

Covid-19 in Somalia: Responses and Challenges amid Election Fever

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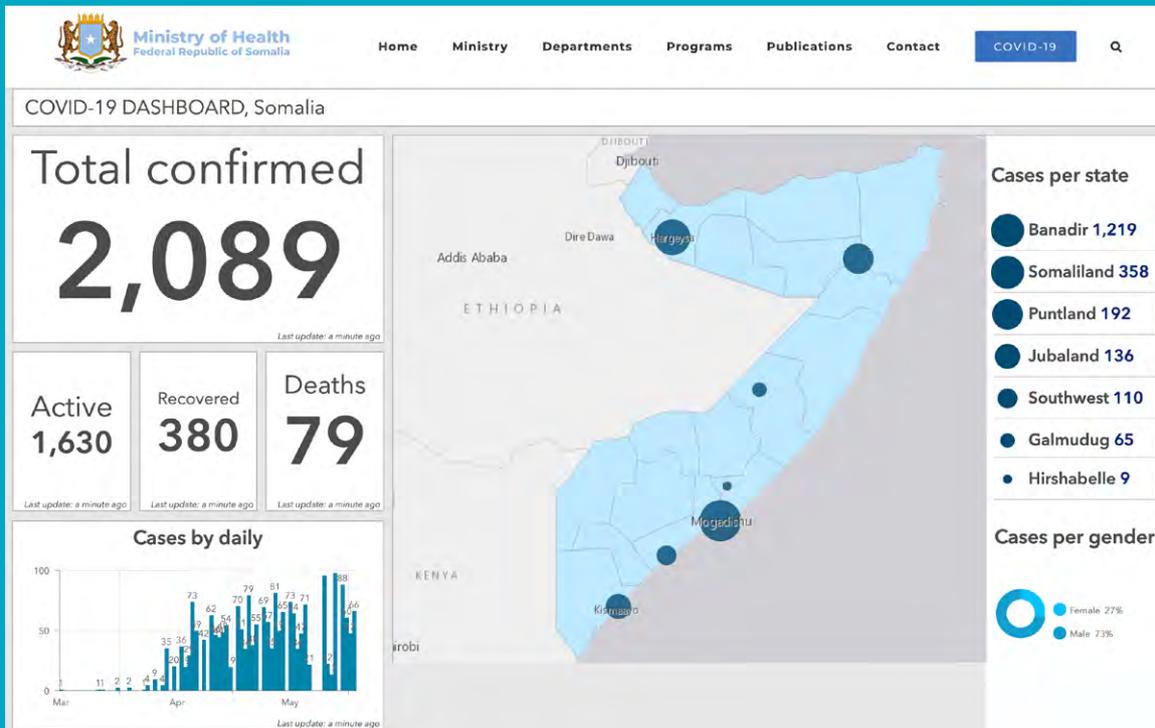
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Introduction

Somalia remains one of Africa's least prepared countries to face the Covid-19 pandemic. Poor health infrastructure, relatively large numbers of internal displacement, insecurity amid an ongoing Al-Shabaab insurgency and natural disasters, such as a locust outbreak and seasonal flooding, remain primary challenges to an effective Covid-19 response. For these reasons, media reports have indicated that the impact of the disease could be worse in Somalia than anywhere else in the world. There were fears that the novel Coronavirus could turn the East African nation into another China, which at that time had the most Coronavirus-related deaths, or worse.

However, almost three months on, these predictions have not come to fruition, even without robust preventative measures or significant international assistance. On the contrary, it seems the prevalence of the virus has decreased in the capital Mogadishu after the government imposed restrictions early on. However, the virus continues to spread rapidly in the regional states and there are fears that community transmission is in full swing throughout the country. Somalia confirmed its first cases of the Covid-19 infection in Mogadishu on 16 March 2020. As of 02 June, there are 2,089 confirmed cases in Somalia with 79 total deaths and 380 recoveries.





