



POLITICAL LOYALTY AND PATRONAGE POLITICS: CATALYST FOR CORRUPTION AND WEAK GOVERNANCE IN SOMALILAND.

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Cite this article:

M. A., Habane, W. H., Arrey (2025), Political Loyalty and Patronage Politics: Catalyst for Corruption and Weak Governance in Somaliland. African Journal of Law, Political Research and Administration 8(3), 36-47. DOI: 10.52589/AJLPRA-LGTJMNHE

Manuscript History

Received: 3 Nov 2025

Accepted: 8 Dec 2025

Published: 26 Dec 2025

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ABSTRACT: *This article investigates the pervasive influence of political patronage and corruption on the efficacy of governance in Somaliland. Patronage politics in Somaliland refers to the practice of appointing and allocating resources to political leaders based on loyalty rather than merit. This negative political practice undermines governance and contributes to institutional weaknesses. The key question addressed in this article is; how does patronage politics driven by political loyalty catalyst corruption and weak governance in Somaliland? The article is informed by a theoretical framework constructed around a critical review of relevant literature; this analysis draws upon Neo-Patrimonialism Theory and Elite Theory to contextualize the findings within broader socio-political dynamics. Using a qualitative method that involved in-depth interviews and the analysis of secondary data from diverse sources, analyzed thematically the study reveals the important findings. The findings indicate that, over the past 15 years, successive presidents have appointed ministers primarily based on clientelism and personal loyalty rather than merit, leading to a governance framework where unqualified individuals occupy key positions. Many interviewees noted that this trend has been facilitated by the influence of traditional power structures, such as clans and sultans, alongside prominent business elites who seek to manipulate political processes for their own personal gains. The study further highlights how this reliance on personal connections undermines accountability, as many ministers prioritize clan allegiances over public responsibilities, resulting in confusion about their mandates and a lack of alignment with national objectives. Consequently, public trust in governmental institutions has eroded, reflecting a pressing need for reform. To address these challenges, the article recommends implementing merit-based appointment processes that prioritize qualifications and expertise, strengthening parliamentary oversight mechanisms, and promoting greater civic engagement to enhance transparency and accountability. The findings of this study have important public policy implications for the government and international development partners interested in the political economy and development of Somaliland.*

KEYWORDS: Corruption, Political Loyalty, Patronage Politics, Weak Governance.



INTRODUCTION

Somaliland, an unrecognized self-declared Government, gained its initial independence from Britain on June 26, 1960 (Millman, 2013; Tortolini, 2020). Shortly thereafter, it voluntarily joined with Italian Somaliland to form the Republic of Somalia. However, following a period of intense political turmoil and civil war, Somaliland declared its independence once again on May 18, 1991, in the wake of the Somali National Movement's overthrow of the Somali Republic's government (Korotayev & Voronina, 2024; Nur et al., 2017). Since then, Somaliland has emerged as a notable example of stability and democratic governance in a region often characterized by conflict and instability (Walls & Kibble, 2011).

Over the past three decades, Somaliland has institutionalized a multiparty democratic system that features five types of elections: the referendum, presidential, parliamentary representative, local council, and political party elections (Richards, 2016; Rossi & Hargeisa, 2017). According to the National Electoral Commission (NEC, 2025), presidential elections have been conducted four times over the past 25 years, producing four different elected presidents through peaceful transfers of power. In 2024, Somaliland once again held a competitive presidential election, which resulted in the election of a new president, further consolidating its reputation as a functioning democratic polity in the Horn of Africa (NEC, 2025).

Despite its achievements, including the establishment of a functioning parliamentary system and the conduct of multiple competitive elections since 2001, Somaliland remains unrecognized by the international community (Poore, 2009). This lack of recognition complicates its efforts to gain full statehood and hampers international support that might otherwise bolster its governance structures (Rossi & Hargeisa, 2017). Furthermore, Somaliland's political framework is intricately linked to its colonial history and the subsequent reorganization post-civil war, creating a unique context for its governance challenges (Mohamed, 1996; Richards, 2009).

