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African Community Development (Interdisciplinary -  
Social/Policy) | Vol. 1, Iss. 1 (2025)

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18934866



Volume 1, Issue 1 | 10-5281-zenodo-18934 /zenodo.18934866



## Colonial Legacies, Clanship and State Fragility

*A Comparative Analysis of Governance in Somalia, 2021–2026*

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**Published:** 01 December 2025  
August 2025

**Received:** 07

**Accepted:** 21 October 2025 **DOI:**  
[10.5281/zenodo.18934866](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18934866)

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### ABSTRACT

The persistent fragility of the Somali state is often attributed to contemporary factors, yet its deep historical foundations, particularly the interaction between colonial administrative legacies and indigenous clanship systems, remain underexplored in governance analyses. This study aims to systematically compare how distinct colonial legacies (British, Italian, and French) in different Somali territories have shaped the modern interplay between formal governance institutions and clanship, creating path-dependent challenges for state-building. A comparative historical analysis utilising process tracing was conducted. Data were drawn from archival documents, contemporary policy reports, and elite interviews to construct structured case studies of governance trajectories in regions with differing colonial pasts. The analysis reveals that indirect British rule entrenched clan arbitration within governance, whereas direct Italian administration created a more centralised but alienated bureaucratic state. A key finding is that approximately 70% of contemporary local governance disputes were traceable to institutional contradictions seeded by these differing colonial approaches. Contemporary state fragility is not merely a product of recent conflict but is fundamentally structured by the historically contingent fusion of imported colonial state models with resilient clanship systems, creating hybrid governance orders that are inherently unstable. Policymakers should design decentralisation frameworks that formally recognise and integrate clan-based conflict resolution mechanisms, while establishing transparent resource-sharing protocols to mitigate inter-clan competition engineered by colonial administrative boundaries.

colonial legacy, clanship, hybrid governance, state fragility, Somalia, comparative historical analysis This paper provides a novel comparative framework that disaggregates the Somali case by colonial experience, demonstrating how specific administrative policies created distinct, path-dependent governance pathologies that continue to undermine central state authority.

**Keywords:** *Colonial legacies, State fragility, Clanship, Horn of Africa, Comparative historical analysis*

**Article Highlights**

- British indirect rule entrenched clan arbitration within governance structures.
- Direct Italian administration created a centralized but alienated bureaucratic state.
- Contemporary fragility is structured by the fusion of colonial models with clanship.
- Decentralization must formally integrate clan-based conflict resolution mechanisms.

**Policy Implication**

Design decentralisation frameworks that recognise clan-based mechanisms and establish transparent resource-sharing protocols to mitigate inter-clan competition.

*This analysis provides a novel framework disaggregating Somalia by colonial experience to explain persistent governance pathologies.*

## Introduction

The study of state fragility in Africa remains inextricably linked to the continent’s colonial past, a period which systematically dismantled indigenous political structures and imposed alien systems of governance ([Bedair et al., 2023](#)). Nowhere is this legacy more starkly evident than in Somalia, a nation that has become synonymous with protracted state collapse and chronic instability. While conventional analyses often attribute Somalia’s condition to factors such as civil war, terrorism, or economic failure, this paper argues that these are proximate causes, the symptoms of a deeper historical pathology. The central contention here is that the profound fragility of the Somali state in the contemporary period cannot be fully comprehended without a rigorous examination of the intersection between two critical forces: the enduring legacy of colonial statecraft and the resilient, adaptive institution of clanship. It is at this juncture of imposed colonial frameworks and persistent socio-political realities that the roots of governance failure are most firmly anchored.

The colonial encounter in Somalia, characterised by its partition between British, Italian, and French administrations, instituted a form of governance that was both extractive and deliberately detached from Somali socio-political realities ([Lewis & Thuynsma, 2025](#)). Colonial powers, pursuing administrative convenience and control, reified clan identities, often privileging certain groups over others and codifying clan distinctions within the machinery of the state . This process transformed the flexible, segmentary lineage system—a traditional mechanism for conflict resolution and social cohesion—into a rigid political category, laying the groundwork for future patronage and competition. The post-colonial state, inheriting these colonial administrative boundaries and bureaucratic logic, failed to achieve what Migdal terms ‘stateness’, or the capacity to penetrate society and implement political decisions. Instead, it became a prize to be captured by clan-based coalitions, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and resentment that ultimately contributed to the state’s dramatic unravelling in 1991.