A group of volunteers distribute cleaning supplies to refugees at Barwako refugee camp on April 02, 2020 in Mogadishu, Somalia. (Sadak Mohamed - Anadolu Agency)

Key Policy Interventions

From the beginning, Somalia's response to the pandemic has mirrored those of other African countries. Some of the measures adopted by African governments generally included national campaigns promoting social distancing and personal hygiene, lockdown orders, contact tracing, testing, and isolation of suspected cases.

Similarly, the Somali government took a number of steps to tackle the epidemic. First, it launched a large awareness campaign to educate the public about the crisis and to promote social distancing and public prevention guidelines. Similarly, regional states and local governments started daily TV and radio broadcasts with updates and health-related content. Religious figures, celebrities and opinion leaders also joined communication campaigns on social media. Both federal and local governments encouraged the use of digital currency in all transactions. The Ministry of Health developed Covid-19 Public Health Recommendations in Somali language and started distribution among public and private hospitals, different institutions and local governments. The campaign also contained a coordinated public-private partnership for effective prevention. Leading national telecommunication companies joined the daily broadcast of key messages through SMS. They have also

attuned a ring-back tone so that callers can instantly hear public health messages such as "please wash your hands... avoid touching face... keep social distance".

Additionally, Somalia announced plans to suspend domestic and international flights, closed schools and imposed a dusk to dawn curfew in major cities including Mogadishu. From early on, the Ministry of Health-led Covid-19 task force, comprised of key actors from the government, civil society and the private sector, was assembled. The task-force is currently playing the lead role in the efforts to tackle the pandemic.

The federal government earmarked an initial \$5 million in emergency funding that has already been [distributed](#) to regional states. There have been emergency tax measures for Somali companies operating in the country. The government introduced a directive for a tax exemption on basic commodities aimed at mitigating the economic impact experienced by the population from the various anti-Covid-19 measures, despite government revenue also falling significantly due to reduced tax income and collection of fees. Moreover, Somalia had received a sizable amount of support - mostly medical equipment and financing - from

its partners in the international community. For example, Mogadishu has already doled out medical equipment donated by the Turkish government and the Jack Ma Foundation, owned by Chinese business tycoon and Alibaba founder Jack Ma, to various federal states. The federal government has also received funding from international institutions, including a [\\$137.5 million](#) from the World Bank, to respond to the pandemic and other emergencies (i.e. floods and drought).

There is a hope that Somalia will be able to weather the pandemic and avoid the type of outbreak that has overwhelmed some Western countries. Somalia's population is young – with a median age of eighteen – and a limited number of foreigners visit the country due to the relatively widespread insecurity, including the fight against the violent Al-Shabaab militancy concentrated in the south-central regions. Somalia has a history of communicable diseases outbreaks and the authorities have learned well that deploying community-based volunteers, increasing public health education, and coordinating with local governments are the best and fastest mitigation measures. Nonetheless, the current numbers probably indicate a shortage of testing due to the limited medical capacity, and medical experts and officials have raised concern on

the high proportion of positive test results and deaths. The country's health infrastructure is severely undermined due to years of on-going conflict and the state's poor economy. The country's Ministry of Health suffers from a shortage of equipment, particularly Intensive Care Unit and ventilator capacity, medicines, and qualified health workers.

Furthermore, Somalia's case count is one of the highest in the region where Sudan and neighbouring Djibouti top the standings with 5,173 and 3,779 confirmed cases respectively. With over 2080 cases, Somalia's official figures are increasing rapidly. Cases have risen tenfold since mid-April, and there are worrying indications of community transmission throughout the country. While cases in the capital Mogadishu have declined, regional states, including Somaliland, Jubaland and Galmudug, have recorded a rise in infections in recent weeks. The outbreak has also severely impacted the political elite. Two regional ministers from Jubaland in the south and Hirshabelle in south-central Somalia died after contracting the virus. In the Somali diaspora, the virus has claimed lives of prominent Somali figures including Somalia's former Prime Minister, Nur Hassan Hussein and widely-celebrated musician Ahmed Ismail Hussein Hudeidi.