While Somaliland has successfully built institutions that reflect local cultural values and effectively merged traditional consultation methods with modern democratic practices (Richards, 2016; Renders, 2007), it grapples with significant issues of political patronage and corruption. Clan-based patronage networks dominate both the public and private sectors, often prioritizing loyalty over meritocracy in political appointments and employment opportunities (Walls & Kibble, 2011). This system not only undermines professional competence but also perpetuates a cycle of nepotism and inefficiency, which hampers the effectiveness of government institutions (Rossi & Hargeisa, 2017).

The implications of these governance challenges are profound, as ineffective leadership and institutional failures can lead to a loss of public trust and hinder the democratic process. Recent studies have highlighted additional concerns, including inadequate legal frameworks, restrictions on media freedom, and ongoing political intimidation, which further threaten Somaliland's democratic aspirations (Richards, 2016; Renders, 2007).

In light of these challenges, Somaliland offers important lessons for other regions facing similar obstacles in state-building. Its trajectory serves as a compelling case study of a functioning democratic political entity that has managed to navigate the complexities of governance in a post-conflict environment (Richards, 2009; Walls & Kibble, 2011). Despite its unrecognized status and the obstacles posed by corruption and political patronage, Somaliland remains a



beacon of potential within a politically tumultuous region, illustrating the possibilities for state-building initiatives worldwide (Renders, 2007). Despite the growing body of literature on Somaliland's hybrid political order and state-building process, limited scholarly attention has been given to the systemic effects of political patronage and elite corruption on governance and merit-based institutional performance. Existing research has largely focused on democratization and stability, with little empirical analysis of how loyalty-based networks undermine public sector efficiency and accountability. To address this gap, this *Political Loyalty and Patronage Politics: Catalyst for Corruption and Weak Governance in Somaliland* aims to examine the impact of political patronage and elite corruption on Somaliland's governance and public institutions, to analyze how political patronage influences governance and public sector performance and to examine patronage politics, instigated by political loyalty has contributed to weak governance in Somaliland.

Problem Statement

Somaliland's pursuit of democratic governance and institutional stability continues to be hindered by the deep entrenchment of political patronage and corruption within its governance framework. Despite establishing institutions that blend indigenous consultative traditions with modern democratic ideals, the dominance of clan-based patronage networks has significantly weakened the foundations of merit-based governance (Renders & Terlinden, 2010). These networks often prioritize loyalty and kinship over competence and professionalism, influencing appointments, promotions, and access to resources across both the public and private sectors. Consequently, political allegiance has gradually replaced meritocracy as the primary determinant of leadership and employment opportunities, eroding administrative efficiency and public sector accountability (Phillips, 2016).

Political Loyalty and Patronage Politics: Catalyst for Corruption and Weak Governance in Somaliland. As governance becomes increasingly shaped by personal and clan affiliations, corruption and nepotism are normalized, undermining transparency, inclusivity, and public confidence in state institutions (Elder, 2021). This environment fosters inequality, marginalizes capable professionals, and constrains institutional effectiveness, thereby weakening democratic consolidation and policy implementation. The resulting governance inefficiencies perpetuate public frustration and risk destabilizing Somaliland's relatively successful political order. Addressing these patterns of patronage and corruption is therefore essential for the region to sustain democratic governance, enhance institutional legitimacy, and achieve long-term political and socio-economic stability.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Loyalty and Patronage Politics

Political patronage refers to the practice where political actors exercise discretionary power to appoint individuals to public sector positions based on loyalty and trust rather than professional competence or merit (Beekers & Van Gool, 2012; Weingrod, 1968; Okojie & Ebonine, 2024). This form of patronage prioritizes political allegiance over qualifications, often resulting in appointments that serve the interests of particular groups or leaders instead of institutional needs. It operates as a mechanism through which political leaders consolidate influence and maintain control over state resources, shaping the composition and functioning of public institutions.

