

New Puntland President Likely to Revive Somalia's Federal Agenda

LSE alumnus Dominik Balthasar says that the election Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas as new leader of Puntland is likely to lead to the renewal of federal ties to Somalia.

The third presidential election in Somalia's semi-autonomous state of Puntland has brought about a change in leadership that might help enhance stability in the Horn of Africa. While it is too early to predict how the shift will ultimately play out in the region, the election of Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas may prove a crucial catalyst for Somalia's stalled process toward federalism.



Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas is the second member of Omar Mohamud sub-clan to become President of Puntland

On 8 January, Puntland's newly sworn-in parliament of 66 members rallied in the northeastern region's capital of Garowe for presidential elections. The semi-autonomous polity had reverted to having its president elected by clan-appointed legislators after local elections were canceled last July due to risks of violence and the democratic process stalled. With eight of the 11 candidates eliminated in the first round of voting, Acting President Abdurahman Mohamed Farole won the second round comfortably. Yet, the third and final round saw Gaas emerge as the winner, defeating the incumbent narrowly with 33 to 32 votes.

Farole's defeat may not have been anticipated, but the changing of the guard follows the unwritten principle of rotating leadership among an informal triumvirate of Puntland's three major Majerteen sub-clans. The polity's first president (Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed, 1998-2004) was a representative of the Omar Mohamud sub-clan; its second president (Mohamoud Muse Hersi, 2005-2009) belonged to the Osman Mohamoud; and the third president (Abdurahman Mohamed Farole, 2009-2014) originated from the Isse Mohamoud. Hence, it was again the turn of the Omar Mohamoud sub-clan of Majerteen to rise to the helm of the state.

Yet Gaas did not succeed merely on the basis of clan arithmetic. A trained economist, Gaas looks back on a formidable political career. Most recently, he served as Prime Minister of the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) under Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed. During his term (2011-2012), Gaas helped devise the formal "roadmap" that led to the official conclusion of Somalia's "transition," and culminated in the establishment of today's Federal Government of Somalia. This experience is particularly valuable, as one of the key tasks for new leadership in Puntland is advancing the region's transition towards multiparty democracy.

Against the backdrop of his narrow victory and given significant social tensions, one of Gaas' first concerns, however, will be the unification of the Majerteen clan. Moreover, he will be expected to forge a more inclusive political settlement that incorporates other tribal factions, such as the Dhulbahante.

Sidelined under President Farole, the Dhulbahante currently hold 17 of the 66 seats in Parliament, and are likely to demand a satisfactory solution to the complex issues surrounding the Sool and Sanaag regions. Having been contested by Somaliland and Puntland for years, disgruntled Dhulbahante founded the Khatumo state in 2012, receiving some support from the central government. While Gaas vowed, in his first press conference, to prioritise the improvement of the region's security situation, strengthening public institutions and initiating economic recovery are among the other urgent tasks the president-elect needs to tackle at home.

Simultaneously, the new leader will have to address federal politics. Indications are that Gaas will try to repair Puntland's relations with the central government, after Farole had cut all ties with Mogadishu in August 2013. Already Gaas's presidential campaign, in contrast to that of his predecessor, was based on a platform of enhanced cooperation with the nation's capital.

Even though many Puntlanders are unhappy with the federal administration, Gaas's course of reconciliation is likely to gain traction locally. This is not least because, by and large, the Majerteen would like to retrieve their historically rooted political influence in Somalia. Besides, in recent years Gaas has proven that he has greater political ambitions, not least evidenced by his candidacy during the 2012 presidential elections in Somalia. Hence, it seems probable that he will be committed to constructively advance Somalia's federal agenda.

The international community will probably respond favorably to such a political course. Combined with the fact that Gaas is likely to benefit from international optimism over Puntland's peaceful election, he will enter into future negotiations with Somalia from a position of considerable strength.

The combination of renewed political stamina and moves toward federalism comes as a double-edged sword for the semi-autonomous Puntland; a careful balance needs to be struck between the priorities of Garowe and Mogadishu. That said, Puntland is unlikely to suffer its resources being siphoned off to the extent that had been the case under the region's first president, Ahmed.

Puntland's revival at the federal level is likely to result in an alliance with a burgeoning and assertive administration in Jubaland to the south – at least in voice, if not in substance. The two regions not only share close kinship because their populations largely trace their descendants back to the Darood, but they are also united in their demand for federalism. The potential alliance could backfire if the federal government and other interest groups feel they're being backed into a corner. The result could be a resumed stalemate.

Yet, strengthened federal units appear more likely to be a boon for Mogadishu, in that the central administration will have more responsive and cooperative counterparts in the regions than has been the case recently. Furthermore, while an increasing influence of the Darood in federal politics comes with its own set of challenges, it might lead to much-needed enhanced cooperation within the Hawiye clan family, which dominates central Somalia in demographic and political terms.

While a scenario of constructive cooperation between Garowe and Mogadishu seems more likely at this point, questions over resource management will pose a test. After all, Puntland is home to the Dharoor and Nugaal faults, which are believed to contain approximately 20 billion barrels of oil.

In the end, the trajectory of Puntland and its impact on other Somali entities will largely hinge on the team Gaas puts together in the coming weeks. The constitution grants him 21 days from his election to form a government.

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