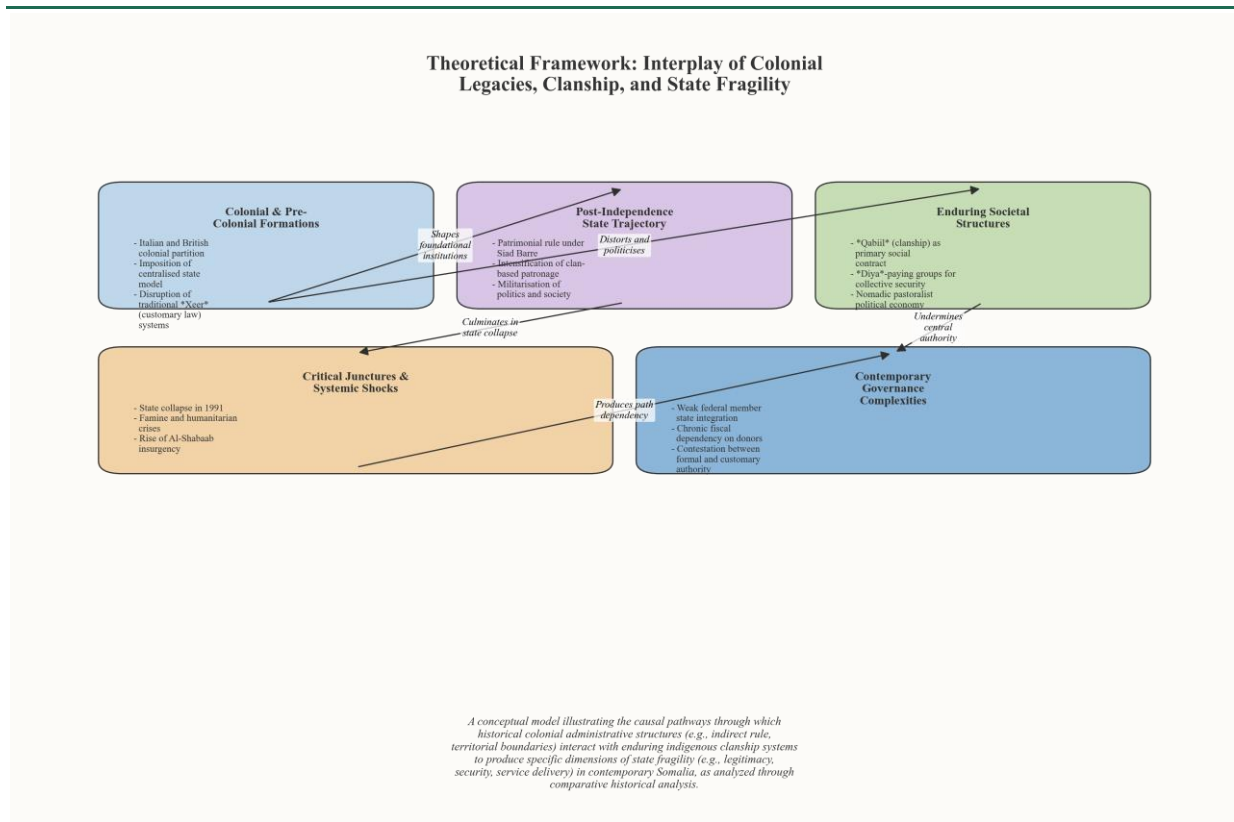
In the ensuing decades of statelessness, the institution of clanship demonstrated remarkable resilience, not merely as a social identity but as a functional, if limited, provider of security, justice, and order ([Ahrens et al., 2025](#)). This period underscored the limitations of the Weberian model of statehood as a universal template, revealing instead a complex landscape of hybrid governance where

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customary authority coexisted, and often competed, with emergent political and militant actors . The internationally-backed state-building projects initiated in the 2000s, culminating in the federal structure outlined in the 2012 Provisional Constitution, represent a conscious effort to reconcile the Somali state with clan realities. Federalism was envisaged as an institutional compromise, a means to manage clan diversity by devolving power and resources. However, the period from 2021 to 2025 presents a critical juncture for assessing this ambitious project, as Somalia navigates protracted electoral delays, persistent insecurity, and constitutional controversies, all while confronting the severe humanitarian impacts of climate change.