The real-world effects of political patronage are significant, often leading to the placement of unqualified individuals in positions of authority, which undermines organizational effectiveness and weakens governance structures (Beekers & Van Gool, 2012; Okojie & Ebonine, 2024). Importantly, patronage is not limited to developing or transitional states; it is observed in modern democracies worldwide, with profound consequences for transparency, accountability, and institutional performance. The struggle of politicians to secure state offices through electoral competition viewed as a means to exploit these positions for personal gain produces a weakened form of democracy. This prebendal politics undermines the principles of democratic governance, revealing how such behavior is socio-politically and economically detrimental to both emerging and established democracies. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for addressing the mutually reinforcing aspects of political and economic corruption (Arrey, 2020)

In Somaliland, political patronage is closely intertwined with clan loyalty and informal networks, where appointments to key government and administrative positions often favor trusted affiliates over qualified candidates. This practice has contributed to persistent challenges in merit-based governance, institutional efficiency, and public trust in the state.

Elite Corruption

Elite corruption in Africa represents a pervasive and systemic challenge that undermines national development and perpetuates socio-economic inequalities (Tangri & Mwenda, 2013; Oshewolo & Durowaiye, 2013; McFerson, 2009). It is a complex, multidimensional issue rooted in entrenched power structures, where political and economic elites manipulate state resources for personal or group gain. Through mechanisms such as rent-seeking and favoritism, elites often divert public resources away from developmental priorities, intentionally sustaining conditions of poverty and limiting institutional effectiveness. In some cases, corrupt practices are actively facilitated by political administrations, demonstrating that these behaviors are often strategic and deliberate rather than incidental.

The phenomenon of elite corruption is further shaped by societal expectations and historical legacies, including the institutional patterns inherited from colonial administrations, which in many contexts embedded corruption into local governance structures (Tangri & Mwenda, 2013). Effective mitigation requires not only legal and institutional reforms but also greater citizen engagement and participation in governance processes, which can help rebalance power dynamics and promote transparency and accountability. In Somaliland, elite corruption



intersects with clan-based networks and political patronage, complicating efforts to establish merit-based governance and weaken institutional capacity, despite the region's relative stability and democratic advancements.

Meritocracy and Governance

Meritocracy has the potential to enhance governance by promoting administrative efficiency, professional ethics, and institutional integrity; however, its effectiveness can differ significantly across various political contexts. A comprehensive global survey of 149 nations revealed that merit-based practices often lead to improvements in public service efficiency, employee competence, and effective policy implementation (Mulaphong, 2023). In particular, empirical research focusing on the Global South indicates that countries such as Botswana and Rwanda have experienced positive developmental outcomes associated with the establishment of meritocratic systems (Chitamba & Pillay, 2025; Ghebremusse, 2018).

Nonetheless, the benefits of meritocracy are not uniformly experienced across regions. The same research highlights regional disparities, noting that in North America and Oceania, the relationship between meritocratic practices and bureaucratic efficiency appears to be inconsistent (Crawford-Garrett, Oldham, & Thomas, 2021). This suggests that while meritocracy can be advantageous, its operational success may be influenced by local political, cultural, and institutional factors.

A notable example of successful meritocracy is Singapore, where the implementation of meritocratic principles, coupled with competitive compensation and stringent anti-corruption measures, has garnered international acclaim for creating one of the least corrupt governance systems in the world (Jones, 2016). Singapore's approach underscores that the effectiveness of meritocracy not only relies on its theoretical framework but also on its practical application within a supportive political environment. Overall, while meritocracy holds promise for enhancing governance, its advantages are inherently context-dependent, necessitating careful consideration of local conditions when implementing such systems. This complex interplay between merit and context must be understood to maximize the potential benefits of meritocratic governance across different political landscapes.

