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Abstract

Somaliland offers a unique example of de facto statehood in a territory that is de facto governed in a fairly enduring way but is de jure not recognized internationally and is still contested regionally. While scholarship has explored locally-initiated peacebuilding and hybrid political systems in Somaliland, less has focused on how the Guurti secures customary authority's political legitimacy and institutional sustainability over time. This research explored the role of the Guurti in the Somaliland statehood struggle, focusing on peace consolidation, political transition management, legitimacy of the state within Somaliland and continuity of institutions. A qualitative case study using an interpretivist-constructivist approach was used to gather data from 60 participants in Hargeisa, including 35 in-depth interviews, 10 key informant interviews, and 15 who participated in the three focus group discussions, along with documentary analysis and media analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, and the interpretation of the analysis was done with the complementary conceptual lens of practical statehood and hybrid governance. The results have shown four interconnected mechanisms: (1) peace consolidation through Xeer; (2) diya compensation, mediation and reconciliation; (3) negotiated customary-constitutional arrangements for managing political transitions; and (4) production of internal legitimacy through peace, predictability and institutional performance, and increased demand for transparency, inclusion, accountability and institutional renewal. The study suggests that the Guurti helps to build political sustainability by transforming culturally rooted legitimacy to social trust, political acceptance and institutional continuity, but that it is increasingly dependent on its ability to respond to the expectations of “representation” and “accountability” that have changed in society. The study has theoretical contribution by investigating sustainability as an evolving legitimacy-conversion process and has policy implications for enhanced institutional complementarity, transparency, inclusive participation and accountable renewal in Somaliland's hybrid governance system.

Keywords: *Guurti; indigenous institutions; contested statehood; Somaliland; customary legitimacy; peacebuilding; hybrid governance*

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1.0 Introduction

Somaliland is one of the few examples of the effectiveness of domestic governance without international recognition that can create political stability. However, although Somaliland has only received formal recognition sporadically over the last three decades, it has developed institutions of governance, a constitution, election and political negotiation processes, and has gained local legitimacy (Bradbury *et al.*, 2003; Renders & Terlinden, 2010). On 26 December 2025, Israel officially recognized Somaliland as an independent and sovereign state, and thus became the first member state of the United Nations to do so since 1991. But the stance of the African Union on the recognition of Somaliland is unchanged, and neither has its stance on the sovereignty and territorial integrities of Somalia changed.

The Guurti (House of Elders) was an important aspect of Somaliland's distinct political development and its unique way of blending customary leadership into the formal state system. Early in the 1990s, conflict resolution, reconciliation, and the formation of the state were actions that engaged and influenced traditional elders, and their influence was also institutionalized in the upper house of parliament (Hoehne, 2013). According to Renders and Terlinden (2010), this setup can be regarded as a form of "hybrid political order," which is a continuously negotiated political process between formal institutions and informal institutions, both of which seek to establish themselves as the authoritative source of stateship. Not only was customary governance reproduced, but the concept of the Guurti was also crucial to connecting local governance institutions of consultation and mediation to new constitutional institutions, helping to create political accommodation as the initial basis of Somaliland's relative stability.

Recognizes that this mixed model is not necessarily an effective or viable model, even though there is existing scholarship. As the statehood struggle got rougher on the ground due to political opposition from the local communities, hybrid institutions were able to adapt to this environment and were more and more troublesome as the political order shifted (Renders and Terlinden 2010). Similarly, Hoehne (2013) argues that the institutionalization and politicalisation of traditional authorities in certain cases has compromised the legitimacy of state and customary authorities, and as well as democratic accountability. The competing evaluations are significant in that they help to focus the issue of the Guurti's role in the maintenance of Somaliland's nascent statehood and whether and under what conditions it can continue to serve as a sustainable contested statehood.

Central empirical question is not Somaliland's lack of international recognition, or its hybrid governance system. The ability of customary elders to produce an accepted political legitimacy and institutional continuity over time, however, is under-explained, as is their role in peacebuilding, negotiated state formation and customary institutional accommodation (Bradbury *et al.*, 2003; Renders & Terlinden, 2010). Additionally, the failure of the institution to represent its activities and the lack of democratic aspects raise an unanswered question regarding the possibility of maintaining the same customary resources which contributed to the consolidation of politics in the early period under new political and social conditions (Hoehne, 2013).

For this reason, this study engages the concept of the Guurti in Somaliland's contested statehood by outlining and examining the interplay between the processes of customary authority, political legitimacy, representation, reconciliation and institutional continuity in Somaliland. It does not simply examine Somaliland as a successful hybrid political regime but also the dynamics of legitimacy production and reproduction within indigenous institutions and how legitimacy can be challenged, even undermined over time. This is particularly because of its emphasis on the

existence of the Guurti in the political landscape of Somaliland and the significance of the institution of the Guurti in sustaining political order in a region that lacks formal international recognition and is subject to a very ambiguous claim.

2.0 Literature Review

The literature on Somaliland's contested statehood examines how indigenous institutions, hybrid governance arrangements, peacebuilding practices, and political legitimacy have shaped the durability of its political order. This review critically assesses these perspectives, with particular attention to the *Guurti*, legal pluralism, inclusion, territorial contestation, and the unresolved mechanisms linking customary authority to long-term political sustainability.

