Somali State Building and Sub-State Actors

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Somali State Building and Sub-State Actors: The Role and Potential of Jubaland and Puntland

The world is changed. The Gulf of Aden between Yemen and Somalia accounts for over 10 percent of global trade in 2024, connecting Africa, Asia and Europe. A secure and stable Somalia is therefore vital for the economic interest of several state and non-state actors. These international actors assisted in the creation of a federal structure in Somalia. In this sense, Barise notes that “federalism is viewed as a strategy for rebuilding the state by empowering regional administrations, addressing local grievances, and fostering national integration“. However, critical analyses describe that “the status of the Somali state as unified, stable, and sovereign has been an elusive goal for generations of Somali citizen“. This has created an environment, in which access to power enables to access and distribute external rents as a mean to generate wealth. The most recent row has been the

approval of controversial constitutional amendments by the federal parliament despite broad political opposition headed by the administrations of the federal states Jubaland and Puntland.

These dynamics add to the fragile situation for Somali state-building efforts, which have reached a new turning point with the recognition of Somaliland by Israel in late December 2025. Tel Aviv's decision is noticeable as the Horn of Africa is increasingly shaped by the power competition between the Egypt-Saudi Arabia-Türkiye and the Ethiopia-Israel-United Arab Emirates (UAE) axis. Additionally, the resurgence of Al-Shabaab combined with the further financing of AUSSOM under scrutiny, and the upcoming presidential elections add to the challenges regarding comprehensive state-building. Considering the importance attached to Somalia's strategic and economic position at the Horn of Africa, the prospect of renewed state collapse and increasing instability remains undesirable.

As most recent analyses of the situation have primarily focused on external factors shaping Somali policies and dynamics, they are neglecting the role and potential advocacy of Somali actors themselves. To this end, the present article aims to provide insight into the role of two notable figures in Somali politics, Ahmed Mohamed Islam, commonly known as Ahmed Madobe, President of Jubaland, and Saeed Abdullahi Deni, President of Puntland. Both Jubaland and Puntland are federal states of the Republic of Somalia, and are recurringly drawing attention by internal and external actors due to their stability, resources, and strategic ports, such as Kismayo Port.

However, it is important to note that internal and external factors shaping Somali politics cannot be observed independently from another. While recent years have indicated an increase in the autonomy and the ability to shape politics by internal actors, remarks by the President of Somalia, Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, demonstrate the persisting influence of external actors. While external partners observe the developments in Somalia in the context of regional power struggles, their agendas still require local implementation and partners. To that end, Somali politicians can use this leverage to advance their own agendas. A similar important, but less transparent and analysed influence is attached to the fragmented clan system.

While this analysis considers the factors presented above, it focuses primarily on the role and agency of the individuals under investigation. After elaborating on the concept of strongmen in political science, the article examines whether Jubaland's Madobe and Puntland's Deni decisively shape their political environment. The results indicate on their constructive or destructive role in further state-building efforts in Somalia. The paper concludes with an outlook on future Somali stability.

The Notion of Strongmen in Politics

Slater defines strongman as military leader or leader with a military audience, which are largely unconstrained in their actions. Applying Slater's model, Weeks finds that "given the treacherous road to power in a personalist dictatorship, these unconstrained leaders are often precisely the types of individuals who seek out international conflict and can survive defeat, only to repeat the cycle".

Rachman presents another characterisation of the strongman. Internally, strongman's are perceived to stand up for ordinary people against an external enemy, such as globalist elites. Externally, they are the embodiment of the nation, while encouraging a cult of personality. Treisman and Guriev add, that strongmen do not rule through the threat of violence and fear, but instead through the manipulation and the control over information. More specifically, they curtail democratic and liberal freedoms, while using the state's power against rivals to remain unchallenged. In such, journalists are expected to function as a arm of the government, spreading often nativist and anti-institutional rhetorics.

Ahmed Madobe: President of Jubaland (2012 – ongoing)

Ahmed Madobe is since 2013 the first and only president of the Somali federal state of Jubaland. Before, he was already the Head of the Jubaland Administration since his seizure of Kismayo in 2012. He was re-elected twice in 2019 and 2024, although both elections led to controversies with the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS).

Since his first public appearance in 1991, Madobe's "own deal-making led him from alliances with Islamist militias to fighting against Ethiopian forces and successive regimes in Mogadishu, and then to an alliance with Kenya, which invaded Somalia in October 2011". With the help of the latter, he conquered Kismayo in 2012. After Mogadishu, under Ethiopian and Kenyan pressure, agreed to the establishment of a federal state in Jubaland, Madobe was elected president in 2013.

