

Somalia leaders fail to reach deal on elections

Author:

Sun, 2021-02-07 02:18

MOGADISHU: Somalia's leaders have failed to break a deadlock over the country's elections, with no clear path to a vote just days before the government's mandate expires.

The country is likely to miss a Feb. 8 deadline to choose a new president after days of negotiations between the central government and federal states collapsed on Friday.

The impasse could usher in a political crisis in the Horn of Africa nation already confronting a violent insurgency, a locust invasion and serious food shortages.

President Mohammed Abdullahi Mohammed, who is seeking a second term, told parliament on Saturday his administration "made compromises on everything" to secure a last-minute agreement during talks with regional leaders in Dhusamareb, some 400 km north of the capital Mogadishu.

"I was hoping there would have been some sort of commitment if we got together there but unfortunately that prospect did not materialize," said the president, who is also known as Farmajo.

"There is still hope. We have agreed to go forward, and make appointments for further talks."

The president accused Jubaland and Puntland, two of Somalia's five semi-autonomous regions, of failing to compromise and thereby scuttling an earlier deal to hold indirect parliamentary and presidential elections in late 2020 and early 2021.

That agreement, reached in September, fell apart as squabbles erupted over how to conduct the vote, and deepened mistrust between Farmajo and his regional rivals, most notably in Jubaland.

Jubaland's leader, Ahmed Madobe, said Saturday that his administration negotiated in good faith but encountered hurdles and resistance all the way.

"The responsibility for the failure to hold timely and consensus-based elections lies solely on President Farmajo," his office said in a statement. Jubaland, a lush, relatively prosperous part of Somalia bordering Kenya, has been locked in a power struggle with Mogadishu and the scene of recent violent clashes between local and national forces.

A major bone of contention involved the electoral process in Gedo, a Jubaland region, where Madobe accused Farmajo of "trying to control the vote from afar."

He said earlier: "We have previously asked the president to stop meddling with the election process and stick to his campaign, but this didn't happen."

Farmajo blamed "foreign interference" for undermining the electoral processes. He did not name Kenya, but Somalia has repeatedly accused its larger neighbor of supporting armed groups in Jubaland, straining ties between the countries.

Kenya sees Madobe as an ally, and Jubaland a buffer between Al-Shabab militants who have staged bloody attacks across the border.

Somalia plunged into chaos after the 1991 overthrow of president Siad Barre's military regime, leading to years of clan warfare followed by the rise of Al-Shabab which once controlled large parts of the country and capital. The central government remains weak, and controls only part of the national territory.

Somalia's foreign backers, who provide the embattled government the necessary security and financial aid to stay afloat, warned this week against any attempts at subverting the poll process.

"We underscore that any alternative outcomes, including a parallel process or partial elections, or other measures short of an agreed electoral process, would be a setback that would not obtain the support of partners," the UN, African Union and other international partners said in a statement on Thursday.

Somalia had set itself the goal of holding its first one-person, one-vote ballot since 1969, a pursuit hailed by the UN as a "historic milestone." But frequent attacks by the Al-Shabab militant group, among other governance challenges, made such an exercise an unlikely prospect.

Instead, the one-person, one-vote model was abandoned for a complex indirect system used in the past, where special delegates chosen by clan elders pick lawmakers, who in turn choose the president.

While the process mirrors the last election held in 2017, it was to go a bit further in terms of inclusivity, with 27,775 delegates voting – almost twice as many as last time.



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Deaths after hotel attack in Somali capital

EU delegation in Aden expresses support for government push for peace

Sun, 2021-02-07 01:06

AL-MUKALLA: Several European ambassadors to Yemen visited the southern port of Aden, the interim capital of the country, on Saturday as Yemeni officials reported that the Houthis were raising obstacles during the prisoner swap talks in Amman.

The ambassador of the EU and ambassadors of France, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Ireland and Finland, as well as the deputy ambassador of Norway, landed in Aden, where they discussed peace efforts with senior government officials.

Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, Yemen's foreign minister, was quoted by the official media thanking the EU ambassadors for their visit to Aden that carries an "important political message" of support to the Yemeni government, adding that he discussed with the ambassadors the Riyadh Agreement, Houthi resistance to repairing the Safer tanker, the government's efforts to restore services in the liberated provinces and the government willingness to reach a "real, comprehensive and lasting" peace in Yemen.

The EU delegation is the highest ranking group of foreign envoys to visit Aden since the arrival of Yemen's new government, which was formed under the Riyadh Agreement.

The Yemeni government delegation in the prisoner swap talks in Amman said the talks encountered a stumbling block after the Iran-backed Houthis refused to swap abducted journalists and activists and seriously ill abductees.

"The Yemeni government delegation has offered concessions for the talks to succeed," Majed Fadhail, deputy minister of human rights and a member of the government delegation in the talks, told Arab News on Saturday, adding that the Houthis have become more uncompromising and sought to obstruct the talks.

The Yemeni official attributed the Houthis' new hardline behavior during talks to the US decision to reverse the designation of the Houthis as terrorists.

"Everyone must know that this criminal and terrorist militia refuses to release the remaining journalists in their detention or even consider swapping them with their fighters captured on the battlefields," Fadhail said.

Representatives of the Yemeni government and the Houthis last month resumed UN-backed prisoner exchange talks with the aim of releasing 301 prisoners on both sides.

At the same time, the Abductees Mothers' Association, an umbrella organization for thousands of relatives of abductees in Yemen, called for the urgent release of 127 extremely sick prisoners held by the Houthi militia and the Yemeni government.

Fadhail said the government delegation presented names of dozens of sick abductees among the Houthi prisoners and demanded their release during this round of talks. "We floated their names during the talks, but the Houthis refused to discuss releasing them," Fadhail said.

In a social media campaign Yemeni activists, journalists and politicians demanded an end to Houthi crimes against Yemenis and criticized the US move to drop the terrorist designation of the Houthis.

Using the hashtag #StopHouthiTerrorismInYemen, dozens of Yemenis said that the Houthis have displaced thousands of people, abducted thousands more, blown up the houses of their opponents and carpeted the Yemeni land with tens of thousands of landmines.

Jamal Al-Mamari, a former abductee, reminded the new US administration in a tweet that the Houthis had tortured and killed an American contractor John Hamen, who died in Houthi custody in 2015

"For the Yemenis, the word Houthis means death, destruction, kidnapping, displacement, prisons, torture, diseases, starvation and rape," said Mohammed Al-Asal, the deputy governor of Raymah province.

Yemeni activists also expressed opposition to any peace deal with the Houthis that does not punish them for human right abuses.

"Yemen does not want an incomplete peace with the Houthi militia who only believe in the language of exclusion, murder, torture, pillage and lack of equal citizenship. Our demand is a comprehensive and just peace, punishing the Houthis for all violations and crimes they committed and disarming them," Huda Al-Sarari, a Yemeni lawyer and human rights activist who documents human right abuses in the southern city of Taiz.

The US administration should have used the terrorism designation of the Houthis as pressure to force them to stop obstructing the UN mission to repair the floating Safer tanker, Yemen experts said.

"By revoking Houthis designation unconditionally, the Biden administration made a huge mistake. It could have been used as leverage on the Houthis to deliver something in return – at least to allow engineers to empty the Safer. The US just lost that leverage for nothing," said Nadwa Al-Dawsari, a Yemeni conflict analyst and a non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute.



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EU delegation arrives in Yemen's Aden
Yemeni warring factions welcome Biden
peace push

[Is peaceful coexistence possible in a fragmented, polarized world?](#)

Sun, 2021-02-07 00:47

DUBAI: Societies are diverse things by nature, composed of individuals with varying ideals and attributes who agree on an arrangement of coexistence around a shared set of values. It stands to reason there will be disagreements from time to time.