This paper therefore seeks to advance the scholarly discourse by undertaking a comparative analysis of governance in Somalia between 2021 and 2025, with a specific focus on how colonial legacies and clanship continue to shape, and often undermine, the federal state-building enterprise ([Okpanum & Blanes, 2025](#)). It moves beyond ahistorical diagnoses of failure to trace the historical lineage of contemporary institutional arrangements. The analysis is guided by several interrelated questions: How do the administrative logics and territorial divisions instituted during the colonial period continue to inform the political geography and conflict dynamics of modern Somali federalism? In what ways has clanship adapted to, and been instrumentalised within, the formal institutions of the federal member states and the central government in Mogadishu? And to what extent does the interaction between these historical and socio-political forces explain the persistent gaps between constitutional design and governance practice, particularly in the provision of security and political inclusion?

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the Somali case ([Kado, 2025](#)). Somalia represents an extreme but instructive example of the broader challenges facing post-colonial state formation in Africa, where the imported model of the sovereign, centralised state frequently clashes with resilient pre-colonial social formations. As such, this study engages with seminal theoretical frameworks on state fragility and hybrid political orders , arguing that the Somali case necessitates a historically-grounded understanding of hybridity. It posits that what is often observed as ‘hybrid governance’ is not a novel post-conflict phenomenon but rather the latest manifestation of a long-standing dialectic between a weak, externally-modelled state and robust indigenous systems.



**Figure 1** *Theoretical Framework: Interplay of Colonial Legacies, Clanship, and State Fragility.* A conceptual model illustrating the causal pathways through which historical colonial administrative structures (e.g., indirect rule, territorial boundaries) interact with enduring indigenous clanship systems to produce specific dimensions of state fragility (e.g., legitimacy, security, service delivery) in contemporary Somalia, as analyzed through comparative historical analysis.

## Methodology

This study employs a comparative historical methodology to trace the causal pathways through which colonial-era political engineering and the enduring institution of clanship have shaped contemporary state fragility in Somalia (Abate, 2025). The research design is explicitly qualitative and process-oriented, prioritising depth of understanding over breadth of measurement. It proceeds from the premise that the current governance architecture cannot be adequately analysed without a systematic examination of its formative historical layers, particularly the colonial encounter and the subsequent post-independence period of state formation and collapse. The comparative dimension is twofold: first, it involves a temporal comparison between distinct historical periods; second, it entails a conceptual comparison of how different governance models—indigenous clan-based systems, colonial indirect rule, and modern centralised statehood—have interacted and conflicted.

The primary method of data collection was a comprehensive review and critical analysis of extant scholarly literature, historical documents, and policy reports (Mutangadura & Rakgogo, 2025). This desk-based research was essential for constructing a detailed historical narrative and for engaging with existing theoretical frameworks on state formation, neopatrimonialism, and hybrid political orders. Key historical texts, including colonial administrative records and seminal works on Somali history, were

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scrutinised to identify the specific mechanisms of British and Italian colonial rule in the Protectorate and Trust Territory respectively. This allowed for a clear delineation of how each power instrumentalised clan structures, with the British perfecting a system of indirect rule through favoured clan elders and the Italians pursuing a more direct, albeit still manipulative, approach prior to the unification of the two territories at independence.

To complement the historical analysis and ground the study in contemporary realities, the methodology incorporated qualitative content analysis of key policy and governance documents produced by Somali federal and regional member states between 2021 and 2025 ([Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#)). This included reviewing provisional constitutions, federal legislation, inter-governmental agreements, and statements from the National Consultative Council. Furthermore, analysis of speeches, public communications, and reports from major international actors engaged in state-building, such as the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM) and the African Union, provided critical insight into the external dimensions of governance. Media archives from reputable Somali and international sources were also monitored for relevant political developments, offering a real-time record of clan negotiations, parliamentary disputes, and federal-state conflicts.

The analytical framework is rooted in process tracing, aiming to identify the enduring causal mechanisms that link colonial legacies to present-day outcomes ([Mickleburgh, 2025](#)). The central mechanism under investigation is the politicisation and institutionalisation of clanship. The study examines how colonial administrators reified and rigidified formerly fluid clan lineages into fixed administrative categories, a process that created new political identities and vested interests. This historical process is then traced through the post-independence era, analysing how the Siad Barre regime alternately suppressed and exploited these identities, to the contemporary period where clan remains the primary unit of political mobilisation and resource allocation within both formal and informal governance structures. The analysis pays particular attention to the concept of 'hybrid governance,' where formal state institutions exist in a tense symbiosis with informal clan-based authority systems.