2.1 Contested Statehood and Political Sustainability

Scholarship points to the durability of Somaliland from a number of conflicting but complementary angles. Previous research focused on the importance of locally negotiated peacebuilding, bottom-up state-building and the integration of customary authority into formal institutions as drivers of the political order established post-1991 (Renders & Terlinden, 2010; Moe, 2011). More recent studies generally confirm the relevance of endogenous institutions, but forewarn against hybridity's a priori stabilising potential. For instance, Biruk and Getachew (2024) show how the relationship between clan-based institutions and formal government facilitated peace and state development, and led to concerns about representation, transparency, gender inclusion, and democratic accountability. Thus, Somaliland's durability is defined more as a product of ongoing negotiation with regard to authority than as the successful blending of "traditional" and "modern" forms of governance.

Recent scholarship also calls into question the view which explains the resilience of Somaliland mainly in terms of institutional hybridity. Hoehne and Norman (2026) show how foreign investment, centralization and political competition based on kinship have changed the political settlement, sometimes adding to (rather than mitigating) marginalization and territorial conflict, while at other times reducing it. This argument fits in with previous narratives of the resilience of institutions as a result of limited external influence and state formation from local resources. Likewise, Abdulahi and Mydlak (2023) claim that formal peacebuilding may undermine locally driven peacebuilding processes if externally driven peacebuilding supplants customary processes which have been supporting reconciliation. The literature suggests, then, that the understanding of durability must be multi-faceted, and can only be gained from the interplay between indigenous legitimacy, democratic institutions, changing economy, political inclusion, and the state's ability to handle the new conflicts.

2.2 Indigenous Institutions, Hybrid Governance, and Peacebuilding

The Guurti has a more ambiguous position in this hybrid order, as it is both customary and is given a legislative role. Indigenous institutions facilitated mediation and reconciliation, which helps in arguing that indigenous institutions provided alternative mechanisms of authority not yet generated by the new state (Renders & Terlinden, 2010; Biruk & Getachew, 2024). But evidence from the modern era challenges the idea: long terms of office, seat by inheritance, and fading ties between some members and their constituencies have led to doubts about whether the symbolic power invested in the process of state formation translates into the same legitimacy in the present.

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International Crisis Group (2024) in particular points out that the selection of the *Guurti* should be improved, as many of its current members are descendants of the original elders chosen and may not have the same reach and influence in the public arena. The question is not so much whether the historical role of the *Guurti* in peace-making was positive or negative, but whether the formal and informal customary structures continue to be socially representative and politically viable.

The *Guurti* cannot be examined in isolation as a political institution, but must be part of the overall framework of legal pluralism in Somaliland. Statutory law is in addition to *Xeer* and Islamic law, and Article 5 of the Somaliland Constitution stipulates that laws be based on and not abrogate Islamic Sharia. This is an area in which consensus is common between traditional elders and Islamic clerics, and in which statutory institutions often participate in dispute resolution, but also where it is found that the ambiguity in institutions can lead to a lack of confidence in formal state adjudication (Tahir, 2022). Recent studies also contend that there is a dynamic interplay between the two modes of law, rather than a complete dichotomy, and that issues of women, minorities, and youth continue to be a challenge in their engagement with formal legal institutions (Abdiweli & Akoth, 2026). Therefore, legal pluralism can enhance local intelligibility of the dispute resolution mechanisms and can also lead to the reproduction of unequal access to representation and authority.

2.3 The *Guurti* and Somaliland's Negotiated Political Order

Questions of inclusion take on a particular importance when the territorial claims of Somaliland is taken into account. In 2023, the conflict in Las Anod revealed the political settlement that supports Somaliland to not be fully accepted in all parts of the areas claimed by Hargeisa; SSC-Khaatumo leaders formed an SSC and later integrated their administration into the Somali system instead of Somaliland. The developments render unconvincing claims of national political legitimacy based on stability in Somaliland's central areas, and the continued contestation in Sool and parts of Sanaag highlights the territorial confines of consensus. Marginalization, shifts in kinship relations and centralized state building are also linked to the Las Anod conflict, as found by Hoehne and Norman (2026). At the interstate level, the Federal Government of Somalia still maintains its claim of sovereignty over Somaliland, as evidenced by the African Union's affirmation in December 2025 and April 2026 that Somaliland is still part of Somalia despite Israel's recognition.

2.5 Research Gap

Existing research has thus confirmed that Somaliland's resilience has been linked to negotiated state formation, customary peacebuilding, hybrid institutions, clan-based political negotiation and the historical functions of the *Guurti* (Renders & Terlinden, 2010; Biruk & Getachew, 2024). New scholarship also has focused on critical issues related to legal pluralism, democratic accountability, gender and youth marginalization, kinship-based marginalization, electoral delays and territorial conflict in Sool and Sanaag (Tahir, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2024; Hoehne & Norman, 2026). Yet, how the *Guurti*-based practices turn customary authority into long-term political legitimacy and how such political legitimacy facilitates, or hinders, the sustainability of contested statehood in the face of evolving social, territorial, and institutional dynamics in these societies remains under-explained. The aim of this study is to fill this empirical and analytical void by analyzing how mediation, representation, symbolic authority, customary legitimacy and

institutional interaction come together to reinforce—and in some cases constrain—Somaliland's political order.