However, if societies lose this sense of fraternity, they can come apart at the seams. One relatively recent development – the advent of social media – appears to have amplified the disagreements, making societies far more polarized, resentful and confrontational.

Social media's role in undermining this ideal was examined in detail at the International Human Fraternity Virtual Summit, held via video conference last week to coincide with the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity ceremony.

Participants in a panel discussion on the topic of “human fraternity” addressed the different types of risks that modern societies are exposed to, including the rise of extremist and populist groups and the role of social media in promoting hate speech. They also explored the strength of human bonds in an age of tribalism and increasing digital solitude.

Facebook, Twitter and others of their ilk have fundamentally changed how humans access information, share ideas and organize collectively. Misinformation travels faster and like-minded groups can assemble quickly, while ideas once considered fringe or extreme are granted almost unfettered airtime.



Less educated people are easily attracted to extreme groups that can, through social media, indoctrinate in them dangerous courses of action. (AFP file photo)

Technology has outpaced regulators, handing Silicon Valley tech giants immense power over freedom of expression.

“The idea of human fraternity is a great one,” Ahmed Aboul Gheit, secretary general of the Arab League, said in his remarks.

“But it will not fall on us out of the blue. We have to work for it and exert efforts to pacify our societies and to change the dominant culture.”

Indeed, today Islamists, Hindu ultranationalists, Buddhist chauvinists and the far right in the West are able to disseminate their hatred widely as trust in traditional news outlets ebbs.

The result is a world brimming with suspicion, conspiracy theories and

xenophobia, with little room for the spirit of fraternity needed to combat humanity's big shared challenges.

After the storming of the US Capitol on Jan. 6, the search for an antidote to social-media-fueled hate and anger appears more urgent than ever.



Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit. (AFP file photo)

"The Arab region is very wide, large and diversified, spanning 11 million square kilometers," Aboul Gheit said.

"You have many ethnic groups, many religions, and you have a lot that is challenging and conflicting with each other. But the important thing, in my opinion, is the Islamists, which are a danger for the region because of the diversity of the Middle East."

Governments are rightly combating political Islam through education rather than security measures alone, Aboul Gheit said. But social media and its use by radical elements remains a potent source of discord in the Middle East.

"This is mainly because education is not as it should be," he said. "There are certain simple people who absorb certain ideas, and they are easily attracted to groups that will indoctrinate in them certain courses of action."

FASTFACTS

- Feb. 4 has been designated as the International Day of Human Fraternity

in honor of the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity by the Pope and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar in Abu Dhabi on that day in 2019.

- UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Moroccan-French activist Latifa ibn Ziaten received jointly the 2021 Zayed Award for Human Fraternity during a commemorative online event on Feb. 4.

Aboul Gheit wants to see social media platforms better regulated and extremist discourse addressed through education programs and the modernization of religious discourse.

“You can’t just leave it because of freedom of speech,” he said. “It often creates havoc on societies as we saw in Washington on Jan. 6. The US – the most economically and socially developed country – is suffering from conduct and actions that are shocking all of us.”

Fellow panelist Corinne Momal-Vanian, executive director of the Kofi Annan Foundation, defined human fraternity as an ethical imperative where all religions recognize the inherent dignity of each human being.

“It is recognized that we each have the same right,” she said. “But beyond this ethical dimension, human fraternity is also a political, pragmatic approach to things.”

She quoted Kofi Annan, the former UN secretary-general, who once said: “Unlike in the past when civilizations rose and fell in a zero-sum game, today, because the world is so interconnected, all nations will rise or fall together.”



Pope Francis (R) receives a gift from Egypt's Azhar Grand Imam Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb during a private audience on November 15, 2019 at the Vatican. (AFP file photo)

This message is self-evident, Momal-Vanian said, and yet countries have "failed" to recognize it time and again, as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic response.

"As much as the virus doesn't distinguish among colors and religions, climate change, rising seas, and hurricanes won't stop at the border, just as they won't care who they are affecting," she said.

According to Momal-Vanian, social media is a key driver of disunity, in large part because regulators have failed to keep pace with technological change.