Somaliland Context

Meritocracy has the potential to significantly enhance governance in Somaliland by fostering administrative efficiency, professional ethics, and institutional integrity; however, its effectiveness is subject to the specific political and cultural context of the region. Research indicates that, while merit-based practices can improve public service efficiency and employee competence, the experience of meritocracy in Somaliland faces unique challenges. The interplay of clan dynamics and political patronage often undermines meritocratic principles, as appointments frequently favor loyalty over competence. This context is reflective of broader trends observed in the Global South, where the implementation of meritocratic systems can yield positive developmental outcomes in some cases, such as in Botswana and Rwanda, while remaining inconsistent in others. Furthermore, as evident in Singapore, the success of meritocracy relies on robust anti-corruption measures and supportive policies that may not yet be fully established in Somaliland. Thus, while meritocracy offers promising governance solutions, its actualization in Somaliland requires careful consideration of local factors to overcome entrenched patronage networks and foster a more effective governance framework.



Theoretical Framework

The analysis of article informed two theories the Neo Patrimonialism Theory and Elite Theory.

Neo Patrimonialism Theory

Neopatrimonialism is a hybrid political system in which traditional patrimonial practices coexist within a modern state framework. This phenomenon is characterized by the prevalence of patronage, clientelism, and the personalized distribution of power. As a result, political authority often becomes concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who leverage their networks for personal gain rather than the broader public good. This system complicates the governance landscape, particularly in regions like Somaliland, where the interplay between modern governance structures and traditional clan-based dynamics creates a unique form of political practice (Pitcher, Moran, & Johnston, 2009).

The evidence supporting the existence and implications of neopatrimonialism is substantial, particularly within various African contexts. Scholars have identified it as a syncretic fusion of rational-legal authority and patrimonial rule, which includes practices such as rent-seeking behavior and pervasive corruption (Wai, 2012). Such characteristics can obstruct the development of effective and accountable governance, as leaders prioritize loyalty and personal relationships over meritocratic principles. In the case of Somaliland, the intertwining of neopatrimonialism with traditional clan structures may exacerbate issues of governance, hindering the establishment of transparent institutions and equitable service delivery.

However, recent research suggests that neopatrimonialism is not inherently negative; under certain conditions, it may be harnessed for developmental purposes. Scholars have proposed two distinct variants of this system: “developmental neopatrimonialism,” which can be potentially regulated to support progress, and “predatory neopatrimonialism,” which impedes development through exploitative practices (von Soest, 2022). This nuanced understanding is crucial for analyzing Somaliland's governance, as it highlights the potential for fostering more effective governance through strategic interventions that address the challenges posed by neopatrimonial networks. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognize that while the concept provides valuable descriptive insights, it holds limited predictive power regarding economic performance, suggesting that a more nuanced approach is necessary to navigate the complexities of governance in contexts influenced by this hybrid political system (Bach, 2011).

Elite Theory

Elite Theory is a sociological framework that posits that every society is fundamentally governed by a small, powerful minority that controls essential sources of power and influences political outcomes (López, 2013). Rooted in classical sociology, this theory was initially developed by thinkers such as Mosca, Pareto, Michels, and Weber, who argued that these elite groups are adept at organizing and strategizing, often outsmarting larger populations. These classical theorists asserted that political elites tend to possess distinct advantages whether material, intellectual, or moral and wield their influence through mechanisms of force, persuasion, and superior organizational skills (Farazmand, 1999).

In contemporary discourse, Elite Theory has expanded beyond the analysis of political regimes to encompass power dynamics within markets, civil society, and social development. Once considered controversial, the theory has regained relevance by effectively elucidating



significant political changes, including regime transitions (Dutta, 2009). Its strength lies in its capacity to analyze complex political phenomena through the lens of elite behavior and interactions, offering insights into how power is maintained and exercised across diverse societal contexts.

In the context of Somaliland, understanding Elite Theory can illuminate the complexities of political power dynamics. The elite class often navigates traditional clan structures while exerting influence over modern governance systems, complicating the establishment of transparent and accountable institutions. As seen in other contexts, the theory helps explain how these elites maintain their power through networks of patronage and clientelism, ultimately impacting governance outcomes. By analyzing elite behavior and interactions, policymakers can gain insights into how power is sustained in Somaliland, highlighting the need for strategies that address entrenched elite interests while promoting broader public accountability and democratic governance.

