

# profile

National Centre: **Federation of Somali Trade Unions (FESTU)**.  
FESTU is affiliated to the ITUC

Country: **Somalia**

Text: **Walton Pantland**

**As Somalia emerges from a long civil war, unions face the challenge of organizing in a society where the rule of law is weak.**

## ORGANIZING IN A FRAGILE ENVIRONMENT



**Omar Faruk Osman is the general secretary of FESTU. Osman is also general secretary of the National Union of Somali Journalists, and an executive committee member of the International Federation of Journalists.**

The rule of law broke down in Somalia with the outbreak of civil war in 1991. The country has stabilized in the past few years, with a federal government formed in 2012, but the country is still dominated by armed groups and politicians who believe that they are above the law. Al Qaeda affiliate Al Shabaab, and other jihadi groups, stage terror attacks in attempts to seize power back from the government.

It is extremely difficult to organize unions in an environment where the rule of law is weak, and there is a severe security crisis. Union activists operate in a dangerous environment and cannot rely on the law to protect them. Their only leverage is collective action and international solidarity.

**“Although the Somali constitution guarantees the right to organize and to protest, the government uses the security situation to undermine trade unions and civil society. Union meetings are often restricted, citing security concerns, and several have been violently broken up by security forces. If workers in a company try**

**to form a union, the employer can hire a militia to intimidate or kill union leaders,”** says Osman.

As a long time union activist, Osman is accustomed to danger: Somalia is the most dangerous country in the world to be a journalist, with 38 journalists killed since 2012. He narrowly survived an assassination attempt a year ago during a terror attack on a hotel where a union meeting was taking place, and the FESTU office has been bombed.

Unions operate under a climate of fear, and there are rumours that there is a death squad hunting down trade union leaders. This is unsubstantiated, but the rampant violence in the country is a perfect cover, and creates an environment of fear and paranoia that makes organizing very difficult.

As general secretary of FESTU, Osman stresses the importance of international solidarity:

**“In such a fragile environment, what matters is international pressure. Our politicians care more about their image with world leaders than the plight of their people.**

“Putting political pressure on international institutions, and international diplomats, to act in the interests of defending internationally recognized labour rights, including union rights, is very important.”

Despite the security situation, the Somali economy is performing well, much of it based on trade with the Gulf. The civil war, and the subsequent collapse of the state, meant that entrepreneurs were able to profit from previously nationalized industries.

Somali investors from the diaspora bought up infrastructure, and since 2012, multinational companies have moved

in. The energy and telecommunications sectors have grown rapidly as companies form consortiums. Somalia has valuable untapped natural resources, including large reserves of uranium and natural gas. As peace returns to the country, the economy is expected to grow fast.

But with large profits to be made, there are attempts to restrict workers' power. The government has created a petroleum company, and recently tried to form its own trade union to bypass legitimate representatives.

IndustriALL has been working with Norwegian affiliate Industri Energi to support the creation and development of a union in the petroleum sector. A new union called the Somali Union of Petroleum & Gas Workers has been established. The union was accepted as an affiliate of IndustriALL at the executive committee meeting in Rio de Janeiro in October 2016. The work of developing the union is ongoing.

The trade union movement sees itself as protecting the needs of the people against profiteers:

“Multinationals want to invest in Somalia, and we have serious concerns that they will exploit the very fragile situation in our country,” says Osman.

**“Our unions want to be involved in any discussion with multinationals from the outset, so that we are clear that whatever is happening reflects the interests of our people.”**

### IndustriALL affiliates:

- National Electricity Workers Union of Somalia
- Somali Tailors & Textile Union
- Somalia Union of Petroleum & Gas Workers