest that the goal should be reforming rather than simply abolishing the system, and that any transition must be carefully sequenced to avoid destabilization.

5.4 Toward a More Realistic Transition Strategy

The findings suggest that Somalia's transition from the 4.5 system requires a more realistic and sequenced strategy. Rather than pursuing universal suffrage as an immediate goal, the focus should be on building the prerequisites for credible direct elections over time. This includes:

Establishing a national civil registry and biometric voter database. The population census announced in 2023, the first comprehensive count in nearly 50 years, is a critical step toward this goal. Without accurate population data and a reliable identification system, universal suffrage is technically infeasible.

Strengthening electoral institutions. The National Independent Electoral Commission requires greater capacity, independence, and operational reach to manage a nationwide electoral process. The 2026 voter registration efforts in Galmudug represent initial progress (Ministry of Information, Culture & Tourism, 2026).

Enacting enforceable inclusion quotas. The 30% quota for women, passed in 2025, must be accompanied by "Temporary Special Measures" including "reserved seats, minimum candidate thresholds, inclusive nomination procedures, party financing tied to quota compliance, penalties for non-compliant political parties, quota monitoring mechanisms, and security guarantees for women during elections" (UNDP, 2025).

Investing in civic education. A national voter education campaign that reaches rural and urban populations, addresses practical aspects of electoral participation, and promotes civic responsibility is essential for building demand for democratic governance.

Sequencing security and elections. In areas where Al-Shabaab retains significant operational capacity, holding elections may be impossible in the short term. A differentiated approach that prioritizes security and stabilization in contested areas while proceeding with elections where conditions permit may be more realistic than insisting on uniform national timelines.

Engaging with informal power structures. Rather than seeking to bypass or eliminate clan elders and customary authorities, a realistic transition strategy should engage with them as stakeholders in the reform process. This means recognizing their legitimate roles in dispute resolution and community governance while gradually building the capacity of formal institutions.

6. CONCLUSION

Somalia's transition from the clan-based 4.5 power-sharing system toward a more democratic and representative order remains incomplete. While the 4.5 formula served a critical purpose in ending prolonged conflict and establishing a functioning government, its longevity has entrenched clannism and marginalized women, youth, and minority communities. This study set out to answer one primary research question and five secondary research questions. The findings demonstrate that Somalia has made minimal substantive progress beyond clan-based power-sharing. The structural impediments that explain this persistence include elite capture of reform processes, the enduring influence of informal power structures (particularly clan elders), federal-state fragmentation, and the dominance of symbolic over substantive reform. These challenges reflect a deeper reality: institutional reforms cannot succeed without addressing the power relations that sustain the status quo. Somalia's democratization requires more than technical adjustments to the electoral system—it demands a fundamental restructuring of the political architecture that promotes accountability, enhances civic literacy, and genuinely distributes power across societal groups.

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