The external support for Madobe against the FGS by Ethiopia and Kenya has continued until today. This support is due to the interest of Somalia's neighbours to both establish a buffer zone towards the Islamist groups, and to continue their own influence on the economic and political development of Somalia. However, Madobe has moved to position himself internally and externally as the embodiment and voix populi of the people of Jubaland and Somalia. Exemplarary, he presented his recent visit to Mogadishu amid constitutional talks as the attempt to "protect Somalia's statehood and to find solutions to the existing disputes. We will not allow the state to be dismantled ". This rhetorical device is frequently used by members of the opposition to the current Somali President Mohamud for his ambition to introduce universal suffrage.

Madobe's visit to Mogadishu takes places after a series of escalations between the FGS and the opposition, constituting itself as the Somali Future Council (SFC). Especially the relations between Jubaland and Mogadishu have been strained, as Madobe claims that President Mohamud is acting contrary to the will of the Somali people, while Madobe would represent such. Another highly contested point between the FGS and Madobe is the latter's re-election in 2024. While his first re-election in 2019 was only recognised by Mogadishu under Kenyan pressure, the most recent election outcome remains contested. In his 2024 victory speech, Madobe characterises himself as the only solution to ongoing troubles in Jubaland and as guardian against external interference. The latter speech is, compared to the victory-speech given in 2019, positioning Madobe more explicit as protector and voice of the people of Jubaland, with him being the only choice for stability and reconcilitation.

However, critics point out that Madobe had to amend Jubaland's constitution, as it previously limited the president's term to two. Additionally, Madobe is accused that he wanted "to coronate himself through a flawed and uncontested electoral process", which's votes were casted by a hand-picked group of MPs. As of that, the outcome "was widely anticipated", while Madobe was able to claim: "I am the legitimate President of Jubaland and no one else holds that title". To this end, Madobe is keen to secure his position by continuing to hinder the universal suffrage approach by the FGS, which has the potential (and ambition) of weakening his control over elections. Simultaniously, he can use this struggle to advance his position as the advocate for the interest of the people of Jubaland. After talks between the FGS and the SFC collapsed in February 2026, Madobe and his allies blaimed the failure on the FGS. While fraiming the proposed constitutional amendments as an attempt by the FGS to control the election outcome, the SFC and Madobe and positioning themselves as guardians of the will of the people in good faith against a corruptible central government.

Concluding, Madobe is trying to position himself as the legitimate voix populi and as the only possible pillar of stability and security. However, Madobe relies on external back-up through primarily Ethiopia and Kenya against the FGS. This alliance will persist until either Madobe or one of his current allies lose their benefit of supporting their partner or find a more benefitable alternative. For Madobe, the best course of action is to continue strengthening his domestic position, while opposing a strong and stable central government in Mogadishu, which could undermine his autonomy and ambitions. Since neither Ethiopia nor Kenya share a desire for a strong Mogadishu, their ambitions remain align for the moment.

However, Madobe's position remains fragile in the long-term, as he cannot rely on an institutionalized regime, which can sustain a change of leadership. At the same time, Rachman has established that one of the main characteristics of strongman rule is the personalization of the regime. In such, Madobe is a notable example, as he rules a territory created for

his ambition. He can claim that the people and the tribe have delegated the power to him, rather than to Mogadishu. Consequently, the self- and alien-presentation of his rule and his ambitions towards the people will remain of upmost importance for Madobe. For this dynamic, it is within Madobe's interest to both align himself with more powerful allies, as he has done previously, for the pursuit of common goals, and to frame these ambitions as beneficial for his people, not himself. Within the fulfilment of these conditions, Madobe can maintain and possible strengthen his position in Jubaland and generally Somalia. However, a strong and centralized government beyond his control and influence remains undesirable for him, without a equal compensation in terms of power and resources.

Saeed Abdullahi Deni: President of Puntland (2019 – ongoing)

The Puntland State of Somalia was established in 1998 as a semi-autonomous state amid the collapse of the central state authorities. Contrary to Jubaland, Puntland has experienced peaceful transitions of power. The current president, Saeed Abdullahi Deni, was elected in 2019 after serving as Federal Minister for Planning and International Cooperation. According to the United Nations, "Puntland has enjoyed relative peace and has become a refuge for many Somalis displaced by violence in the South".