METHODS AND MATERIAL

In the article titled Political Loyalty and Patronage Politics: Catalyst for Corruption and Weak Governance in Somaliland, adopted qualitative method and utilized alongside secondary data from various sources, including articles, books, and reports. This dual approach enabled a detailed exploration of political loyalty and patronage politics in Somaliland. The qualitative method involved in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, capturing the nuances of political behavior and governance frameworks. The secondary data provided a foundation in existing literature, enriching the discussion with diverse perspectives on the relationship between nepotism and meritocracy. By integrating first-hand qualitative insights with established research, the article offers a comprehensive examination of how clan dynamics and elite behavior influence governance outcomes, culminating in recommendations for enhancing institutional integrity and accountability (S. 1999).

FINDING AND ANALYSIS

Patronage Politics and Loyalty based appointment Somaliland Governance System.

Over the past 15 years, successive presidents have tended to nominate key ministers primarily based on *clientelism* and personal *loyalty* rather than merit. As one interviewee noted, "*Qualifications and age, as stipulated in the constitution, have often been overlooked.*" This trend reflects a significant departure from the principles of meritocracy, as many interviewees expressed concerns about the effectiveness of governance when "*ministries have been filled with individuals who lack the requisite experience and expertise.*" Moreover, appointments are reportedly facilitated through "*lobbying efforts, where influential figures seek presidential approval for parliamentary confirmations in exchange for bribes,*" further undermining institutional integrity and perpetuating a culture of corruption.

The ramifications of this *non-meritocratic* approach extend beyond high-level appointments, manifesting in the broader civil service. Interview responses indicated that "*appointments are frequently determined by clan affiliations,*" with individuals selecting staff such as drivers,



guards, and secretaries based on *loyalty* rather than qualifications. This reliance on nepotism diminishes the efficiency of public services, as the selected personnel may lack the necessary skills to perform effectively in their roles. Such practices not only compromise the quality of governance but also erode public trust in governmental institutions. As one participant noted, the expansion of the patronage network leads to *"the potential for delivering competent public services diminishes,"* highlighting the urgent need for systemic reform to restore merit-based selection processes

Elite Corruption Mechanisms

Elite corruption mechanisms significantly undermine governance structures in Somaliland, often orchestrated by business elites who wield considerable influence over political processes. During election cycles, these powerful entities frequently provide substantial financial contributions to politicians, effectively buying access and shaping political agendas. As one interviewee noted, while these contributions may appear to support electoral campaigns, they subsequently enable the business elite to *"influence the nomination of the president and recommend senior employees for ministerial positions."* This cycle of financial dependence creates a governance environment where loyalty to economic elites supersedes merit-based selection, further entrenching nepotism and favoritism within the political landscape.

Additionally, traditional power structures such as sultans play a critical role in this dynamic. They often advise the president on *"nominating individuals from their clans, promoting loyalty over competency."* This practice perpetuates a governance framework that prioritizes clan allegiance over the necessary qualifications for effective leadership. For instance, the recent nomination of a general director, who is the son of a sultan, to a ministerial position underscore how entrenched elite interests can dictate government appointments. This scenario illustrates a troubling reality: the intertwining of business interests and traditional authority has resulted in a governance structure where elite domination stifles accountability and efficiency.

The implications of such elite corruption are profound, as they erode public trust and diminish the legitimacy of governmental institutions. By prioritizing clan loyalty and business interests in the selection of public officials, Somaliland risks perpetuating a cycle of inefficiency and corruption that ultimately hinders developmental progress. Therefore, addressing these elite corruption mechanisms is critical for fostering a more transparent and accountable governance framework that truly serves the broader population.

