SOMALIA | Trends in Conflict and Cooperation

In December 2006, the dissolution of the Somalia Islamic Courts Council (ICC), that attempted to unify Somalia under an Islamic state based on Shari’a law, opened up a political vacuum. Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which is unpopular, weak and dependant on Ethiopian support, is unable to fill this gap. The previous FAST updates had reported increasing tendencies towards destabilization and political devolution in Somalia since the defeat of the ICC. The TFG’s military efforts to stabilize Somalia became difficult and progress remained halted.

Conflicitive events continued in Mogadishu and in other parts of the country after the National Reconciliation Conference (NRC) (see graph). Armed opposition to the TFG, particularly the jihadist Youth Mujahideen Movement (YMM), which had claimed responsibility for many attacks in Mogadishu during the NRC, continued to disrupt the proceedings. During September, groups of several dozen YMM fighters attacked police stations and TFG and Ethiopian military bases with heavy machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. On 29 September, the attacks peaked when three police stations and two Ethiopian bases came under fire, resulting in the deaths of 100 insurgents and 45 government soldiers, and the arrests of 700 people supporting the insurgency.

Local resistance to Ethiopia-TFG forces has been reported in regions where the TFG’s armed opposition originated. The central regions of Hiran and Galgadud, which is the heartland of the Ayr sub clan of the Hawiye clan family and the home of former chair of the ICC, Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, continued their resistance to the TFG administration. In the Lower Shabelle region, the “fief” struggle between the Ayr warlord and ICC Defence Minister Sheikh Indha Cadde remains unsettled. Several clashes were reported between TFG forces and militias claiming loyalty to the old administration.

The dispute between Somaliland and Puntland over most of the Sool and Sanaag regions escalated into a broader military conflict. The conflict’s development in Sool, which has been occupied by Puntland since 2003, makes another full-scale war between the two entities increasingly likely. On 17 September, forces loyal to Puntland’s government clashed with local pro-Somaliland militias near the Sool region’s capital Las Anod. On 20 September, renewed fighting mounted between Puntland forces and Somaliland troops. On 24 and 28 September, heavier fighting broke out. On 1 October, fighting broke out in Las Anod with up to 15 people reportedly killed. The conflict takes place at a time when the TFG leadership has dissolved many of the militias of the otherwise heavily militarized Puntland – a fact worsened by the region’s deep economic crisis.

The continuing clashes in Mogadishu and the conflict between Somaliland and Puntland increased civilian causalities during the reporting period. Fighting between government troops and anti-government elements in Mogadishu injured over 30 people and killed several civilians, including three journalists. Field reports from aid agencies indicate that the conflict between Puntland and Somaliland displaced about 500 families. Assistance to vulnerable people was further complicated following the abduction of WFP staff in Mogadishu by TFG forces on 17 October. WFP suspended food aid distributions as well as the loading of food in Mogadishu, which was supposed to be distributed to 75,000 people. On 23 October, WFP staff has been released without any precondition.

A political solution to the Somalia crisis through the NRC remained unpromising, if not disappointing. The NRC, which domestic and external actors had described at the beginning as an opportunity for Somali warring parties to bring peace and integrate Somalis, increased polarization and political fragmentation. With no other major inclusive political reconciliation initiatives in the future at the national level, the NRC created a confused political picture that stimulated clan based solidarity.

The failure of the NRC in bringing a political solution to the Somalia crisis was nothing more than the failure of two reconciliation conferences: the NRC, which was later transformed by the TFG into its desired alternative NRC; and the Somali Congress for Liberation and Reconstitution (SCLR) organized by the political opposition based in Eritrea. The outcome of the conferences confirmed that neither the TFG nor the opposition is united enough internally to provide Somalia with a credible political formula and is far too unorganized to compromise with its rival.

The TFG’s failure to reconcile over key issues became evident when at the closing; the organizer of the conference expressed his disappointment about the many delegates who believed that matters of concern (to their clans) had not been adequately addressed. Having achieved no substantive reconciliation, the NRC did not appear to have achieved its major objective, which is to preserve the transitional institutions and its personnel. The TFG remains weak, unpopular and internally fragmented.
This reporting period indicates that their diverse aims and support bases made it impossible for the opposition to merge their agenda and come up with an attractive political formula. The failure of the SCLR began from its inception when disagreement among opposition groups over the agenda, modality and leadership alliance mounted. On 1 September, the Hawiye sub-clans refused to participate in the SCLR after the failure of opposition groups to even address their common commitment to removing Ethiopian occupation from Somalia.