Covid-19 figures in the IGAD countries of East of Africa

As of 02 June 2020

Country	Confirmed Cases	Recoveries	Deaths
Ethiopia	1,344	231	14
Somalia	2,089	380	79
Kenya	2,093	499	71
Djibouti	3,779	1,607	25
Eritrea	39	39	0
Sudan	5,173	1,522	298
South Sudan	994	6	10
Uganda	489	82	0

Source: Johns Hopkins University

Major Challenges

Somalia's efforts to mitigate the Covid-19 pandemic face several imminent challenges. As previously mentioned, the country suffers from poor and under-resourced health infrastructure. Somalia could undergo enormous damage were a major outbreak to happen. The limited testing capacity in terms of equipment and sufficient qualified medical personnel means that, for now, it is difficult to determine or even predict the true magnitude of the virus spread. The World Health Organisation (WHO) rates Somalia's public health system as one of the [weakest](#) in the world. Similarly, one study conducted a few years before the pandemic's beginning ranked Somalia as the country [most vulnerable](#) to infectious disease globally, noting that any communicable disease in the country could easily spread across borders.

A second challenge relates to displacement. An estimated [2.6 million](#) of the 15 million-strong population remain displaced by armed conflict, floods, insecurity and droughts with many living in overcrowded and often under-served camps throughout the country. The displaced are concentrated around major cities including Mogadishu, Baydhaba, Laas Caanood, Boosaaso and Hargeysa. These cities include the majority of documented coronavirus cases so far and there are [reports](#) that some displaced people have tested positive for Covid-19. A major outbreak in the camps would likely take a terrible toll. Anecdotal data documents that the death rate from the public health threat may already be far higher than official reports, with health workers, funeral workers and gravediggers [reporting](#) they have witnessed an unprecedented rise of deaths in the recent few weeks.

Another enormous challenge presented by the pandemic in Somalia is that, as much of the rest of the world, it is likely to take a heavy economic consequence. The containment measures, despite variations in enforcement, will inevitably make Somalia's economic situation more precarious as people experience disruptions to daily livelihoods and a breakdown in local and regional trade. Already suffering from the worst locust outbreak in over a quarter a century, the country must now contend with a pandemic-induced decline in remittance income, as Coronavirus-related restrictions, layoffs and illness around the world hurt the earnings of many Somalis in the diaspora. The over 1.5 million-strong Somali diaspora is scattered throughout the world, with some of the largest communities found in North America, the UK, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany,

and Italy. All of these have been heavily impacted by pandemic, particularly as it concerns their economies.

The World Bank estimates that \$1.4 billion in remittances flow into Somalia annually under normal circumstances. That total amounts to approximately one-quarter of GDP – and an estimated 40 per cent of Somali households depend on the remittance lifeline. Abdurrahman Dualeh Beileh, Somalia's Minister of Finance told TRT World Research Centre that “while the full scale of the impact cannot be presented in its entirety today as we are still monitoring the situation, it is clear that our discussions with the Somali Money Transfer Businesses that remittances are down by around 30 per cent.” Minister Beileh further noted that “if the global lockdown is not eased and remittances do not flow back as usual to the Somali people and economy, there will be even greater social and economic challenges to follow. Remittances are a lifeline for the majority of the Somali people. It pays for schools, healthcare, food, business operations and all that most Somali individuals and families need and depend on for their daily survival. On the wider economy, restricted remittance flows, or a reduction in their volume to their beneficiaries, will also hurt the real economy as spending and consumer confidence will go down and domestic revenue which we rely on to deliver key public services such as security and public administration will be negatively impacted.” International financial assistance flowing to Somalia might also drop, given the impact of the virus on Somalia's international partners. To mitigate the impact, authorities have introduced tax relief and asked businesses to avoid price inflation. According to the Finance Minister, “we have listened to and continue to engage the private sector throughout the process of policymaking during this difficult crisis. We have responded with tax exemptions and tax cuts for key imports and goods which benefit the Somali people, including essential food items. We are also making joint decisions on the way forward for the economy with the private sector which is well represented in the national Covid-19 response architecture.”