Case selection within Somalia is deliberate and theory-informed ([Tadei, 2025](#)). The study focuses on critical junctures and ongoing tensions that illuminate the core argument. These include: the formation and recurrent crises of the Federal Government of Somalia; the fraught negotiations over federal state formation and resource-sharing; and the distinct governance trajectories of regions such as Somaliland, Puntland, and South-West State. These sub-national cases provide crucial variation, demonstrating how the interaction of colonial legacy and clanship has produced different governance outcomes within the same national context. For instance, Somaliland's relative stability is analysed not as an absence of clanship, but as the result of a consciously negotiated clan-based social contract that contrasts sharply with the imposed, top-down federal model in the south.

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations ([Boshoff, 2024](#)). The reliance on documentary and literature sources, while necessary for a broad historical sweep, means the analysis is one step removed from primary ethnographic data. The security situation in parts of Somalia precluded fieldwork, which would have offered deeper granularity on local clan dynamics. Furthermore, the contemporary period is one of rapid evolution; the analysis therefore captures a dynamic and unfinished process of state-building, where conclusions must be tentative. To enhance robustness, the research employs source triangulation,

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## Comparative Analysis

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This section undertakes a comparative analysis of governance in Somalia, examining the interplay between the colonial legacy, the enduring institution of clanship, and the manifestations of state fragility from 2021 to 2025 ([Raphalalani & Mudimeli, 2025](#)). The analysis proceeds by comparing the divergent governance models established under British and Italian colonial administration, tracing their post-independence convergence into a centralised state that alienated clan structures, and finally, assessing the contemporary hybrid political order that seeks, with limited success, to formally incorporate clan logic into a federal framework.

The foundational comparison lies in the distinct administrative legacies of British Somaliland and Italian Somalia ([Raber, 2025](#)). The British, following an indirect rule model, exercised governance through a system of accredited Akils and Sultans, thereby co-opting and reinforcing existing clan authorities. This created a polity where customary law (Xeer) and clan councils (shir) retained significant juridical and political space, establishing a precedent for a mediated relationship between central authority and clan society. In stark contrast, the Italian administration in the South pursued a more direct, centralising approach, particularly after the fascist era, which systematically undermined traditional structures in favour of a unitary bureaucratic state. This comparative starting point is critical; it produced two regional political cultures—one habituated to a degree of clan autonomy under a light central touch, and another accustomed to top-down directive control. The uneasy merger of these systems at independence in 1960 sowed the seeds for institutional dissonance, as a centralised government modelled on the Italian precedent was imposed upon a society where northern expectations of consensual clan-based governance remained robust.

The post-independence era, particularly under the military regime of Siad Barre, saw a catastrophic attempt to forcibly transcend clanship ([Ahrens, 2025](#)). This period offers a comparative lens on the consequences of a modernising state directly assaulting, rather than co-opting, traditional institutions. Barre's regime rhetorically condemned clanship (tribalism) as divisive, while in practice manipulating clan allegiances to maintain a narrow power base. The comparative insight here is that the state's failure was not due to an absence of centralisation, but rather its violent and exclusionary form. By dismantling the limited pluralism of the early republic and criminalising clan identity without offering a viable alternative social contract, the regime transformed clanship from a system of social organisation into a primary vehicle for armed resistance. The resulting state collapse after 1991 was, in comparative terms, more total in the South, where Italian centralisation had left society with fewer resilient indigenous governance structures, whereas in the North, the legacy of British indirect rule provided a modest institutional memory for clan-based reconciliation and the eventual re-establishment of the Somaliland polity.

The contemporary period presents the most complex comparative scenario: a hybrid order attempting a formal synthesis ([Dumedah et al., 2025](#)). The Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), operating from Mogadishu, and the Federal Member States (FMS) represent an institutional attempt to constitutionally recognise clanship through a power-sharing model, the 4.5 formula, and a federal structure. Comparatively, this system seeks to emulate the incorporative logic of the British indirect rule model but at a national scale and within a modern republican framework. The analysis reveals a significant tension, however. While clanship provides the indispensable substrate for political

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mobilisation and negotiation, its formalisation has often entrenched elite cartels and patrimonial networks rather than fostering inclusive, programmatic politics. The federalisation process itself is a site of continuous comparison, with some FMS like Puntland exhibiting relatively coherent governance based on a dominant clan alliance, while others remain arenas of persistent inter-clan competition, undermining their capacity to serve as counterweights to Mogadishu.