3.0 Research Methodology

The study was conducted from an interpretivist-constructivist perspective and used a qualitative case study approach to explore the understanding of the *Guurti*'s role in political sustainability of the historical and institutional context. Given that the research question was not about statistical associations, but about meanings, practices, legitimacy and institutional relationships and that the *Guurti* cannot be analytically separated from Somaliland's broader political settlement, qualitative case study was appropriate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023; Hennink *et al.*, 2020). The study was carried out in the city of Hargeisa, between May and June 2026, where the national political institutions, *Guurti* networks, civil society organizations, and key governance actors are focused. The design aimed for analytical depth and contextual explanation, rather than statistical representativeness, which is consistent with the qualitative standards of information richness, reflexivity and transparency of interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

The final sample consisted of 60 participants including 35 in-depth interview participants, 10 key informants and 15 participants in the three focus group discussions. The elders, *Guurti* members, scholars, government officials, women leaders, youth leaders, peace actors, civil society representatives, humanitarian actors and participants from *Isaaq* and non-*Isaaq* clan communities were recruited using purposive, criterion-based and supplementary snowball sampling (Hennink *et al.*, 2020). Interviews were conducted until the principal analytical categories were sufficiently developed and further interviews were generating new meanings that were not substantially different from those already found in the existing categories and were not relevant to the research objective. The diversity of participants was significant because the scholarship on customary authority reveals that legitimacy can be felt differently based on gender, generation, social status and access to decision-making institutions (Baldwin, 2016; Logan, 2013).

Table 1: Participant Distribution by Primary Data Collection Method

Method	Participants	Primary analytical contribution
In-depth interviews	35	Lived experience, historical interpretation, institutional and community perspectives
Key informant interviews	10	Specialized knowledge of governance, peacebuilding, customary authority, and political transitions
Focus group discussions	15 in 3 FGDs	Shared and contested community perspectives across age, gender, clan, and social roles
Total	60	Triangulated qualitative evidence

Note. IDI = in-depth interview; KII = key informant interview; FGD = focus group discussion.
Source: Study fieldwork, 2026.

Data were collected using the qualitative methods of interviews, key informant interviews, focus groups, observation, documentary review and media analysis, which involved Somali-speaking research assistants to conduct culturally appropriate interviews and translate. The documentary

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sources used were the 1993 National Charter, the 2001 Constitution, records of the peace-process, governance reports and scholarship on the *Guurti* (Republic of Somaliland) (1993, 2001). Participant claims were corroborated, qualified or challenged by historical evidence and contemporary reporting (Academy for Peace and Development & Interpeace, 2006, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2024). The study was ethical; IDI, KII, and FGD codes ensured anonymity; and politically sensitive identities were protected by codes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2023; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted according to Braun and Clarke (2021) by means of familiarization, coding, theme development, review, interpretation and iterative comparison of themes across categories of participants and across external evidence. In this way, deductive attention was given to contested statehood, legitimacy, conflict management and institutional continuity, and inductive coding of meanings was used to categorize meanings that arose from participants' descriptions of *Xeer*, *diya*, elder mediation, political transitions, and reform (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Member checking, an audit trail, reflexive documentation, triangulation and retaining divergent accounts strengthened the degree of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

4.0 Findings

The findings are not discussed, and so are analytically visible before being compared to the broader literature used to support the findings. In the 60 participants, the *Guurti*'s role in the sphere of sustainability was expressed in four interrelated processes: making peace, cushioning political transitions, regenerating the legitimacy of the inside and adjusting to new accountability challenges. In line with the Triangulation approach adopted in the study, the documentary and media evidence was used as an attempt to corroborate the processes rather than replace participants' accounts (Academy for Peace and Development & Interpeace, 2008; International Crisis Group, 2024). The findings thus reflect first the data found, and, in Section 5, the results are explained by invoking theories of practical statehood, hybrid governance, and locally-based peacebuilding.

4.1 Conflict Prevention and Peace Consolidation as the Foundation of Contested Statehood

Participants consistently located the *Guurti*'s most consequential contribution in the post-1991 reconstruction period, when elder-led reconciliation provided a mechanism for restoring communication across communities after the collapse of centralized authority. They identified *Xeer*-based negotiation, *diya* compensation, extended dialogue, and clan-level responsibility as mechanisms that interrupted revenge cycles and generated settlements that communities considered socially binding. Historical studies independently document that Somaliland's early peace architecture was built through successive locally organized conferences rather than through an externally administered peace process (Academy for Peace and Development & Interpeace, 2008; Bradbury, 2008; Walls, 2009). The finding therefore links sustainability to the production of interclan social trust before the consolidation of formal constitutional institutions, rather than treating peace as an outcome that followed state building (Phillips, 2013; Renders, 2012).