The conference opened on 6 September but before it could proceed, a disagreement broke out on the modality of reconciliation. The question as to whether the SCLR “reconstitution” means determining a political formula for a future Somali state or simply forming an alliance aimed at “liberating” the country from Ethiopian occupation needs to be addressed. Nationalists withdrew because they argued that the conference would not consider their case for building a single national movement dominated the ICC.

Disputes have also been reported between the ICC and two other elements – diaspora groups and the Free Parliament faction – on the structure of the alliance related to positions and number of seats. The ICC managed to apportion 45 percent of the 191 seats, and the remaining 25 percent went to the Free Parliament, 16 percent to the Diaspora and 14 percent to clan elders, civil society organizations and intellectuals. On 15 September, non-Islamist delegates walked out of a session in a dispute over the issue of whether to include the term “jihad” in the proposed charter for the alliance. Later it was decided to use a more general term, “struggle.” At the conclusion, the alliance spokesperson announced that the movement it had formed – the Alliance for the Re-Liberation of Somalia (ARS) – would pursue armed resistance and diplomacy to achieve an Ethiopian withdrawal from Somalia and would be “dissolved” when the occupation ended, which reflects the inability of the opposition to come up with a political solution to Somalia’s crisis.

Apart from the failed reconciliation efforts, the internal rifts of the TFG deepened severely during the reporting period. In particular, conflict surfaced between President Abdullahi Yusuf and Prime Minister Ali Mohamed Gedi over the mandate of transitional institutions. Among other events, divisions were displayed by the sacking of the public prosecutor that was initiated by Gedi in order to punish the prosecutor and by the prosecutor’s refusal to leave his post supported by Yusuf. The personal dispute of the leadership had been growing for over a year but hardened significantly over the granting of oil concessions to foreign companies and the USD $32 million Gedi received from Saudi Arabia. As a consequence of the growing power battle, the two men are said to have established their own personal militia and Gedi, in particular, is seeking much closer ties with his own clan platform than before.

The United States continued its effort to isolate Jihadists and their supporters from TFG supporters. The US urged Saudi Arabia to support the TFG in order to isolate its domestic opposition and threatened to put Erétrie on its list of state sponsors of terrorism. At the same time, an US donation of USD $97 million to Ethiopia for development seemed to encourage its military presence in Somalia. The missing link between external actors and the TFG reached a peak during the end of the reporting period, notably following the erosion of Yusuf’s power, which left external actors with no one to turn to anchor their policy.

Given the uncompromised divergence of interests within and between the TFG and its opposition, Somalia will continue to experience devolution in which power remains dispersed to regional and local clans and warlords. The leadership split within the TFG threatens to turn into an open military division along clan lines. Wider armed resistance against Ethiopian and TFG forces is certain, which the TFG will likely seek to counter with large-scale offensives against Ethiopian and TFG forces is certain, which the TFG will likely seek to counter with large-scale offensives against Islamist-controlled areas across the south. Neither the internationally recognized TFG nor the opposition alliance will be able to come up with an attractive political formula that would win legitimacy by the majority of Somalis. With the TFG evidently failing to deliver on any front, the discord with external actors gradually lost interest in supporting the TFG. During September, although external actors were not satisfied with the outcome of the conference, they remained consistent with their original position and efforts; continued pressing the TFG to engage in reaching out to the political opposition and calling on African states for stabilization. On 12 September, the Washington-inspired Contact Group for Somalia, which includes the US, the EU, European donor states, and international and regional organizations, met in Rome and repeated its calls for African states to contribute to AMISOM. So far, however, there is no measurable progress in withdrawing Ethiopian forces from Somalia or the deployment of troops by other African states. Ethiopia has reportedly sent reinforcements with troops now estimated up to 50,000. The most likely addition to AMISOM is likely to come from Burundi, where training by the US military has been completed. However, the 1,700 Burundians still lack capabilities and will not make a significant difference on the ground. As the SCLR conference proceeded, Prime Minister Gedi – under pressure from donors – traveled to Djibouti in a failed attempt to open talks with opposition figures, including ICC supporters. On 17 September, President Yusuf was in Saudi Arabia where he and some former delegates to the NRC reaffirmed the agreement of the conference. But the opposition quickly announced its rejection of the pact.

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