"In the US, the issue is regulated by an act of 1996, which was before Facebook, Twitter or others existed," she said.

"Legislation hasn't followed and governments have struggled between the need to balance freedom of expression with the need to consider that these platforms are no longer just platforms hosting content, but they actually moderate content themselves."



Less educated people are easily attracted to extreme groups that can, through social media, indoctrinate in them dangerous courses of action. (AFP)

One recent example was Twitter's decision to suspend the account of former US president Donald Trump in the wake of the Capitol incident. Even many anti-Trump voices in Europe have questioned whether that decision was truly

Twitter's to make.

"The good news is that the European Union is working on a Digital Services Act, which will answer a lot of these questions," Momal-Vanian said. "It will serve as a model to many other regulators."

The challenge now is to define the responsibilities of these platforms over the content they share. "They can no longer hide behind the fact that they are just hosting it," she said, adding that the Kofi Annan Foundation is working closely with companies including Facebook to establish appropriate regulations.

"You can have the best algorithm and yet you will always have hatred spreading like wildfire on these platforms," Momal-Vanian said. "This will be a very important issue and COVID-19 has accelerated our awareness that we need to respond to these very fast."

Maria Fernanda Espinosa, a former president of the UN General Assembly, struck a relatively more optimistic note, saying that although racism, xenophobia and violent extremism appear to be on the rise, such trends can be reversed collectively in societies based on solidarity and cooperation.

"That was perhaps the clearest lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic," she said. "We are interdependent, we need each other, and no one is safe until everybody's safe. We are here to reflect on the need to remember our humanity and the need for a peaceful coexistence."

Every zoonotic disease, from Ebola to influenza, is a message to humans from nature saying "we cannot overstep its boundaries, that we need to reconcile with nature, and that our development should be sustainable and greener," she said.

So, business as usual is not an option, according to her. "We need to reinvent, rebuild societies that are more inclusive, based on affirmative action to fight poverty, and all forms of inequality, including gender, economic, ethnic and age," Espinosa said in conclusion.

"We now have the opportunity to build back better, to build back more equal, greener and to build back more peaceful societies."

Twitter: @CalineMalek





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Religious leaders denounce extremism in Europe Biden orders review of domestic violent extremism threat

[UAE says it's committed to working with US to reduce regional tensions](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1612640334075313400

Sat, 2021-02-06 19:32

CAIRO: The United Arab Emirates' foreign minister affirmed his country's commitment to working closely with the Biden administration to reduce

regional tensions during a phone call with the United States' special envoy for Iran, Emirates News Agency (WAM) reported on Saturday. In the phone call with special envoy Rob Malley, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan affirmed "the UAE's commitment to strengthening relations and working closely with the administration of US President Joe Biden to reduce regional tensions, (and) start a new dialogue," WAM reported.



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Top UN court throws out Qatar blockade case against UAE

[Filling Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam in July threatens Sudan's security: Minister](#)

Author:

Reuters

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1612635150664936200

Sat, 2021-02-06 16:40

KHARTOUM: Sudan considers that any unilateral step to fill Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam in July would pose a direct threat to its national security, Sudanese Irrigation and Water Resources Minister Yasser Abbas said on Saturday.

Sudan is also proposing a mediation role for the United States, European Union, United Nations and African Union as a way of breaking the deadlock in talks about the dam between Sudan, Egypt and Ethiopia, Abbas told Reuters in an interview.

Ethiopia began filling the reservoir behind its dam after the summer rains last year despite demands from Egypt and Sudan that it should first reach a binding agreement on the dam's operation.

Egypt views the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) as a major threat to its fresh water supplies, more than 90% of which come from the Nile.

Ethiopia has been building the hydropower dam on the Blue Nile, close to its border with Sudan, and says the dam is crucial to its economic development. The Blue Nile flows north into Sudan then Egypt and is the Nile's main tributary.

"The filling of the Renaissance Dam by one side next July represents a direct threat to Sudan's national security," said Abbas.



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