Insecurity remains a key issue for an effective response to the crisis. There are concerns that Al Qaeda-linked Al-Shabaab may try to use the pandemic to its advantage while not allowing genuine coronavirus-related information to disseminate in the areas it controls. At a conference in March, the group's leaders asked militants to continue fighting. They labelled Covid-19 as an export to Somalia

by “crusader forces who have invaded the country”, an apparent reference to the African Union Mission in Somalia, whose thousands of peacekeeping troops support the UN-backed government against the militants. However, the good news is that Muslim clerics in the country have tried to counter Al Shabaab’s propaganda. Since the first confirmed case of Covid-19 was announced in Somalia, Al-Shabaab launched multiple attacks against state targets and there have been reported clashes with the security forces. Al Shabaab’s attacks and its clashes with Somali security forces will accelerate the displacement and movement of people, compounding the situation and hindering efforts to contain a broader outbreak. A Covid-19 outbreak in rural areas under Al-Shabaab’s control could be disastrous, particularly if the group blocks humanitarian aid as it did during the 2011 famine, which contributed to the death of more than 260,000 people and fuelled public anger at the group.

Furthermore, Somalia has been hit by a second wave of locusts leaving millions of people food insecure and complicating an already dire humanitarian situation. The desert locust is considered the most destructive migratory pest in the world. To date, the locusts have spread through Eritrea, Djibouti, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and over the Persian Gulf. In Somalia, it is the worst outbreak in 25 years and it is of an unprecedented scale. In February this year, the Somali government declared the desert locust upsurge a national emergency. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that the impact of this desert locust outbreak in Somalia could, by September 2020, increase the number of people facing food insecurity or severe hunger by 500,000. Covid-19 is also restricting efforts to fight the locust outbreak. The arrival of consignments to control agricultural pests, such as biopesticides, is reportedly experiencing delays and international experts cannot easily travel to Somalia due to the global travel restrictions. Quarantine measures upon arrival are also constraining the development of an effective response.

Flooding is another disaster raising concerns amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Seasonal rains that began in late February have caused flash and riverine flooding that has killed 24 people and affected over 700,000 in 24 districts. It has also displaced almost 283,000 people. The flooding resulted from a sharp rise in the level of the Shabelle River following heavy and incessant rains in Somalia and the Ethiopian highlands, which started in late April. The flooding emergency has resulted in displacement that has exacerbated potential exposure to Covid-19 and places

individuals at heightened risk of contracting water-borne diseases.

Finally, the pandemic may undermine Somalia’s efforts towards debt relief. With fortuitous timing, however, Somalia finds itself on good terms with global financial institutions for the first time in over quarter a century. In March 2020, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund announced that Somalia had made the difficult but necessary economic reforms under successive IMF Staff Monitored Programs and reached the ‘Decision Point’. This means that the country can now gain access to concessional financing from the World Bank’s International Development Association – including support from the \$14 billion fast-track fund established to assist countries to prevent, detect and respond to Covid-19. The decision by global financial institutions was followed by the successful Paris Club negotiations where Somalia’s debt of just over \$3 billion was reduced by \$1.4 billion. Subsequently, Somalia has turned its attention to the group of Non-Paris Club creditors, mainly Arab governments and their institutions, to whom just over \$700 million is owed to get a comparable or better deal. The country also recently embarked on a three-year macroeconomic monitoring process under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. With over \$3 billion of additional debt relief at stake, Somalia may need to re-negotiate with international financial institutions with the hope to reach a deal that reflects the rapidly shifting economic conditions while maintaining policies to enlarge the government’s revenue base, improve financial transparency, increase funding of public services and attract private investment.

Election Fever

In addition to the public health and economic challenges, Somalia is currently facing election fever. Questions remain on how the Somali authorities could handle the difficult election, which is expected to start with parliamentary elections in November and end with a presidential vote in February 2021. The election process was already contentious prior to Covid-19, as major parties and political stakeholders are divided over the election design. The federal government has insisted on a One-Person, One-Vote (OPOV) electoral model, in line with international expectations that such a vote would symbolise Somalia's recovery from state collapse. However, critics argue this model is impractical, given the prevailing insecurity and poor electoral preparations. Some opposition figures are concerned that President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed (also known as Farmajo) is purposely sticking to an unrealistic plan so as to engineer an election delay and extend his time in power.

