



20160310: SPECIAL REPORT #4: SOMALIA ELECTION 2016 – The Road to Villa Somalia

The flurry of high level political events focused on the roadmap for elections in Aug 2016 appears to have eased momentarily, with attention turning towards the security environment required to enable political progress to be made. AMISOM Troop Contributing Countries Summit held Feb 28 exposed tensions between allied forces, international actors and Somali national security organs regarding the way forward. Political events have arguably been eclipsed by a series of high profile security incidents that have heightened a sense of urgency around addressing challenges facing Somalia national forces and AMISOM, and relations between the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) and regional administrations. The prevailing security paradigm posed by al-Shabaab, political power brokers and clan and regional interest groups each have the potential to fundamentally challenge progress towards elections in Aug 2016.

Al-Shabaab factor The threat profile of al-Shabaab has come to the fore since the start of 2016, with the overrunning of El Adde KDF-AMISOM base, a succession of high casualty, complex attacks in Mogadishu and Baidoa, two IED laptop bomb incidents targeting aircraft, and mortar attacks in Mogadishu, Kismayo, Baidoa and smaller urban centres in Lower Shabelle region. The group has proven its intent and capability against military targets, a number of which have left AMISOM forces wanting, and enabled the group to access large amounts of ordinance, which they appear to have disseminated and used in attacks in other parts of the country. The complex attacks targeting SYL Hotel in Mogadishu on Feb 26 and a restaurant in Baidoa, Bay region on Feb 28, resulted in a combined death toll of 56, including a high proportion of civilian casualties. The laptop bombs intended to disrupt aircraft suggests increased sophistication and evolution of its targeting methodology, possibly with the intent of causing the suspension of domestic air travel and international flights. In addition to the media attention and elevated threat profile, these incidents have the potential to restrict operations of internationals and UN supporting national projects and federal state administrations, at a time when technical support and concerted effort are required to meet the scheduled election date. Some politicians have called for a political solution with al-Shabaab. However, al-Shabaab is a violent extremist organisation, has not attempted to develop a substantive political agenda or wing, and based on its current form, a strategy of engagement appears untenable. Were the group to fragment, it is possible that ideologues may pursue a political agenda alongside the militant campaign.

Al-Shabaab threat to elections Al-Shabaab has not yet made specific threats against the presidential and parliamentary elections but these events are likely to be exploited with potential for targeting by the group. Al-Shabaab has directly threatened government officials, and expressed opposition to federal states and attempts to divide the country.¹ Attacks against regional headquarters are likely to affect stability in the area and their capacity to engage with the elections. Regional states are resulting in the establishment of an arm of government in territories less defended, and many are closer to al-Shabaab areas of operations.² Federal administrations will draw visits by high profile, senior politicians to the regions, presenting new targets of opportunity. The AMISOM offensive has resulted in dispersing al-Shabaab militants, which has led to an increased presence of al-Shabaab weaponry, operatives and planning expertise in decentralised regions, who may look to undertake attacks there, in addition to Mogadishu.

AMISOM Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) summit saw leaders of the five TCCs attribute challenges to the mission to a lack of commitment by the international community and slow progress in the development of Somali national security forces (SNA/SPF/NISA). A Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (HIPS) report identified capable, legitimate and inclusive national Somali security forces as a key component for a successful exit from Somalia.³ The report highlights that AMISOM's mandate to support the FGS has, at times, seen it become embroiled in regional level conflict and viewed as taking the side of the political elite. At other times, contingents of AMISOM appear to have stepped outside their mandate to support regional entities, often motivated by building a sphere of influence for their own national interest.⁴ Political infighting and a lack of framework to guide relations between the FGS and

regional administrations have resulted in a failure to develop a national security strategy required to establish a security force loyal to a national agenda. Somalia comprises a myriad of armed forces, many of which operate outside of the national security forces. Even those that fall under the FGS umbrella are loyal to local personalities, clan affiliations, and sometimes competing international agendas, rather than a national security ideology. This highlights the importance of a political process based on consensus to develop an effective national force, however the decided election model falls far short of agreement from regional entities.

