

# **A Fragile Order Unsettled: Federal-State Rupture Raises Conflict Risks in South West State**

*Stability Index Brief  
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# Stability Index Briefs

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Stability Index Briefs are short, targeted analytical outputs that draw on the Somali Stability Index to analyze emerging political developments, shifts in authority and stability, and evolving risks across Somalia's Federal Member States.

The Index is a structured analytical tool that assesses political stability by examining how authority is structured, exercised, and sustained. It combines public perception surveys of over 2,400 respondents, alongside 120 interviews with political elites and district officials, and 120 interviews with traditional elders and societal leaders, conducted across five Federal Member States and Banadir.

The Index is structured around five key dimensions of political stability: elite cohesion, enforcement capacity, resource control, political legitimacy, and federal anchoring.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent weeks, tensions in South West State have intensified. Localized clashes have been reported in Baidoa, Buur Hakaba, and Qansax Dheere, while rival political actors have mobilized armed militias in other parts of the state. At the same time, relations between Baidoa and Mogadishu have worsened. The South West administration has suspended cooperation with the federal government,<sup>1</sup> halted most commercial and private flights,<sup>2</sup> and accused Mogadishu of interference in the state's political and security affairs. New disputes over district authority and appointments, together with President Abdiiaziz Laftagareen's resignation from Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's Justice and Solidarity Party,<sup>3</sup> point to a deeper rupture. What had been a working political relationship between the state leadership and the federal center has now largely collapsed.

This crisis did not begin with the latest turn of events. Since 2022, when Laftagareen's original term was due to end, South West has faced an unresolved dispute over the presidency. Opposition figures challenged his continued rule, mobilized supporters, and periodically triggered local flare-ups. Even so, those episodes rarely turned into a sustained bid to unseat the administration. Instead, competition played out through shifting alliances, negotiation, and restraint. Underlying this was a broad expectation that the administration could retain control and that an armed challenge was unlikely to succeed. The recent clashes and political standoff have brought that unresolved leadership question back to the forefront. They also suggest that the limits that had kept competition from escalating are weakening.

What appears to be changing is the setting in which that dispute is now unfolding. While the immediate crisis still centers on Laftagareen's expired mandate, it is now tied to a larger contest over the state's political direction, its place in the

contested federal electoral process, and the extent of federal influence over the outcome. Drawing on findings from the Somali Stability Index, this brief examines what the recent clashes and political rupture reveal about the balance of power in South West and the risks ahead.

## 2. UNRESOLVED LEADERSHIP DISPUTE

The tensions in South West stem from a leadership dispute that has remained unresolved since 2022, when President Abdiiaziz Laftagareen's original mandate was due to end. The crisis first surfaced in Baidoa when opposition figures rejected the extension of the president's mandate and mobilized supporters in the city. Security forces moved to disperse these gatherings, leading to armed clashes around the residence of former finance minister Mohamed Adan Ibrahim "Fargeti,"<sup>4</sup> where opposition leaders had assembled. Several people were killed and injured, raising concerns that the confrontation could escalate further. The fighting subsided soon afterward following negotiations involving state authorities, opposition figures, elders, and federal representatives, but those negotiations contained the crisis without settling the underlying dispute.

That outcome reflected the calculated interests of both Baidoa and Mogadishu. At the time, Mogadishu was pushing ahead through the National Consultative Council on contentious negotiations over security arrangements, constitutional reform, and electoral rules. Puntland had boycotted the forum, which made the cooperation of the other federal member state leaders more important. A change of leadership in South West would have introduced fresh uncertainty into that process and further strained an already fragile alignment between Baidoa and Mogadishu. The federal government therefore favored continuity, seeking to contain the dispute rather than risk a change in leadership.

The balance of power inside the state also favored the incumbent. Laftagareen's administration retained firm control of Baidoa, which made any direct challenge costly for his opponents. South West's past transitions had also shown how much leadership change depended on backing from Mogadishu, including in 2018, when federal authorities backed Laftagareen's candidacy and security forces intervened ahead

of the vote. Without at least tacit federal support, efforts to remove him were unlikely to succeed and would probably have triggered intervention to preserve the existing order. Thus political competition remained contained, with Laftagareen's presidency sustained by federal backing and the broader security architecture, including federal and Ethiopian forces.