Leading opposition political parties and some federal member states have repeatedly mentioned that they will not accept any delay of the vote or term extension. On 3 April, the Forum for National Parties (FNP), a conglomerate of six opposition parties that includes two former presidents and a sizable proportion of parliament, called for the elections to be held on schedule. The FNP, which enjoys the support of powerful clans, has stridently rejected many of the Farmajo administration's policies and warned against delaying the upcoming December vote, arguing that any term extension is unacceptable. Puntland and Jubaland member-states also demanded that the vote take place on schedule. Consequently, if parliament - which is split among President Farmajo's supporters and opponents - votes to delay the election, serious unrest and potential political instability throughout the country could become a reality.

On 30 May, Prime Minister Hassan Ali Kheyre [signalled](#) his government's commitment to holding the vote on time, without clarifying how this might actually take place. The federal parliament is planning to reopen on 6 June and the National Independent Election Commission - the principal body in charge of organising and conducting elections - is slated to report to the parliament on 27 June about elections regulations and preparedness. Below are several scenarios currently being (unofficially) discussed by Somalia observers and Somali elites on what could happen if the OPOV polls cannot take place at the end of December 2020.

- 1.** A two-year extension of the current government and parliament to allow time for election implementation and resolution of other critical issues.
- 2.** The establishment of some form of government of national unity to achieve the same end.
- 3.** A short technical extension to allow for completion of OPOV elections.
- 4.** A timely indirect election process.
- 5.** Re-election of the national leadership (president, prime minister, leadership of parliament).

In the past two decades, a key pillar of political stability that Somalia enjoyed has been timely and inclusive (indirect) elections every four-years followed by a peaceful transfer of power. Given the remaining limited timeframe, the lack of electoral preparedness and insecurity, opposition groups are reportedly pushing for an enhanced model of the 2016 indirect elections. This means that each legislator will be elected by, for instance, 150, 250 or even more electorates (it was 51 in 2016). The opposition is reportedly against a formal extension but is prepared to accept a technical delay of 5-10 months. Whatever the case, it is clear that the Covid-19 public health threat will complicate the country's arduous election process, in all likelihood leading to an election delay. A political agreement between all stakeholders (i.e. the federal government, federal member states and the political parties) remains the only way forward.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic presents enormous socio-economic challenges for Somalia. A seriously weak and under-resourced health infrastructure resulting from the civil war and subsequent state fragility, internal displacement, insecurity and natural disasters, including a locust infestation and seasonal flooding, remain primary challenges for an effective Covid-19 response.

With 2,089 confirmed cases and 79 total deaths as of 02 June, there are deep fears that community transmission is in full swing. Somalia's only advantage is its relatively young population. Approximately 70 per cent of the Somali population is under the age of 30. However, after decades of living under a crumbling health system, many have underlying health conditions and poor access to quality healthcare, which might nullify the stronger immunity that youth provides. The pandemic is likely to take a heavy economic toll given that remittances from Somali diaspora are shrinking and people continue to suffer disruptions to livelihoods made worse by breakdowns in local and regional trade. There are also fears that the Covid-19 pandemic could lead to a political crisis in Somalia. Questions

remain on how the federal government will be able to manage the difficult election process. The prevailing insecurity and poor electoral preparations as well as Covid-19 related regulations, such as social distancing, will complicate the electoral process and potentially delay the vote.

Responding to the Covid-19 public health threat requires unleashing the power of unity and cooperation among all political stakeholders in the country as well as international partners. Even if Somalia avoids a large-scale outbreak, the economic toll is likely to be devastating. Any unilateral move by the federal government to postpone the upcoming elections could pose a serious threat to the country's nascent democracy and political stability. President Farmaajo, who is the symbol of national unity and the guardian and promoter of the founding principles of the constitution, should take urgent action and approach opposition groups to reach a consensus regarding the election. Somalia's political elites should join hands in this unprecedented time to deliver their responsibilities and relieve Somalia's long-suffering people.



A group of volunteers distribute cleaning supplies to refugees at Barwako refugee camp on April 02, 2020 in Mogadishu, Somalia. (Sadak Mohamed - Anadolu Agency)

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