Counterinsurgency (COIN) Strategy There has been much speculation regarding al-Shabaab's current strength and its ability to stage high profile complex attacks, however we assess that much of the group's recent success can be attributed to the lack of offensive engagement through a cohesive COIN strategy. At a basic level, the current COIN model in Somalia involves a *clear-hold-build* concept. There has been success in *clearing* al-Shabaab from several urban areas and strongholds, often with great lulls between offensive operations, but the group has primarily withdrawn its forces and continued direct and asymmetric attacks against AMISOM, FGS, regional governments and civilians in these areas. As more urban areas have been reclaimed, defensive and stability operations are just beginning, with the *hold* phase of operations ongoing in a few. Ultimately, al-Shabaab retains the ability to move freely between, and sometimes inside, these areas planning and conducting attacks. The 2016 elections signify a key component in the *build* phase of the country, as well as to ongoing counterinsurgency operations. AMISOM and SNA forces are preparing a renewed offensive, with success likely to be dependent on the ability of forces to form a cohesive strategy to simultaneously engage in direct combat with enemy forces in their respective sectors, and in cutting off the ability of al-Shabaab to withdraw and further disperse their forces. While the AMISOM Summit exposed tensions with the international community, the Mar 05 and 09 strikes on al-Shabaab camps may signify a shift in the U.S. programme in Somalia towards renewed offensive engagement through signature strikes and strategic raids,⁵ and a more engaged role in the conflict. Targeted drone strikes on key leaders alone are unlikely to significantly degrade the long term capabilities of the group, but they will provide near term disruptions in planning and attack cycles, as well as to act as force multipliers in support of the ongoing AMISOM and SNA military campaign.

New security measures have been announced amid mounting criticism directed against senior politicians and national security agencies after attacks in Mogadishu and Baidoa.⁶ Security for Mogadishu is to be handed over to the Banadir administration, with no armed groups other than security agencies allowed to operate in the capital and all unlicensed guns required to be registered within 30 days. Previous attempts to disarm militias in Mogadishu resulted in localised clashes and claims that it was targeted against political opponents of the President and the executive. Proposed measures are arguably little different to previous initiatives which al-Shabaab has exploited, are probably unenforceable, and may be a ploy to avoid making changes to security heads at a time when the political agenda requires stability and Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's re-election requires he maintain control and loyalty of security dockets. Interestingly, the latest attacks also led to calls for less involvement of AMISOM and a greater role of Somali national security forces in securing government institutions.⁷ There is a risk that the perception elections are being driven by the international community could increase hostility to AMISOM and create additional challenges to deliver on its mandate to support the FGS and election transition.

Disputes within Interim administrations

Federal state formation activities seeking to consolidate administrations continue to be a source of conflict ranging from ongoing boycotts affecting Hiraan-Middle Shabelle, and Jubaland, to descent into armed conflict. Tensions over Ahlu Sunna Wal Jama'a (ASWJ) refusal to accept the authority of Galmudug Interim Administration (GIA) spilled over into heavy fighting on Mar 03 in Dhusamareb, Galgadud region, after armed GIA-aligned forces reportedly moved into the ASWJ held area, resulting in 15 deaths.⁸ While fighting has dissipated with ASWJ resuming control of the area, there are indications that ASWJ may be mobilising weapons. The dispute over Galmudug has seen its relations

deteriorate with the FGS and with GIA President, Abdikarim Hussein Guled, a known ally of President Mohamud. There is also evidence that the FGS is supplying weapons to GIA forces. Progress towards a viable administration is highly unlikely without the support of ASWJ armed units that are a key security pillar opposed to al-Shabaab across the central areas. The latest fighting suggests that reconciliation between GIA and ASWJ is far from being achieved with renewed clashes assessed as more likely than cooperation under a regional administration at this point.

Federal Government relations with Puntland, Somaliland and Interim administrations

Puntland maintains its opposition to the chosen election process, with a risk that the longer it remains on the outside building a platform of resistance, the more difficult it will be for politicians to change position and for Puntlanders to rebuild confidence in the election. Interests and infighting between Puntland's political elite is also guiding its stance. In spite of the brinkmanship, it remains unlikely that Puntland would boycott elections as it would result in its clan base missing out on decision making and assuming seats in the Lower and Upper Houses of Parliament.

Somaliland is unlikely to change its rejection of its inclusion in the federal election process, with a possibility of political tensions escalating following reports that the FGS sent MPs to solicit local support for the elections to Buhoodle district, Togdheer region. While Khatumo does not appear to have made substantive headway towards a federal administration between the Dhulbahante and Warsengeli in Sool, Sanaag and Cayn regions, it is evident that some local leaders are playing the FGS, Puntland and Somaliland sides for their own clan interests in the disputed zone.

ASWJ's exclusion from the election process is a critical missing component to creating a comprehensive political platform for governance across Central Somalia. FGS military support against an anti-al-Shabaab paramilitary group may lend support to a worrying perspective that implicates senior level political spoilers intentionally fuelling conflict to create instability and to jeopardise the 2016 elections. An election delay may also be in the interests of regional personalities with national political ambitions, as it would facilitate them to enter the race at a later stage without jeopardising their clan support base at a mid-term point for many regional administrations. A lack of progress between Hiraan and Middle Shabelle is likely to impact on President Mohamud's re-election campaign, given the actual and perceived positions of regional administrations towards the President.