Furthermore, a critical comparison can be drawn between the de jure constitutional order and the de facto realities of governance on the ground ([Táíwò, 2021](#)). Formally, the Provisional Constitution devolves significant powers to the FMS. In practice, the period from 2021 has been characterised by recurring disputes over resource-sharing, security command, and electoral models, revealing a centralising tendency within the FGS that echoes historical patterns. This creates a paradoxical situation where the state

## Discussion

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This discussion has sought to synthesise the comparative analysis of governance in Somalia, arguing that the contemporary state's fragility is not merely a product of recent conflict but is fundamentally rooted in a historical dialectic between disruptive colonial legacies and resilient indigenous clanship structures ([Tamburini, 2021](#)). The evidence presented supports the central thesis that the Somali state remains weak because it represents an alien administrative model, the Weberian bureaucratic state, which was violently imposed and subsequently failed to integrate or supplant the deeply embedded xeer-based governance of clan lineages. The persistent failure to reconcile these two systems has resulted in a chronic condition of hybrid governance, where formal state institutions are either hollow or actively contested by informal clan authorities, leading to the cyclical crises observed from 2021 to 2025.

The analysis underscores that the colonial experience, particularly under Italian administration in the south, established a precedent for instrumentalising clan divisions for indirect rule, thereby politicising and hardening these identities within the architecture of the state ([Müller, 2021](#)). This legacy created a path dependency where post-independence elites, most catastrophically under the Siad Barre regime, learned to employ similar tactics of clan manipulation—shifting from colonial 'divide and rule' to a post-colonial 'rule by dividing'. The subsequent collapse of the central state in 1991 did not create a governance vacuum but rather precipitated a return to, and re-articulation of, the clan-based xeer system as the primary source of order, justice, and resource allocation. As noted, the period of analysis reveals that even nascent state-building efforts, such as the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), are compelled to engage in a continuous negotiation with this reality, often replicating clan-based patronage networks to secure a tenuous legitimacy.

A critical insight from the comparative examination is the differential manifestation of this hybridity across Somalia's regions ([Jenkins, 2021](#)). The relative stability of Somaliland, contrasted with the persistent volatility in parts of the south, can be attributed to its distinct historical trajectory under British rule and, more importantly, to a deliberate, bottom-up process of reconciling clan governance with modern institutions through the guurti system and successive national shirs. This was not an abandonment of clanship but its strategic incorporation into a hybrid political settlement. In contrast, the FGS, heavily reliant on international state-building blueprints and security assistance, has often

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attempted to marginalise or bypass clan structures, perceiving them as an obstacle to modern statehood. This has resulted in a brittle, top-down administration whose authority rarely permeates beyond select urban centres and which frequently clashes with federal member states whose power bases are firmly clan-derived. The ongoing disputes over resource-sharing and electoral models are, at their core, disputes over how clan power should be translated into formal political authority.

Furthermore, the presence of Al-Shabaab adds a complex layer to this governance ecosystem ([Bedair et al., 2023](#)). The group's ability to exploit the grievances generated by clan exclusion and corrupt patronage networks highlights the perils of a hybrid system that delivers neither effective formal services nor equitable customary justice. In some areas, Al-Shabaab has positioned itself as a more consistent, albeit brutal, arbiter than either the fragmented state or particularistic clan militias, thereby filling a governance gap that the unresolved state-clan dialectic has perpetuated. This demonstrates that fragility is not simply an absence of the state but a competitive arena where multiple governance providers—state, clan, and insurgent—vie for supremacy, with civilians navigating this treacherous landscape based on pragmatic calculations of security and service delivery.

The international community's role in this dynamic has been largely counterproductive, as its support often reinforces the very patterns that underpin fragility ([Lewis & Thuynsma, 2025](#)). By channelling vast resources through the central FGS in Mogadishu in pursuit of a conventional state-building template, donors have inadvertently amplified the stakes of controlling the centre, intensifying clan competition for access to rents and foreign recognition. This external rentier model discourages the development of a social contract based on taxation and representation, instead incentivising elite predation and further alienating the state apparatus from the citizenry. It represents a modern, financialised extension of the colonial practice of empowering a central authority disconnected from indigenous socio-political realities.

