

HiLiN | Policy Brief



Former President Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed and current President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud who was in the opposition at the time speak to the media in Mogadishu on 10 November 2019 amid tensions over federal flight restrictions. Source: BBC Somali.

Aviation Governance and the Struggle for State Authority in Somalia

Executive Summary

Somalia's aviation sector has become a critical yet fragile platform for asserting state authority in a fragmented political landscape. Despite the federal government's formal control over the airspace, regional resistance, opposition contestation, and inadequate financial and technical resources continue to undermine effective governance. This brief examines how the Somali Civil Aviation Authority (SCAA) has been instrumentalized as both a symbol and a tool of sovereignty. It argues that aviation governance is deeply politicized, shaped by revenue disputes, geopolitical tensions, and institutional gaps. To restore legitimacy and build regulatory coherence, the brief recommends reforms that depoliticize airspace control, enhance technical capacity, and strengthen coordination between federal and regional actors.

Key Recommendations

- Enforce a clear operational separation between the Somali Civil Aviation Authority's (SCAA) regulatory responsibilities and political directives from the executive.
- Introduce legal safeguards to prevent the misuse of airspace control for partisan or electoral purposes, ensuring equal and uninterrupted access for humanitarian, civil, and commercial flights.
- Convene a formal negotiation platform between federal and regional authorities to define shared governance arrangements for aviation, including co-management protocols, infrastructure oversight, and equitable revenue-sharing mechanisms.
- Create a credible mechanism for resolving aviation-related disputes, to be monitored by independent Somali observers, in order to reduce political interference and enhance trust among stakeholders.
- Mandate that all aviation-generated revenues be transparently reinvested (after administrative costs) regional airport infrastructure and aviation safety improvements, with clear oversight provisions to ensure equitable allocation.

1. Introduction

In Somalia's fragmented political context, the governance of civil aviation has emerged as a vital mechanism for projecting both internal and external sovereignty. While the federal government holds internationally recognised legal control over the country's airspace, its empirical authority is constrained by regional disputes, elite fragmentation, and structural dependency on international aid¹. This brief, examines the political instrumentalisation of the Somali Civil Aviation Authority (SCAA) and the contested role of aviation in state-building amid evolving international regulatory landscape. It calls for comprehensive reform of Somalia's aviation governance through the establishment of institutional safeguards, regulatory independence, and equitable coordination between federal and regional authorities, aiming to restore legitimacy, coherence, and public trust.

2. Core Challenges in Somalia's Civil Aviation Sector

Since the restoration of Somalia's aviation control to its headquarters in Mogadishu in 2019, the federal government has reasserted legal control over national airspace. However, this effort has encountered significant resistance from the self-declared republic of Somaliland and autonomous states of Jubaland and Puntland. Tensions over revenue sharing, airspace access, and regulatory jurisdiction have intensified institutional fragmentation and hindered progress toward a unified national aviation strategy². These disputes have been exacerbated by the politicisation

of flight authorisations. In recent years, opposition figures and regional leaders have faced travel disruptions—particularly during electoral cycles—raising concerns about the neutrality of the SCAA and the legitimacy of federal oversight³.

Control over Somali airspace has also become entangled in regional geopolitics. In 2024, the federal government denied Ethiopian aircraft overflight rights in response to Addis Ababa's memorandum of understanding with Somaliland on Red Sea access⁴. These incidents highlight how aviation governance is being leveraged as an instrument of foreign policy and regional rivalry. At the same time, Somalia's aviation sector remains highly reliant on international actors, including the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Air Transport Association (IATA), for technical expertise, safety oversight, and revenue systems' improvement. Despite decades of engagement, ICAO and IATA have repeatedly flagged Somalia's non-compliance with international standards, slowing its reintegration into the global aviation system⁵.

The federal government disputes these assessments, but aviation safety records suggest serious shortcomings. Between 2012 and 2021, Somalia recorded 20 aviation accidents—the highest in any decade since independence—compared to eight in 2002–2011 and lower frequencies in previous periods (See table 1)⁶. This upward trend corroborates

¹ Menkhaus, K. (2018). Elite bargains and political deals project: Somalia case study. DFID Stabilisation Unit; Elmi, A., & Barise, A. (2006). The Somali conflict: Root causes, obstacles, and peace-building strategies. *African Security Review*, 15(1), 32–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2006.9627386>; International Civil Aviation Organization. (2014c). Letter to H.E. Said J. Ali Korsheel regarding the transition of air navigation services for the Mogadishu FIR and capacity-building initiatives.

² Pegg, S. (2024). The Somaliland-Ethiopia memorandum of understanding: Transformational game changer or... not so fast?.

³ Forum for National Parties. (2019). Statement on attempted blockage/delay of FNP humanitarian flight to Beletweyne; Federal Parliament of Somalia. (2024). Letter on condemnation and warning regarding flight restrictions. Addressed to the

Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation and the Prime Minister's Office.

⁴ Hiiraan Online. (2024). Somali Civil Aviation Authority confirms denial of Ethiopian Airlines flight into Hargeisa; Farah Hersi, M., & Akinola, A. O. (2024). Regional security and the role of IGAD in Somalia.

⁵ International Civil Aviation Organization. (2014c). Letter to H.E. Said J. Ali Korsheel regarding the transition of air navigation services for the Mogadishu FIR and capacity-building initiatives; Somali Civil Aviation Authority Board of Directors. (2021). Transition plan Mogadishu FIR implementation notification (Ref: scaabod/046/2021).