In this context, Hared and Abbas note that "Puntland is depicted as the founding state of federalism", which does not require a central authority to construct governance structures and to manage their own affairs. However, this understanding has opened gaps in the development of Puntland, which are filled by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), "a key provider of security assistance and economic investment". This dynamics creates tensions with Mogadishu, as Puntland relies "on a partner whose broader regional calculations may not align with Puntland's long-term survival within a [sic] united Somalia".

This ambiguity is exemplified by Deni's position during the recent struggles between the FGS and the SFC. Deni describes Puntland as the "spearhead [for] the re-establishment of a united and stable Somalia". By relying on Puntland's relative democratic stability and prosperity vis-à-vis Mogadishu, Deni can position himself as legitimate representative of the 'true' Somali interests. This includes recent steps such as the announcement, that Puntland "no longer recognize Hassan Sheikh Mohamud as the nation's president, declaring that his legitimate mandate has expired". Puntland and his president Deni therefore embodie the constitutional legitimacy against internal threads.

On the other hand, Puntland opposed attempts by the FGS to centralize resources and revenue income away from the federal states, citing ambitions of external actors. However, in the case of the dispute over the implementation of centralized e-visa fees, Puntland itself receives backing from external actors, such as Ethiopia and the UAE. These regional com-

petitors aim to create deep dependencies, as Puntland has become a key area of attention in the regional power dynamics for its strategic position. A notable example of the possible advantages has been the accusation that the UAE has been using Puntland's Bosaso Airport to transport weapons to the Sudanese Rapid Supply Forces (RSF). This incident demonstrates that Puntland is perceived as a part of a larger strategy.

This dynamic limits Deni's scope of potential options. Additionally, there are other senior and vocal members of the Puntland administration, including former presidents. As they are momentarily united against Mogadishu, they form a united front against the FGS. Dissidents from this line of action are excluded or suspended. While Deni can rely on a supportive and institutionalized regime, a change of the current trajectory would need the approval of several other figures. Given the long-standing and deep impact of the relationship with the UAE, it is unlikely to change in the nearer future. A plausible way for Deni to increase his leverage is therefore to increase his perception among other Somalis and the present himself as guardian of the Somali constitution. This line of thought supports and maintains his own power position within Somalia and towards external actors. Additionally, recent talks with the United States circumventing Mogadishu demonstrates another possible way for Deni: By diversifying the external dependencies and relations of Puntland, he can decrease his vulnerability towards external actors and shocks, while promoting himself as guarantor for stability and future prosperity.

This situation creates some contradictions for Deni, exemplified by the Israeli recognition of Somalialand in December 2025. While "the widespread public anger in Somalia reflects a rare show of political, [...] Puntland and Jubaland [...] have remained silent". This scenario demonstrates the limited political scope Deni possesses towards Abu Dhabi, narrowing his ability to act as an opposition figure vis-à-vis Mogadishu and claimed negative external influence. Applying the established notion of the strongman finds that Deni cannot be identified as the pillar of stability and representation of Puntland in the alien- and self-perception. As there are other senior members, and a semi-democratic environment, his position remains fragile and contested in the long-term. Together with the dependency on the UAE, this dynamic is limiting his political agency. However, Puntland's position in the SFC and ongoing internal troubles can be identified as a window of opportunity for Deni. Therefore, a solution to the constitutional and electoral requires guarantees of political advantages to find Deni's approval. This could include the recognition of Deni as a representative of the voix populi, and further concessions for Puntland's status as semi-autonomous state. However, the creation of a strong central government would also require a solution for the dependency on external actors, which is not feasible in the short-term.

Outlook

While Madobe and Deni are united in their opposition to the FGS, their motivation, interests and long-term ambitions remain different and sometimes contradictory. Madobe can be rather characterized as a 'strongman', especially given his personalized style of politics and rhetorics. However, he cannot rely on an institutionalized regime and long-term political alliances. Despite these differences, both actors pose a substantial and impactful obstacle to any attempt of the FGS for further constitutional and electoral amendments. At the same time, the SFC lacks unity and a shared vision to advance a constructive reform itself. This dynamic is exacerbated by external actors, who either support Somali actors for short-term economic and security gains or establish deep dependencies. In consequence, different interpretations and the implementation of Somali actors on a larger playing field creates a fragile and complex environment. As the escalations continue, Somalia's stability and state-building efforts remain questionable.

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