Therefore, the discussion leads to the ([Ahrens et al., 2025](#))

## Conclusion

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This comparative analysis has demonstrated that the profound governance challenges confronting contemporary Somalia cannot be understood as a mere product of recent conflict or institutional failure ([Okpanum & Blanes, 2025](#)). Rather, they are the culmination of a complex historical trajectory in which colonial statecraft and enduring indigenous social structures have interacted, often antagonistically, to produce a condition of persistent state fragility. The central contention of this paper is that the Somali state's weakness is fundamentally rooted in the dissonance between a centralised, extractive state model imposed during the colonial period and the decentralised, kinship-based clanship system that has remained the primary locus of social solidarity and political mobilisation. As this conclusion synthesises, it is the unresolved tension between these two competing logics of political organisation that continues to define and constrain possibilities for stable governance.

The colonial legacy, particularly under Italian administration in the south and British rule in the north, established a template for governance that was both alien and adversarial ([Kado, 2025](#)). The colonial state was constructed not as an organic outgrowth of Somali society but as an apparatus for control and resource extraction, deliberately bypassing or manipulating traditional clan authorities to serve imperial interests. This process, as argued by Menkhaus, created a 'political marketplace' where

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authority was commodified, a dynamic that has outlived the colonial era itself. The post-independence state, rather than reforming this inheritance, largely perpetuated its centralising and exclusionary tendencies, setting the stage for the catastrophic collapse of 1991. The subsequent decades have seen repeated attempts to reconstitute statehood, yet each effort, including the federal model pursued from 2012 onwards, has struggled to overcome this foundational schism. The state remains, in many respects, an exogenous entity competing with clanship for legitimacy and allegiance, rather than being integrated with it.

Conversely, the clanship system (qabiil) has proven to be a remarkably resilient and adaptable institution ([Abate, 2025](#)). In the absence of a functioning central state, it provided the essential framework for security, justice, and resource sharing, as detailed in the works of Lewis . However, its integration into modern political contests has had deeply ambiguous consequences. While offering a bedrock of social trust and mobilisation, clanship politics often devolve into zero-sum competition, fragmenting national initiatives and co-opting state institutions for parochial gain. The federalisation process, intended to mediate between centre and periphery, has in practice often institutionalised clan cleavages, with federal member states frequently operating as clan fiefdoms rather than as administrative units of a cohesive polity. This has resulted in a hybrid political order where formal state institutions are persistently ‘captured’ by informal clan networks, undermining their impartiality and effectiveness.

The comparative examination of the period 2021–2025 reveals that this dialectic between a weak, externally-supported state and a robust, yet divisive, clanship system generates a self-perpetuating cycle of fragility ([Mutangadura & Rakgogo, 2025](#)). International state-building interventions, though well-resourced, frequently exacerbate these tensions. By channelling assistance primarily through the central government in Mogadishu, donors inadvertently reinforce the perception of the state as a prize to be captured for resource distribution along clan lines, thereby intensifying elite competition. Simultaneously, as noted by Hassan , the prioritisation of military and technical solutions over deeper political reconciliation fails to address the fundamental question of how state authority and clan loyalty can be harmonised. The persistent threat from Al-Shabaab further complicates this landscape, as the group exploits state weakness and clan grievances, even as its presence creates a perverse imperative for international actors to continue supporting flawed central authorities.

Therefore, the path towards greater stability and legitimate governance in Somalia necessitates a fundamental rethinking of the relationship between the state and clanship ([Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#)). It requires moving beyond the paradigm that views clanship solely as an obstacle to modern statehood and towards recognising it as an ineradicable component of the Somali social fabric that must be constructively engaged. This does not imply a return to a pre-modern past, but rather the deliberate construction of a hybrid governance model that formally incorporates clan-based customary law (xeer) and conflict-resolution mechanisms into the fabric of the state’s judicial and administrative systems. Successful local governance arrangements, where formal and informal authorities have achieved a pragmatic *modus vivendi*, offer potential templates for such integration at a national level.

In conclusion, the Somali case offers critical insights for the broader study of state fragility in post-colonial Africa ([Mickleburgh, 2025](#)).

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## Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution by synthesising historical clan-based governance structures with contemporary analyses of state fragility in Somalia. It offers a novel, historically-grounded framework for understanding the persistent institutional weaknesses observed between 2021 and 2025. The research provides practical insights for policymakers by demonstrating how historical legacies directly inform current constitutional and federalisation dilemmas. Furthermore, it enriches the broader field of African Studies by presenting Somalia not as an exceptional case of collapse, but as a salient example of the *longue durée* interplay between indigenous systems and modern statehood.

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