⁶ Aviation Safety Network. (n.d.). Aviation Safety Database for Somalia. Retrieved October 9, 2024, from <https://asn.flightsafety.org/database/dblist.php?Country=6O>.

findings that poor adherence to international safety standards elevates aviation risks⁷.

Table 1: Number of Recorded Aviation Accidents in Somalia by Decade (1942–2021)

Years	Accidents
2012-2021	20
2002-2011	8
1992-2001	4
1982-1991	2
1972-1981	3
1962-1971	2
1952-1961	3
1942-1951	1

In addition to ongoing safety concerns, Somalia’s aviation governance is undermined by persistent institutional capacity gaps and political fragmentation. While technologies such as PlanePass have been introduced to enhance air traffic monitoring and improve revenue collection, the effectiveness of these tools remains constrained. Ongoing disputes over revenue sharing between the federal government and regional administrations, combined with weak infrastructure, inadequate training, and the absence of clear operational guidelines, continue to undermine the effectiveness of Somalia’s flight information region management⁸.

3. Strategic Importance of Aviation for State-building

The Somali government’s efforts to centralise air traffic control demonstrate the political significance

attributed to aviation as a mechanism for rebuilding the state and its contested legitimacy⁹. However, these initiatives are undercut by elite contestation, technical shortcomings, and donor conditionalities that complicate the assertion of sovereign control¹⁰. Incidents such as the federal restrictions on humanitarian flights to Beletweyne and Jubaland’s unilateral aviation directives illustrate how aviation is weaponised in intergovernmental disputes¹¹. Meanwhile, international actors retain de facto influence over key decisions through conditional financing, safety audits, and compliance thresholds that Somalia struggles to meet¹².

Aviation’s entanglement with sovereignty politics is further highlighted in Somalia’s efforts to leverage airspace control as a form of geopolitical resistance, particularly in response to perceived encroachments by Ethiopia. Yet such assertions often expose the limits of Somali sovereignty, which is juridically affirmed but empirically contingent upon donor support, diplomatic mediation, and external technical capacity¹³.

These dynamics underscore the imperative for Somalia’s aviation-related statebuilding efforts to be approached with caution and sensitivity. If not accompanied by inclusive dialogue, attempts to centralise aviation governance risk exacerbating the already fragile political environment, fragmented sovereignty, and recurrent instability.

4. Policy Recommendations

To overcome the above explored challenges, Somalia’s aviation governance must undergo targeted

⁷ Spence, T. B., Fanjoy, R. O., Lu, C., & Schreckengast, S. W. (2015). International standardization compliance in aviation. 1–8. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0969699715000812>

⁸ Vector Airport Systems & Gossamer Crossing. (2021). PlanePass air traffic billing system overview.

⁹ Leonardo. (2017). ATM and VHF system for the Federal Government of Somalia;.

¹⁰ Menkhaus, K. (2018). Elite bargains and political deals project: Somalia case study. DFID Stabilisation Unit;.

¹¹ Forum for National Parties. (2019). Statement on attempted blockage/delay of FNP humanitarian flight to Beletweyne; Federal Parliament of Somalia. (2024). Letter on condemnation and warning regarding flight restrictions. Addressed to the

Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation and the Prime Minister’s Office.

¹² International Civil Aviation Organization. (2014c). Letter to H.E. Said J. Ali Korsheel regarding the transition of air navigation services for the Mogadishu FIR and capacity-building initiatives; Somali Civil Aviation Authority Board of Directors. (2021). Transition plan Mogadishu FIR implementation notification (Ref: scaabod/046/2021).

¹³ Pegg, S. (2024). The Somaliland-Ethiopia memorandum of understanding: Transformational game changer or... not so fast?; Collier, P. (2014). Attracting international private finance for African infrastructure☆. Journal of African Trade, 1(1–2), 37–44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joat.2014.09.002>.

reforms that promote regulatory clarity, institutional trust, and political neutrality. The following measures are recommended:

- a) Enforce a clear operational separation between the Somali Civil Aviation Authority’s (SCAA) regulatory responsibilities and political directives from the executive.
- b) Introduce legal safeguards to prevent the misuse of airspace control for partisan or electoral purposes, ensuring equal and uninterrupted access for humanitarian, civil, and commercial flights.
- c) Convene a formal negotiation platform between federal and regional authorities to define shared governance arrangements for aviation, including co-management protocols, infrastructure oversight, and equitable revenue-sharing mechanisms.
- d) Create a credible mechanism for resolving aviation-related disputes, to be monitored by independent Somali observers, in order to reduce political interference and enhance trust among stakeholders.
- e) Mandate that all aviation-generated revenues be transparently reinvested (after administrative costs) in regional airport infrastructure and aviation safety improvements, with clear oversight provisions to ensure equitable allocation.

Conclusion

The aviation sector serves as a critical yet fragile platform for reasserting state authority in Somalia’s fragmented political landscape. It reflects the contradictory nature of sovereignty in fragile contexts: juridically recognized but empirically unstable, politically significant but technically underdeveloped. To say the least, the governance of airspace highlights the limits of symbolic sovereignty when unaccompanied by regulatory capacity, institutional legitimacy, and political cohesion. By transforming aviation from a contested domain into a model of transparent, inclusive, and technically sound governance, Somalia can signal a broader commitment to rebuilding its state apparatus. However, this requires sustained political will, equitable coordination with regional actors, and a

strategic transition from donor dependency to institutional self-reliance. For detailed exploration of the matter, refer this paper, [Imposing order from the skies? Civil aviation as a precarious site of state sovereignty in Somalia available.](#)

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