From my lived experience as a Habar Awaal elder, I understand the historical role of the Guurti as deeply tied to the survival of social order and the rebuilding of trust among clans after years of conflict. In the early stages, especially during the collapse of central authority, it was the elders who carried the responsibility of stopping revenge cycles and restoring communication between divided

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communities. I personally witnessed situations where clan tensions could have easily escalated into violence, but the intervention of elders under the Guurti structure helped prevent revenge cycles through negotiation, diya compensation arrangements, and continuous dialogue between conflicting groups.

(KII-07, Habr Awaal Clan Elder, 2026)

The second pattern was that peace production continued after the founding conferences, as participants stated that *Guurti* connected elders continued to be the “first responders” to the interclan, resource, community and household peace production. This ongoing role was understood as restorative rather than focused on punishment, as negotiated settlements aimed to repair social relations between groups likely to live together in the future following a conflict. Studies on Somali customary justice also indicate that *Xeer* and negotiated compensation still have *de facto* authority as they link the process of adjudication with collective responsibility and socially recognized duties (Massoud, 2021; Peterson & Zaki, 2023; Menkhaus, 2000). The evidence is thus suggestive of an ongoing process of peacebuilding that involves a continuous engagement with conflict rather than a single postwar peace arrangement (Moe & Simojoki, 2013; Njeri, 2019).

From my lived experience as a senior member of the Guurti engaged in mediation and peace consultations for many years, I have directly witnessed how this institution contributed to peacebuilding and conflict resolution across different levels of society. At the micro level, the Guurti plays a crucial role in resolving family and clan disputes before they escalate into violence. At the meso level, the institution helps manage conflicts between different communities and regions. At the macro level, the Guurti has been central in national peace processes, especially during political crises and transitions. From my perspective, the strength of the Guurti lies in its ability to combine moral authority with social trust, making peacebuilding a continuous process rather than a one-time event.

(IDI-31, Habr Magaadle Guurti Member, 2026)

4.2 Institutional Durability and the Management of Political Transitions

A second sustainability mechanism was reported at the level of the relationship between electoral competition and the clan codes of social relations, in which the *Guurti* serves as a buffer during politically sensitive transitions. The significance of the institution was not given in the sense of legal enforcement but in terms of the ability to bring actors around a table, to shift political issues into a social arena where compromise is possible, and to promote understanding and action that defuse institutional conflict into something potentially more manageable. Previous research also indicates that Somaliland's hybrid structure has resulted in a dispersed authority structure, with authority distributed to constitutional positions and customary networks, which allows for political contention to be addressed through multiple avenues and not by formal institutions alone (Renders & Terlinden, 2010; Richards, 2015; Walls & Kibble, 2010). In this regard, the 2024 election and peaceful transition of power gave contemporary support that political competition could be managed in an institutional framework even in the aftermath of electoral delays (Associated Press, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

In political disputes, I have personally observed that the Guurti brings conflicting sides together through mediation sessions rooted in dialogue and customary reconciliation practices. These discussions often focus on restoring trust rather than assigning blame. Overall, in my interpretation, the Guurti functions as a buffer

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between political competition and social stability, ensuring that elections and transitions do not disrupt the broader peace that communities depend on.

(KII-07, Habr Awaal Clan Elder, 2026)

This tension between continuity and democratic legitimacy in the short- and long-term was one of the strongest in the findings, and arose from the same transition-management role. In some cases, the youth and minority participants saw this as a way to neutralize politics and maintain fairness, whereas extending political time horizons was viewed as a way to avoid institutional vacuums by the elder participants. Delayed elections and mandate extensions have repeatedly generated political crises, without ever leading to a full political collapse, but only to a compromise (Freedom House, 2023, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2021, 2022). It is thus not that extending is per se stabilizing, but that the buffering effect of the *Guurti* can also generate accountability costs which at a later stage can become a threat to the legitimacy that underpins the continuity (Hoehne, 2013; Richards, 2020).

In my lived experience and what I have followed through public discussions, the Guurti becomes most active when elections approach or when disputes emerge over political timelines and authority. In such situations, it has often been involved in advising or deciding on the extension of mandates when conditions are considered unstable or when consensus among political actors has not been reached. This role is widely debated, but it is part of how the system functions in practice. However, I also feel that its involvement in electoral timelines sometimes raises concerns among younger people about neutrality and democratic fairness.

(KII-08, Habr Magaadle Youth Leader, 2026)

4.3 Internal Legitimacy as a Governance Resource in a Context of Limited Recognition

The third finding was that participants understood political legitimacy primarily through experienced peace, predictability, and institutional performance rather than through external diplomatic status alone. They repeatedly described citizens as evaluating the political order by whether disputes can be managed, institutions continue functioning, and political competition does not repeatedly collapse into violence. This performance-centered understanding is consistent with empirical work showing that Somaliland's legitimacy has been produced through negotiated political practice, domestic bargaining, and everyday recognition of authority (Eubank, 2012; Moe, 2011; Richards, 2014). The finding does not imply that international recognition is irrelevant, but it shows how internal legitimacy can sustain practical governance while external status remains only partially recognized and regionally contested (African Union Commission, 2026; Reuters, 2025).

From my perspective, Somaliland challenges conventional ideas of state legitimacy by demonstrating that domestic acceptance can exist independently of international recognition. Legitimacy is not measured only by diplomatic recognition but by whether people trust institutions to manage everyday political and social life. I have observed that many people judge the state by its ability to preserve peace, protect community interests, and provide predictable governance. In my interpretation, Somaliland broadens the understanding of statehood by showing that practical legitimacy and institutional resilience can precede formal international recognition and still command enduring public confidence.