### **Shifting Incentives: From Containment to Armed Contestation**

What now appears to be changing is not the dispute itself, but the conditions that had kept it contained. The crisis in South West is no longer being managed through the same mix of bargaining, restraint, and implicit deterrence that had previously limited the scope of confrontation. Opposition figures are no longer relying on political mobilization alone, as the deterioration in relations between Baidoa and Mogadishu has weakened the assumptions that had earlier discouraged a more direct challenge. Indeed, reports of troop deployments toward Baidoa and accusations that the federal government is spearheading the pressure campaign against Laftagareen have reinforced the view that the old limits on escalation no longer hold.

That shift is already visible on the ground, where opposition forces identifying as the South West Liberation Front now control Buur Hakaba and Qansax Dheere.<sup>5</sup> These gains do more than shift local control; they also test whether security forces remain cohesive, how local actors align under pressure, and whether the administration can still respond effectively outside its core stronghold. The same pattern is visible at the administrative level. The dissolution of the district administration after it aligned with the federal government, followed by a federal directive instructing dismissed officials to remain in place,<sup>6</sup> suggests that the state's authority is being displaced and that, in some districts, decisions over who governs and whose orders stand are increasingly being settled from Mogadishu.

The Index data points in the same direction. Statistical analysis shows a close relationship between perceptions of how secure the president's position is and perceptions of how far state authority reaches across districts. Where the administration is seen as capable of projecting authority beyond Baidoa, rivalry is more likely to remain politically

contained. Where that reach becomes uncertain, the likelihood of challenge rises. The recent clashes and administrative disputes are important in that sense not only because they reflect rising tension, but because they test whether the political conditions that had helped protect the incumbent are beginning to break down.

The same logic applies to revenue. Unlike Puntland or Jubaland, South West does not have an autonomous fiscal base and depends much more heavily on domestic taxation and federal transfers to sustain alliances and its security arrangements. The Index data reflects that dependence clearly: contestation over revenue collection is one of the strongest predictors of both elite cooperation and alignment with the leadership. Where the state is seen as controlling key revenue sources, influential actors are more likely to remain within the existing arrangement. This is why control over customs revenues in Afgoye has taken on greater political significance, with South West officials accusing the federal government of taking over the Afgoye customs post.<sup>7</sup> Any sign that this revenue stream is being contested affects not only the state's finances, but also how elites judge how secure the presidency is and whether to remain aligned with it.

At the same time, Laftagareen's ability to remain in power under growing federal pressure will depend in large part on enforcement capacity, especially as more special forces move toward Baidoa. The Somali National Army's 60th Division, headquartered in the city, sits at the center of that question. It remains unclear how these forces would act, particularly given their local ties, but their importance lies in the role they play within South West's security order, where limited state reach makes the projection of force more difficult. Much of the surrounding rural territory remains under al-Shabaab influence, leaving district centers, including Baidoa, relatively isolated and dependent on garrisoned security arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

The federal government's ability to project force is therefore constrained and depends heavily on forces already in place, since deploying additional units, including special forces, is logistically difficult and depends on limited air access and permissive local conditions. That gives the 60th Division outsized importance. If it acts in ways that reinforce the state administration, control in Baidoa would

strengthen and efforts to dislodge the administration would become less likely to succeed. If it instead responds in ways that weaken the administration, Laftagareen's ability to hold power would come under much greater strain. In practice, however, the issue is unlikely to be so clear-cut. Given the division's local ties and the uneven nature of command and loyalty, its posture may not resolve into a single, coherent line of action. That ambiguity is itself politically important, as it shapes how far rival actors believe they can push and how much deterrent value the administration still retains.

Beyond federal forces, the posture of external military actors further shapes the evolving dynamics of control in South West. Ethiopian forces, which maintain a presence across parts of Bay and Bakool, appear to have adopted a largely neutral posture, remaining in position while engaging only in limited mediation. This posture carries important implications. In districts where state authority depends on external military support, non-intervention reduces the immediate costs of challenge, creating space for opposition actors to expand their influence and test the limits of state control.