What next?

Examining the 2016 election process through the lens of the prevailing security paradigm related to the al-Shabaab terrorist campaign, external allied state actors and internal national, regional and clan dynamics highlights the complexities and anticipated obstacles to proceeding with a successful transition in Aug. Continued high profile and sophisticated, complex attacks could compromise the ability to hold the already weakened 'inclusive' 'consensus based' election process in Aug. Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for recent attacks resulting in high civilian casualties, defiantly stating that it targeted government officials and that Muslims had been warned to avoid areas government and security officials frequent,⁹ however further attacks resulting in significant civilian casualties could galvanise public opinion against the group. The perception that AMISOM and the international community is propping up an imposed process that best suits existing political elites and incumbent President Mohamud may work to the advantage of political spoilers and threat groups to undermine stability and ultimately derail the ability of elections proceeding in Aug, particularly if it appears to comprise the objectivity of external actors towards regional stakeholders or potential presidential contenders. A failure to provide a secure environment is likely to result in the 2016 election being scaled back further, in terms of less participation or delays, which will affect the future credibility of Somalia's political development.

END NOTES

¹ On Jun 28, 2014, al-Shabaab spokesperson, Ali Mohamud (Ali Dheere) stated that they will fight against any individual involved in dividing the country into federal states claiming it was a Western agenda, seeking to 'divide and conquer' and split the country into sections.

² Baidoa is the current headquarters of the Interim South West Administration. While there have been a number of low level attacks in Baidoa, the mortar fire and complex attack have been less common, with the last complex attack that targeted the Baidoa ISWA Presidential Palace occurring almost a year ago. In Mar 2015, al-Shabaab launched a complex attack on ISWA Presidential Palace in which seven members of security forces were killed, just days after ISWA President Shariff Hassan Adan unveiled his cabinet.

³ Williams, P.D. with A. Hashi (2016) "Exit Strategy Challenges for the AU Mission in Somalia" (Mogadishu: HIPS) Feb 2016.

⁴ Ibid p3: HIPS described AMISOM as operating as a 'loosely coordinated coalition' with countries exercising operational autonomy within their respective sectors; it accused frontline states of Ethiopia and Kenya of having 'repeatedly pursued counterproductive policies in Somalia that sought to retain their influence over local and national dynamics'.

⁵ On Mar 05, Manned and Unmanned U.S. airstrike reportedly killed at least 150 al-Shabaab militants at a training camp in Raso, Hiraan region. The strike was described as a 'signature strike', on suspected terrorists or militants whose identities are not known, but whose "pattern of life activity" would seem to indicate that they are involved in some militant/terrorist activity. U.S. Pentagon spokesperson, Capt. Jeff Davis, said the fighters had just completed "training for a large-scale attack" against American and African Union forces. On Mar 09, U.S. and Somali Special Operations Forces infiltrated in two to three helicopters and engaged al-Shabaab fighters near Awdhegle. Al-Shabaab claimed foreign speaking fighters were repelled with 1 militant killed, local administration officials reported up to 19 militants were killed, with unconfirmed reports of at least 2 al-Shabaab captured or taken on exfil. U.S. Pentagon spokesperson, Capt. Jeff Davis, said U.S. aircraft were used in the operation, described as an "advise, assist and accompany mission" with the Somali army. "We did go on the mission but we did not go all the way to the objective."

⁶ There have been repeated calls by parliament for the Minister of Internal Security, Abdirizak Omar Mohamed, Head of NISA Abdurahman Mohamud Turyare, and Somali National Police Commander, Gen Mohammad Sheikh Hamud, to appear before it to account for the recent security incidents, as well as calls for them to be dismissed.

⁷ On Feb 29, Jubaland President Ahmed Mohamed Islam (Madobe) advised the federal government to transfer the security of all government institutions including Villa Somalia to the Somali security forces. Madobe accused the international community of not focusing efforts to rebuild the SNA and a lack of supervision and effectiveness of AMISOM.

⁸ ASWJ forces have been in control of Dhusamareb following its rejection of the state formation process, with a series of armed confrontations since July 2015.

⁹ On Feb 28, al-Shabaab released a propaganda statement in Arabic, entitled "The Hotel Facts", where it stated that SYL Hotel was inhabited by security, military, intelligence and government officials, and said that this prompted the targeting of these hotels. It asserted that on more than one occasion, al-Shabaab leaders had advised Muslims to stay away from those hotels to avoid being affected by targeted attacks.