(IDI-01, Habr Awal Scholar, 2026)

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From a governance perspective, the Guurti ensures continuity of peace, which is central to state legitimacy. This stability supports Somaliland's diplomatic case for recognition in the international arena. From what I have witnessed over many years, the Guurti resolves conflicts by ensuring that no clan feels ignored during negotiations. At the national level, I believe the institution has repeatedly reduced political tensions by encouraging compromise during difficult periods.

(FGD3-P4, Warsangeli Government Official, 2026)

Participants also described a representational effect in which sustained internal order becomes evidence of political viability to external audiences, even though it cannot compel diplomatic recognition. The 2024 election, the peaceful inauguration of a new president, and subsequent international attention supplied observable instances in which internal political performance shaped external assessments of Somaliland's reliability (Associated Press, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2024; Reuters, 2024). Israel's 2025 recognition created a new diplomatic fact, but the African Union's rejection and calls for reversal demonstrate that recognition remains politically contested rather than being a linear reward for effective governance (African Union Commission, 2026; Reuters, 2025). Internal legitimacy is therefore best understood as a state-sustaining resource and a source of external credibility, not as a complete substitute for the international legal and diplomatic consequences of broad recognition (Grzybowski, 2017; Kyris, 2022).

From my lived experience as a Gadabuurs scholar and historian, I understand Somaliland as challenging conventional theories of state legitimacy by demonstrating that recognition is not the only foundation of effective statehood. Somaliland disrupts the assumption that international recognition is the primary determinant of state validity. At the macro level this challenges international norms of state recognition by presenting a de facto functioning system; at the meso level it shows how clan-based and hybrid institutions can substitute for externally imposed governance frameworks; and at the micro level it demonstrates how everyday citizens validate authority through lived stability rather than legal recognition. Overall, I understand Somaliland as reshaping conventional state theory by showing that legitimacy is not solely a product of international systems but can also be constructed from sustained internal governance practices and social agreement.

(IDI-06, Gadabuursi Scholar, 2026)

4.4 Limits to Sustainability: Accountability, Inclusion, and Institutional Renewal

The fourth finding was that “transparency, rotation, inclusion, and clearer institutional boundaries” were noted by the younger and women and some minority-community participants as the *Guurti*'s historical legitimacy was not self-renewing. Their concerns typically focused on the on-going utility of elder mediation rather than on issues of poor visibility in the selection process, length of service, and unequal access to decision-making locations. Further, research reveals that clan-organised representation can also foster social inclusion in the name of political exclusion, particularly of women and youth (Carter 2021; Parke *et al* 2017; Richards 2020). In order to achieve sustainability, it is, therefore, necessary to transfer legitimacy to stakeholders who have increasingly come to expect accountability and participation over recollection of the early reconciliation period (Hoehne, 2013; International Crisis Group, 2022).

One important improvement would be introducing clearer criteria and transparency in how members of the Guurti are selected. While traditional legitimacy is

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important, I believe the process could benefit from more structured guidelines so that communities understand how representation is achieved. Another useful reform would be setting defined terms of service. This would help balance continuity with renewal, ensuring that younger generations also gradually participate in advisory and reconciliation roles alongside elders. I also feel that strengthening coordination between the Guurti and formal state institutions could reduce overlaps and misunderstandings. Additionally, I would encourage more inclusion of women and youth voices in advisory processes, even if the final authority remains with elders, to reflect changing social realities.

(KII-07, Habr Awaal Clan Elder, 2026)

Youth participants identified adaptation as a way of sustaining, not giving up, customary legitimacy, particularly when peacebuilding outcomes are still highly valued, but institutional processes seem less responsive to current democratic requirements. This discovery confirms broader studies that have found traditional authority can be enduring as long as it continues to serve a social purpose, and that its representative and accountability relationships change with political contexts (Baldwin, 2016; Logan, 2013). Similarly, in the discussions on customary-justice reform in Somalia, it is important to note that cultural legitimacy and procedural adaptation are not mutually exclusive, especially if a cherished system of justice is undermined by exclusion and confusion of the interface between customary and formal justice systems. Also, in Somalia, discussions about customary-justice reform highlight that cultural legitimacy and procedural adaptation can go hand in hand, particularly when important systems of justice are undermined by exclusion and unclear institutional interfaces that lead to loss of trust in valuable justice systems (Peterson & Zaki, 2023; Massoud, 2021). Consequently, it is not a liberal reform that is imposed on an indigenous institution from the outside, but an endogenous sustainability strategy that emerges from the data (Moe & Simojoki, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015).

From my perspective as a Warsangeli youth leader, the Guurti has contributed to sustaining Somaliland's contested statehood mainly by maintaining internal peace and helping communities manage disagreements in a way that does not disrupt the broader political system. In my lived experience, stability is the most important foundation of state survival, especially in a context where formal recognition is still contested internationally. However, I believe it can remain relevant only if it continues to adapt. The main gap is the limited participation of youth and women in decision-shaping processes, even though these groups are directly affected by the outcomes of decisions made through traditional structures. I would recommend stronger inclusion mechanisms that allow youth representatives and women leaders to formally contribute to discussions, especially in matters related to peacebuilding and social stability.