These pressures point to a more uncertain phase in South West's political order. What had kept this order intact was never the absence of rivalry, but the belief that authority could still be asserted and defended when challenged. South West's low position in the Index, tied for the lowest with Jubaland, reflects that underlying fragility. That expectation is now under greater strain. As it weakens, actions that once seemed too costly or too unlikely become easier to pursue. While this does not yet amount to a breakdown, it does point to a rising risk of instability. Whether current tensions remain contained or widen into a more consequential contest over control will depend on how far ongoing political and military mobilization, together with shifting alignments, continue to reinforce one another.

### **3. RISKS AND ESCALATION TRAJECTORIES**

The current crisis in South West has entered a less predictable phase. The suspension of cooperation between Baidoa and Mogadishu, the halt in flights, and early signs of federal pressure through force deployments and political positioning all suggest that the dispute is

already escalating. The central question is no longer whether tensions will deepen, but whether the different pressures now building around the crisis remain separate or begin to reinforce one another in ways that alter the balance of power inside the state.

Two trajectories are visible in the way the crisis is unfolding. The first is a continuation of the pattern that has defined much of South West's recent politics: rivalry intensifies, local clashes occur, and pressure on the administration grows, but the broader order holds because the administration still retains enough alignment and enforcement capacity to absorb these shocks. The second points to a more consequential shift, in which those same pressures begin to produce wider changes in political alignment and territorial control, increasing the likelihood that the existing order begins to change in ways that are harder to contain or reverse. Which path becomes more likely will depend less on any single incident than on whether federal positioning and force posture begin to reinforce one another in ways that deepen the crisis rather than contain it.

### **TRAJECTORY 1: Contained localized conflict**

<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Ongoing; moderate likelihood of remaining contained</b>
<b>Instability profile:</b>	<b>High frequency, low-to-moderate intensity</b>

This trajectory reflects the pattern currently visible in South West. Political competition intensifies through localized clashes, restrictions on movement, and continued mobilization, but it remains contained since the administration still retains enough alignment among key political and security actors, together with enough enforcement capacity, to prevent a decisive shift in control. The state administration continues to hold its position in key areas while limiting federal access and influence, even as federal actors apply pressure without yet converting that pressure into a sustained presence on the ground. Instability is therefore contained rather than resolved, with tensions repeatedly absorbed through intermittent bargaining, mediation, and selective containment. The result is a pattern of recurring but still localized instability.

This trajectory is likely to persist as long as authority continues to be enforced from Baidoa, security actors do not fragment in ways that fundamentally change existing arrangements, and federal intervention remains inconsistent or indirect. Under these conditions, escalation becomes more frequent without producing a decisive shift in who governs. Pressure may ease temporarily if mediation regains traction, but without a political agreement on the leadership dispute, and given its connection to wider federal political tensions, including uncertainty around the federal electoral process, any reduction in tensions is likely to be limited. This pattern is also consistent with Somali Stability Index findings, which suggest that where executive authority and enforcement capacity remain intact, competition can intensify without producing an immediate change in control.

**This trajectory is sustained by several reinforcing dynamics:**

- Continued mobilization of clan-based militias, which keeps confrontation active at the local level
- Breakdown in coordination between federal and state authorities, which reduces the capacity to contain escalation
- Growing uncertainty among political actors over how long the current leadership can hold
- Increasing contestation over district administration, including competing federal and state directives

**These pressures create a corresponding set of risks:**

- More frequent localized clashes, especially in peripheral districts and along key access corridors
- Disruptions to movement, trade, and routine governance
- Growing fragmentation at the district level, with contested authority over appointments and governance
- Wider openings for al-Shabaab to exploit fractured authority and localized insecurity

**A shift toward a broader conflict trajectory becomes more likely if several developments begin to alter the underlying balance of power. The most important warning signs include:**

- The 60th Division aligning clearly with either the state administration or federal authorities
- More consistent or direct involvement by Ethiopian forces in support of one side
- Erosion or breakdown of mediation mechanisms, especially elder-led processes
- Clashes spreading across multiple districts in a sequential or coordinated way
- Movement of forces towards Baidoa, together with increased federal deployments to surrounding towns such as Buur Hakaba, Berdale, Hudur, Wajid, Afgoye and Baraawe
- State-led elections proceeding without a negotiated and broadly accepted framework
- The emergence of a parallel or federally driven electoral process
- Deepening federal disputes over mandates and constitutional arrangements

## **TRAJECTORY 2: Expanding conflict and federal pressure**

<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>High; already underway and increasing</b>
<b>Instability profile:</b>	<b>Persistent instability with widening political impact</b>

This trajectory is already taking shape and points to a shift away from contained contestation toward a broader and more dangerous phase of the crisis. The dispute is no longer confined to Laftagreen's mandate, but is increasingly shaped by federal force posture, intervention in district administration, and disputes over how the electoral process will be organized. Early signs are already visible in reported deployments toward Baidoa, federal actions against district councils, and the growing possibility that state and federal actors could back competing political processes.