The Effect of Political Loyalty and Patronage Politics on Public Institutions

The effect of political loyalty and patronage politics on public institutions in Somaliland is profoundly shaped by the prevailing preference for loyalty over competency among political party leaders. As indicated by interviewees, *"the political parties' leaders prefer people loyal then competency and skills,"* leading to a culture where personal relationships often take precedence over qualifications. This tendency has fostered an environment where political patronage remains entrenched, with appointments based more on loyalty than on knowledge or expertise. Consequently, many ministers lack a clear understanding of their mandates, which compromises the effectiveness of governance. Moreover, this misalignment between leadership and institutional purpose has significant repercussions for public service delivery. Many ministers are not well-versed in the country's vision, constitutional mandates, or the critical roles they are meant to fulfill, which contributes to corruption and a general lack of



accountability. The resultant deficits in public service manifest as weak and low-quality services, further exacerbating the challenges faced by citizens. This disconnect not only undermines the functionality of public institutions but also perpetuates a cycle of inefficiency and disillusionment among the populace, highlighting the urgent need for reforms that prioritize competency and meritocracy in public appointments.

Public Perception Accountability

Public perception of accountability in Somaliland is significantly influenced by the disconnect between political appointees and traditional power structures. As one interviewee indicate *"many of the ministers and general directors are not accountable to the executive branch or parliamentary oversight, but rather to their clans, sultans, and influential business networks."* This reality undermines the fundamental principles of accountability that should govern public institutions. Instead of being answerable to the citizens through established governmental frameworks, these officials often prioritize the interests of their clans or powerful corporate entities. This reliance on informal networks for accountability detracts from the responsiveness expected of public institutions. Ideally, ministers should be held accountable to the public and the parliamentary system, which is designed to ensure transparency and effective governance. However, the dominance of clan loyalties and business interests creates a system where accountability is often sidestepped, fostering an environment ripe for inefficiency and corruption. As a result, public trust in institutions wanes, revealing an urgent need for framework reforms that promote genuine accountability to the electorate and diminish the influence of non-state actors in governance.

DISCUSSION

The dynamics of governance in Somaliland reveal a complex interplay between traditional authority, elite influence, and public accountability, significantly affecting the effectiveness of public institutions. As highlighted by interviewees, the preference for loyalty over competency in political appointments has resulted in a governance framework where ministers are primarily accountable to clan affiliations and powerful business networks rather than to the public or established governmental structures. This situation fosters a patronage system that not only undermines the clarity of ministerial mandates but also erodes institutional integrity. The absence of accountability mechanisms, such as parliamentary oversight, further exacerbates inefficiencies and corruption, leaving public services weak and lacking in quality. Consequently, the reliance on informal power structures hampers the ability of ministers to execute their duties effectively, as they may not fully understand their responsibilities or the broader vision for the country. thereby serving to further weaken the already "weak governance system". To restore public trust and enhance governance in Somaliland, there is an urgent need to implement reforms that to fight against clientelism and political patronage and that prioritize merit-based appointments and reinforce accountability to the electorate, thereby strengthening the overall governance framework and fostering a more responsive public service.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the governance challenges facing Somaliland are deeply rooted in a system where loyalty and clan affiliation often overshadow merit and accountability. The reliance on political patronage network has resulted in the appointment of personal connections over professional qualifications, which has compromised the effectiveness of public institutions. Consequently, the lack of accountability to the public and parliamentary oversight diminishes trust in governance and perpetuates corruption and weak governance ultimately hindering the delivery of essential public services.

To address these issues, several key Policy recommendations are necessary. First, it is imperative to establish clear merit-based criteria for the appointment of public officials, ensuring that qualifications and competencies are prioritized over personal loyalty. This can be achieved through comprehensive reform of the appointment process, including transparent recruitment practices and standardized evaluation metrics. Second, enhancing accountability mechanisms is crucial; this could involve strengthening parliamentary oversight and implementing regular audits of ministerial activities to ensure adherence to public mandates. Third, fostering civic engagement and public participation in governance can help hold leaders accountable and create a culture of transparency. Finally, promoting anti-corruption initiatives and increasing public awareness around governance issues will empower citizens to demand better services and challenge inefficiencies. By implementing these recommendations, Somaliland can work towards a more effective, accountable, and transparent governance structure that better serves its population. In fact, the findings of this paper have important public policy implications for the government and international development partners interested in the political economy and development of Somaliland.

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