(KII-03, Warsangeli Youth Leader, 2026)

4.5 Documentary and Media Triangulation

The four themes identified by the participants were supported and reinforced by documentary and media evidence and further sharpened the contradictions. The peacebuilding-first narrative was corroborated by historical sources, constitutional text confirmed the institutionalisation of the *Guurti* and contemporary election reporting illustrated ongoing importance of continuity in politics and negotiated transitions (Academy for Peace and Development and Interpeace, 2008; Republic

of Somaliland, 1993, 2001; Reuters, 2024).

Table 2: Summary of Findings

Theme	Principal mechanism	State-sustainability implication
Peace consolidation	<i>Xeer</i> , diya, elder mediation, reconciliation, early intervention	Rebuilds social trust and reduces escalation that can destabilize political order
Institutional durability	Mediation during elections, transitions, and political disputes	Buffers political competition and supports continuity, but can generate accountability costs
Internal legitimacy	Performance-based trust, predictable governance, domestic acceptance	Sustains practical political order despite limited recognition and contested external status
Limits and renewal	Transparency, inclusion, rotation, generational legitimacy	Makes institutional adaptation a condition for future legitimacy and sustainability

Note. Themes were generated through reflexive thematic analysis and triangulated across interviews, focus groups, documents, and media evidence.

Meanwhile, governance evaluations reported delays in elections and accountability issues (African Union Commission 2026; Freedom House 2024; Reuters 2025), and the recognition reporting after 2025 highlighted the lack of efforts to resolve the regional dispute over Somaliland's status despite the increased external visibility. The triangulation supports the interpretation that the contribution of the *Guurti* is contingent but real, as the same hybrid architecture is found to produce institutional tensions that must be negotiated continuously (Hoehne, 2013; Richards, 2020).

Table 3: Documentary and Media Triangulation

Source	Type/date	Finding corroborated	Analytical contribution
Academy for Peace and Development & Interpeace	Policy/history, 2008	Peace consolidation	Documents locally driven reconciliation and indigenous state building
Bradbury	Scholarly monograph, 2008	Peace consolidation	Provides historical account of reconciliation, conferences, and state formation
Walls	Peer-reviewed article, 2009	Peace consolidation	Links elder-led peacebuilding to emergence of Somaliland political order
Renders & Terlinden	Peer-reviewed article, 2010	Institutional durability	Explains negotiated statehood through hybrid customary-constitutional authority

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Source	Type/date	Finding corroborated	Analytical contribution
International Crisis Group	Policy brief, 2021/2022	Transition tensions	Documents election delays, political crisis, and negotiated compromise
Freedom House	Governance assessment, 2024	Accountability limits	Records mandate-extension and democratic-accountability concerns
Reuters	International news, Nov. 2024	Political transition	Reports election following two-year delay and subsequent opposition victory
Associated Press / ICG	International news/policy, Dec. 2024	Political transition	Corroborates peaceful handover and institutional continuity
Peterson & Zaki	Policy research, 2023	Institutional renewal	Supports continued relevance of <i>Xeer</i> alongside reform and inclusion needs
Reuters / African Union Commission	News/official, 2025-2026	External status	Shows Israel recognition alongside continued AU rejection of Somaliland independence

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Peacebuilding as State-Sustaining Infrastructure

The first finding helps to understand the relevance of peacebuilding for state sustainability, not just for providing proof of reconciliation's role for elders. Previous studies indicate that negotiated peace has been followed by institutional consolidation, and negotiated peace has been experienced through local bargaining that is credible (Academy for Peace and Development & Interpeace, 2008; Bradbury, 2008; Phillips, 2013; Walls, 2009). The evidence in the present showed the mechanism: credible mediation through customary authority, reinstated relationships through restorative settlement, and ongoing conflict management provided trust for future institutions. This helps to sustain the local-peacebuilding scholarship, but it also reminds us that local processes are not necessarily fair, or even recognized as legitimate by everyone (Mac Ginty, 2010; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015).

According to Lewis (1961), Massoud (2021), and Menkhaus (2000), the *Guurti's* peace function is institutional, as it is organized in terms of obligations, compensation, dialogue, and collective enforcement which are expressed in the form of *Xeer* and *diya*. Thus, peace and justice in Somaliland is realized through cooperation and contestation between customary and formal systems, but not necessarily through one legal system over another (Moe & Simojoki, 2013). The *Guurti's* ongoing relevance after the appearance of constitutional institutions can be explained due to the fact that the authority of the *Guurti* also exists outside the sphere of legal rules and fills in the gap between legal rules and social relationships (Moe, 2011; Renders, 2007). Security

infrastructure can therefore be indigenous institutions when social legitimacy is transformed into regularized practices of conflict management (Richards, 2014; Renders, 2012).