What makes this trajectory more difficult to contain is that pressure no longer stays localized or episodic. As federal involvement deepens, opposition figures have greater room to mobilize, local actors face stronger pressure to realign, and the administration is forced to consolidate defensively around Baidoa and other key positions. Under these conditions, the crisis is no longer only about whether Laftagareen remains in office, but increasingly about who controls key districts, who can enforce decisions, and which side local actors believe is better placed to hold power beyond Baidoa.

**This trajectory is likely to intensify through several reinforcing developments, some of which are already beginning to emerge:**

- Federal forces and opposition militias tighten pressure around Baidoa while also holding positions in contested towns
- District administrations split, with rival officials claiming authority, issuing competing directives, or running parallel electoral and administrative processes
- The electoral dispute hardens into parallel political processes, with state and federal actors moving ahead on competing mandates, appointments, or election tracks
- Ethiopian forces become more active in ways that alter local balances and prompt counter-mobilization by rival actors

**These dynamics create a corresponding set of risks:**

- Districts and key corridors falling under divided authority, with different militias controlling movement and access
- Mounting pressure on Baidoa, including the risk of partial loss of control over the capital
- Emergence of parallel governance structures at the district level, including competing electoral processes and rival claims to state authority
- Disruption of trade routes and population movement, particularly along the Baidoa–Buur Hakaba and Afgoye corridors, affecting access
- Escalation into multi-sided confrontation involving federal, state, and external actors

- Greater room for al-Shabaab to exploit divided authority, weak enforcement, and distracted security actors, especially in contested or weakly governed areas

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The direction and pace of escalation will be shaped by reinforcing pressures that increasingly cut across both trajectories. What had previously remained localized and broadly containable is now being pulled into a wider set of pressures that the existing order is less able to absorb. This is visible not only in clashes and militia mobilization, but also in the breakdown of political alignment, the spread of territorial and administrative contestation, and more direct federal involvement through troop movements and intervention in district administration. As these pressures accumulate across political, territorial, and federal domains, the arrangements that had kept rivalry within bounds are coming under greater strain, narrowing the gap between contained instability and a more consequential shift in control.

The convergence of political timelines at the state and federal levels is now shaping how escalation unfolds. Uncertainty around the federal mandate, disputes over electoral arrangements, and growing pressure on Laftagareen are no longer unfolding in separate arenas. They are increasingly feeding into one another. As the space for negotiation narrows, actors have stronger incentives to harden their positions, test where authority still holds, and move before the political balance shifts further. That makes developments in South West more closely tied to wider federal political competition and increases the likelihood that local escalation will reflect shifts at the national level.

Whether the crisis remains contained or moves into a more consequential phase will depend on how these pressures interact on the ground. If federal pressure, local mobilization, and disputes over authority and revenue continue to unfold separately, instability is likely to persist in a contained but still volatile form, with clashes remaining localized and without sustained shifts in control. If, however, these dynamics begin to reinforce one another, instability is more likely to become sustained and consequential.

FEDERAL MEMBER STATE <b>SOUTH WEST</b>	SSI SCORE <b>1.70</b>	<b>FRAGILE</b>
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TABLE 1: Somali Stability Index Pillar and Indicators Scores by Respondent Groups in South West

