



Somalia – President Mohamud on the back foot while al-Shabaab attacks continue

Standard Note: SN06421

Last updated: 27 June 2014

Author: Jon Lunn

Section International Affairs and Defence Section

A few days ago, President [Hassan Sheikh Mohamud](#) declared that Somalia was once again in a “[political crisis](#)”. In May, UN Special Envoy to Somalia, Nicholas Kay, said that Somalia is approaching “[a danger zone](#)”. What lies behind such warnings?

Mohamud’s election in September 2012 was the culmination of an intense final few months of Somalia’s long transitional period. During August 2012, in line with a ‘road map’ agreed by stakeholders in late 2011/early 2012, a provisional Constitution was adopted and the membership agreed of both a new, much smaller, parliament and a constituent assembly tasked with drafting a final Constitution. In the same month, the mandate of the corrupt and discredited Transitional Federal Government expired.

Mohamud’s election was described at the time by [David Cameron](#) as a “great step forward” for Somalia. Combined with continuing military set-backs for the militant Islamist group al-Shabaab, which had lost control over tranches of territory, official optimism about Somalia’s future was greater than for many years – although there was still plenty of scepticism from some observers. [Roland Marchal](#) argued that “the new institutions are likely to have no more legitimacy [than the TFG did] since the whole roadmap process appears to be overly influenced by foreigners [...] Britain and the US have fallen for their own propaganda.”

For the first year or so after President Mohamud took office, Western supporters of the Government put a positive spin on his performance. However, this has become increasingly difficult to do. There is a growing sense that President Mohamud’s government is not turning out to be the fresh start that Somalia needed. Some are worried that the president has surrounded himself with a narrow clique and that real power does not lie with him but with some of his ministers. Factionalism and in-fighting are rife. There are unconfirmed reports that US Secretary of State John Kerry told President Mohamud when they met in Ethiopia in early May that he must improve or resign. In May, a caucus of Somali parliamentarians called on him to resign and threatened him with impeachment. The threat remains on the table.

Mohamud’s administration has barely begun to address many of the [crucial tasks](#) it inherited from its discredited predecessor, the Transitional Federal Government, such as completing a final Constitution and securing agreement on how a federal Somalia will operate. An independent constitutional review commission was only established in May. Elections are due in 2016 but many wonder whether they may have to be delayed.

Nor does Mohamud’s government seem to have made a great deal of progress in combating official corruption. A July 2013 UN Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea report argued that [not much has changed](#), alleging that: a large percentage of withdrawals from the Central Bank had been for private purposes: a significant proportion of Mogadishu port revenues was going missing every month; and that the immigration service was heavily implicated in fraud

in connection with the issuing of passports and visas. The Somali Federal Government initially repudiated the report, with the Governor of the Central Bank, [Abdusalam Omer](#), accusing it of being “completely unfounded, unsubstantiated, defamatory and reckless.” Omer eventually resigned in September 2013 but little has changed for the better since then.

Al-Shabaab has suffered important military reverses since President Mohamud took office – most notably, losing control over Somalia’s strategically vital second city, the port of Kismayo in October 2012, and subsequently all of its remaining territory in the far south of the country. Al-Shabaab has experienced a violent split, with two senior figures, Hassan Dahir Aweys and Mukhtar Robow forcefully expelled by Ahmed Abdi Godane, the group’s ‘Emir’. Some viewed these clashes as spelling the [beginning of the end of al-Shabaab](#), with the group in danger of fracturing along clan lines. But it has adjusted to the new situation, focusing increasingly on launching regular [violent attacks](#) on government-held areas, including Mogadishu, where security has declined markedly in recent months. Al-Shabaab conducted a car bomb attack on Somalia’s Parliament in May.

It has also increased its attacks in neighbouring Kenya, which sent troops into southern Somalia in 2011. Al-Shabaab recently declared Kenya to be a “[war zone](#)”. It attacked the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi in September 2013, killing 67 people. At least 48 people died in an al-Shabaab attack on the Kenyan coastal town of Mpeketoni earlier this month. The group retains control over significant parts of the south and centre of Somalia.

The African Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) launched a new military offensive against al-Shabaab in March, which has had some [successes](#). However, the International Crisis Group asserts in a 26 June briefing:

Despite military gains against Somalia’s Islamist group al-Shabaab, the insurgents’ defeat will remain elusive until the Somali government and its international partners address long standing social – often clan-based -- grievances through parallel local and national processes, as the basis for the revival of governmental authority.

As this assessment makes clear, the security gains made by pro-government forces, led by AMISOM, have not yet translated into a significantly strengthened Somali Federal Government. For example, since Kismayo fell in October 2012, a local militia called the ‘Ras Kamboni Brigade’, led by Sheikh Ahmed Madobe, has ([with Kenyan consent](#)) effectively taken over the government of the port city and surrounding areas. In May 2013 it declared a new state in the south called ‘Jubaland’. The Federal Government has had to accept this arrangement for a two-year period.

Clan tensions have also been on the rise in other regions nominally under government control, including in the south-west, where rival local administrations emerged. However, in recent days a [deal](#) has been done to create a single administration. Meanwhile, there has been no progress in bringing Somaliland back into the federal fold. Relations between the semi-autonomous region of Puntland and the Federal Government have not always been good. Neither Somaliland nor Puntland attended an [international donor conference](#) on Somalia in May 2013 at which [\\$300m was pledged](#). However, Puntland is participating in the independent constitutional review commission.

Background reading: International Crisis Group, “[Somalia: Al-Shabaab – it will be a long war](#)”, Africa Briefing No. 199, 26 June 2014; D. Balthasar, “[Will Somalia’s hydrocarbon boom oil or spoil its future?](#)”, *African Arguments*, 9 June 2014; “MPs want the President’s head”, *Africa Confidential*, 16 May 2014 (available on request); Library Research Paper 08/86, [Interlocking crises in the Horn of Africa](#) (24 November 2008).