5.2 Hybrid Institutional Durability and Political Transition Management

5.2 Institutional Durability, Political Transitions, and Hybrid Governance

The second finding offers support to the idea of a hybrid political order, but also shows why hybridity requires a dynamic process of evaluation, and not a process of stabilization as an institutional middle-ground. As Somaliland's state formation occurred, its formal and customary institutions became intertwined (Renders and Terlinden, 2010; Walls and Kibble, 2010; Hoehne, 2013). The *Guurti* as a buffer between political competition and social stability is a good example of this duality, with customary mediation keeping rivalries from erupting into violence and other continuity measures undermining the confidence in the electoral rules over time. Based on the election crises that are well documented by International Crisis Group (2021, 2022) and Freedom House (2023, 2024), the repeated crises, as outlined above, thus illustrate an underlying paradox of sustainability: what is accepted as a way to avoid a breakdown may become destabilizing when it undermines the procedural legitimacy over time.

The 2024 peaceful transfer of power is particularly significant as it shows the durability of the political settlement and the costs that went into reaching that result. Reuters (2024) reported the two-year delay for the election, and Associated Press (2024) and International Crisis Group (2024) reported the following opposition victory, concession, and peaceful inauguration. The events reinforce Richards' (2020) argument that Somaliland has resilience and fragility attributes, as institutions are intact, but always rely on negotiated adaptation under stress. The study thus reads political durability not as proof that the hybrid system has found a solution to transition problem, but as proof that the hybrid system has some capacities to absorb conflict the legitimacy of which relies on whether the extraordinary measures are exceptional and can be stated and defended publicly (Balthasar, 2013; Njeri, 2019).

5.3 Internal Legitimacy, Recognition and Practical Statehood

The third finding adds to the scholarship of practical-statehood by making useful observations about the role of internal legitimacy in sustaining governance without full and uncontested external sovereignty. Clapham (2004), Pegg (1998), and Kolstø (2006) suggest that political viability can co-exist with non-recognition, and Caspersen (2012) and Geldenhuys (2009) demonstrate that that these unrecognized bodies are nonetheless constrained in diplomacy, security and international participation. The Somaliland evidence identifies a process that takes place within this state: peace and predictable institutions create domestic acceptance, domestic acceptance leads to continuity, and continuity makes it possible to have a political order with some track record of actual performance for external parties to observe (Eubank, 2012; Richards, 2014). The term internal legitimacy is not symbolic, but it is not the same as recognition either (Kyrus, 2022; Visoka, 2022).

The post-2025 recognition environment adds to the analytical usefulness of this distinction as Somaliland now enjoys one formal bilateral recognition, but has not been recognized by African Union and is contested by Somalia. In December 2025, the African Union Commission (2026) confirmed Somalia's territorial integrity and denied Somaliland's independence, while Reuters (2025) reported Israel's December 2025 recognition. This is an indication of the dynamism and the

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unevenness of sovereignty and recognition between actors, as demonstrated by Kyris (2022), alongside Grzybowski's (2017) illustration of the ontological contestation of statehood even when effectiveness is considered to be significant. This finding should therefore be carefully expressed: the *Guurti* helps to sustain domestic political stability and external credibility of Somaliland's political status quo, but cannot on its own resolve the legal and geopolitical dynamics in which recognition is ultimately determined (Knotter, 2024; Organization of American States, 1933).

5.4 Accountability, Inclusion and Renewal of Customary Legitimacy

The fourth finding is that customary legitimacy is not in itself guaranteed by tradition or institutional tenure, but rather depends on ongoing social recognition. The fourth finding relates to celebratory accounts of indigenous governance, as it demonstrates that customary legitimacy is not absolute, but is contingent on continued social recognition. Comparative research shows that the support of the traditional leaders remains when the community feels that they are useful, accessible and socially legitimate, and that they may be challenged if inherited leadership is inconsistent with evolving community expectations of representation and accountability (Lund, 2006; Logan, 2013; Baldwin, 2016). Research on women and youth participation across Somaliland has documented the constraints of clan-based representation and the structural constraints to women's and youth's direct political voice (Carter, 2021; Parke *et al.*, 2017). The demand of the participants for transparency, rotation and structured consultation, in other words, are not just the antithesis of liberal democracy versus indigenous governance, but rather an internal renegotiation of legitimacy (Moe, 2011; Richards, 2020).

The interpretation is also consistent with critical local-turn scholarship, which cautions against the lack of equal chances to be issued by culturally based institutions, which need to be examined (Leonardsson & Rudd, 2015; Paffenholz, 2015). In Somali legal research, *Xeer* is also viewed as an ongoing process, whose procedures need to be adapted across plural customary and Islamic norms and state rules (Peterson & Zaki, 2023; Massoud, 2021). Ways in which Somaliland is continuing the tradition of negotiated adaptation is then when institutional renewal supports and extends valued mediation functions with an increase in participation and responsibility (Richards, 2015; Renders, 2012). The term "legitimate" is thus not only about historical attachment to the peace settlement, but also about fairness and responsiveness, as this is the only way to secure long-term legitimacy (Freedom House, 2024; Hoehne, 2013).