PILLARS/INDICATORS	RESPONDENT GROUPS		
	PUBLIC	POLITICAL ELITES	SOCIETAL LEADERS
<b>ELITE COHESION PILLAR</b>	<b>2.01</b>	<b>2.24</b>	<b>1.91</b>
Stability of the Executive Authority	2.28	2.40	2.15
Elite Cooperation	2.06	2.10	1.95
Alignment with Power Holders	2.07	2.29	2.00
Dispute Management Mechanism	1.58	2.15	1.40
Obstructive Power Centers	2.07	2.25	2.10
<b>ENFORCEMENT CAPACITY PILLAR</b>	<b>1.74</b>	<b>2.03</b>	<b>1.67</b>
Reach of Executive Authority	2.16	2.50	2.20
Reliance on Federal and External Forces	1.10	1.55	1.05
Presence of Parallel Functions	1.79	2.04	1.55
Territorial Contestation	1.91	2.04	1.90
<b>RESOURCE CONTROL AND RENT FLOWS PILLAR</b>	<b>1.80</b>	<b>2.33</b>	<b>1.78</b>
Control of Key Revenue Source	2.02	2.50	2.20
Contestation of Revenue Collection	1.94	2.35	1.85
Distribution of Rents	1.44	2.15	1.30
<b>POLITICAL LEGITIMACY PILLAR</b>	<b>1.61</b>	<b>2.28</b>	<b>1.87</b>
Perception of Representation	1.83	2.29	2.04
Perceived Responsiveness	1.38	2.00	1.45
Behavioral Engagement	1.64	2.45	2.00
Confidence in the State Leader	1.61	2.40	2.00
<b>FEDERAL ANCHORING PILLAR</b>	<b>1.67</b>	<b>2.27</b>	<b>1.90</b>
Confidence in FGS Leadership	1.55	2.10	1.60
Confidence in the FGS Parliament	1.55	2.45	1.90
FGS-FMS Relations	1.92	2.29	2.10
FGS Stabilizing-or-Destabilizing Role	1.65	2.25	2.00

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Hiiraan Online, “Southwest State Suspends Cooperation with Federal Government,” *Hiiraan Online*, March 17, 2026, [https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2026/Mar/204687/southwest\\_state\\_suspends\\_cooperation\\_with\\_federal\\_government.aspx](https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2026/Mar/204687/southwest_state_suspends_cooperation_with_federal_government.aspx).

<sup>2</sup> Hiiraan Online, “Southwest State Suspends All Commercial Flights as Deepening Rift with Mogadishu,” *Hiiraan Online*, March 19, 2026, [https://www.hiiraan.com/security4/2026/Mar/204704/southwest\\_state\\_suspends\\_all\\_commercial\\_flights\\_as\\_deepening\\_rift\\_with\\_mogadishu.aspx](https://www.hiiraan.com/security4/2026/Mar/204704/southwest_state_suspends_all_commercial_flights_as_deepening_rift_with_mogadishu.aspx).

<sup>3</sup> Shabelle Media, “Southwest State President Laftagareen Resigns from Somali President’s Political Party,” Shabelle Media, March 18, 2026, <https://shabellemedia.com/southwest-state-president-laftagareen-resigns-from-somali-presidents-political-party/>.

<sup>4</sup> Somali Magazine, “After a Deadly Gunfight in Baidoa, the Southwest State Information Minister Resigns in Disapproval,” Somali Magazine, December 25, 2022, <https://somalimagazine.so/after-a-deadly-gunfight-in-baidoa-the-southwest-state-information-minister-resigns-in-disapproval/>.

<sup>5</sup> Garowe Online, “Somalia: Heavy Fighting Erupts in Qansahdhere as Opposition Forces Claim Control,” Garowe Online, March 14, 2026, <https://garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-heavy-fighting-erupts-in-qansahdhere-as-opposition-forces-claim-control>

<sup>6</sup> Hiiraan Online, “Federal Government Rejects Southwest’s Dissolution of Hudur District Administration,” Hiiraan Online, March 23, 2026, [https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2026/Mar/204724/federal\\_government\\_rejects\\_southwests\\_dissolution\\_of\\_hudur\\_district\\_administration.aspx](https://www.hiiraan.com/news4/2026/Mar/204724/federal_government_rejects_southwests_dissolution_of_hudur_district_administration.aspx)

<sup>7</sup> Baidoa Online, “Post,” X (formerly Twitter), March 16, 2026, <https://x.com/BaidoaOnline/status/2033526206696464544>

<sup>8</sup> GLAFPOL, Containment at Risk: Modeling the Impact of Ethiopian Forces’ Withdrawal from Somalia, January 13, 2025, <https://glafpol.com/briefing/containment-at-risk-modeling-the-impact-of-ethiopias-withdrawal-from-somalia>.

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