5.5 Analytical Synthesis: Indigenous Institutions and Sustainable Contested Statehood

The results together indicate that the customary legitimacy facilitates the social credibility of mediation, mediation facilitates peace and resurrected relationships, peace facilitates social trust, social trust facilitates political acceptance, and political acceptance facilitates institutional continuity. This sequence adds to the current description of Somaliland's indigenous state building by providing a description of the conversion mechanism through which authority at the local level turns into a resource to sustain the state (Academy for Peace and Development & Interpeace, 2008; Phillips, 2013; Renders & Terlinden, 2010). The mechanism is dependent as failures of fairness, inclusion or accountability can impede the conversion process by undermining the social recognition that is the foundation of customary authority (Hoehne, 2013; Richards, 2020). The sustainable contested statehood is therefore a 'process' rather than a 'state of being' that is secured

through a series of peacebuilding, negotiated transition, performance-based legitimacy, and institutional adaptation processes (Moe, 2011; Njeri, 2019).

6.0 Conclusion

The Guurti functions as a vehicle that helps to convert customary legitimacy into peace, social trust, political stability, and institutional continuity in Somaliland. Its role in reconciling has led to the building of the formal institutions, and on-going mediation has led to the control of political conflicts before they become more serious crises. It has also shielded the institution somewhat from political competition, but has raised democratic and accountability issues due to multiple mandate extensions. The processes at work indicate that the role of indigenous institutions in sustaining political processes is more likely to be fulfilled if customary authority is continually created through the performance, responsiveness and public legitimacy of the actors rather than simply on the basis of inherited cultural status.

Internal legitimacy is an additional governance tool when there is limited international recognition. Somaliland's example shows that in the absence of full sovereign recognition, a viable political system can maintain stability. In 2025, Israel recognized Somaliland, shifting the international landscape, but regional opposition is seen in the ongoing African Union protests against Somaliland's independence. The evidence therefore shows that it is possible to strengthen political viability and external credibility with internally generated legitimacy, but not necessarily with it the outcome of international recognition politics.

7.0 Policy Implications

The public institutions of Somaliland must maintain the conflict prevention capacities of the *Guurti* and make clear the institutional relations between customary mediation, courts, parliament, the executive and local administration. Where reconciliation and dialogue with elders are based on the *Xeer*, this should be treated as a governance tool that has a basis of community legitimacy, but it is important that there is clear referrals between the various levels of the *Xeer*, and that constitutional responsibilities are clearly understood and followed (Peterson & Zaki, 2023; Republic of Somaliland, 2001). Better coordination would maintain the flexibility that is crucial to successful indigenous mediation but also would solve the accountability issues of overlapping authority (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004; Lund, 2006). The goal of the policy should thus be institutional complementarity, not the formalization of customary practice or the replacement of customary practice through state institutions (Moe & Simojoki, 2013; Renders & Terlinden, 2010).

The institutional renewal should also enable the membership of *Guurti* and consultation with it to be made more transparent, socially inclusive, time-bound and without erasing the cultural basis of elder authority. Improving the representation of minority groups and inclusion of women and youth through structured participation, plus publicly transparent renewal processes and rigorous selection criteria would directly address the legitimacy concerns highlighted in the findings and broader governance literature (Carter, 2021; Freedom House, 2024; Parke *et al.*, 2017). The adaptive nature of Somaliland's political settlement is also reflected in its ability to implement such reforms through processes of negotiation, as opposed to the mechanical transfer of a single constitution template (Phillips, 2013; Richards, 2015). Reform must therefore be seen as a means of preserving the peacebuilding capital of the *Guurti* by keeping the communities as its stewards,

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who benefit from its authority, able to see it as both fair and relevant. Reform should, therefore, be understood as a way of protecting the peacebuilding capital of the *Guurti* by ensuring that the communities whose trust is the basis for the elder authority are able to continue to perceive the authority as both fair and relevant (Logan, 2013; Renders, 2012).

There is a need to keep promoting the fact that Somaliland enjoys peace, peaceful political transitions, transparent governance, and accountable institutional reform, without assuming that these things are enough to bring recognition from others. The 2024 transition and 2025 recognition development signals that – despite the recognition decisions of regional organizations and states based on broader political and legal factors – the performance of the governance can be enhanced to boost the visibility of the action (African Union Commission, 2026; International Crisis Group, 2024; Reuters, 2025). Policy makers should, therefore, document the role of indigenous institutions in conflict prevention and continuity, as well as progress towards accountability and inclusion, since external credibility is undermined by a lack of domestic legitimacy (Freedom House, 2024; Richards, 2020). Such a strategy provides robust practical justification for Somaliland's political viability, but analytical realism about the geopolitical character of recognition (Knotter, 2024; Visoka, 2022).

6.3 Suggestions for Further Research

Further studies are required to assess if the sustainability mechanism found in Hargeisa is applicable to pastoral, rural, and coastal communities, and communities in conflict zones. Comparative work should explore, for example, if customary legitimacy generates social trust and continuity in a uniform way or not, depending on the territorial histories and institutional access (Bradbury, 2008; Richards, 2020). The transfer of legitimacy should also be studied longitudinally in relation to the transfer of legitimacy from traditional authority to state resilience, as well as other similar relationships across Africa (Baldwin, 2016; Logan, 2013). This research would assess the transferability of the mechanism, but not presume that the institutional form of the *Guurti* is a model that should be replicated in other contexts other than Somaliland (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Paffenholz, 2015).

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