

# Somaliland: An Overview of the 2021 Parliamentary and Local Council Elections

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**POLICY BRIEF**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somaliland is going to the ballots to elect members of the House of Representatives, mayors, and members of the Local Councils. National Electoral Commission has completed the voter registration process, and with more than 1 million registered voters will be able to vote on May 31, 2021. The elections are important as there were successive delays in the electoral process and the elections for the House of Representatives and Local Councils will be done together for the first time.

ISIR Think Tank and Africa Foundation jointly prepared this policy brief for the experts and the general reader interested in the electoral process in Somaliland as well as the current situation en route to the May 2021 elections. The policy brief provides fundamental information on Somaliland's political system and actors involved in the electoral process such as the political parties, electoral bodies, and the civil society; presents in-depth analyses on the contemporary issues ahead of the elections such as the participation of women and ethnic minorities, elections funding, and the role of diaspora; and finally, it offers recommendations to various election-related actors.

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# INTRODUCTION

**I**n Somaliland, citizens are expected to go to the polls in May 2021 to elect legislators and local councilors for the first time in 15 and 8 years, respectively. These will be the seventh elections since 2002 and the introduction of multiparty democracy. Somaliland was praised for conducting timely elections ever since and gained the reputation of a peaceful and growing democracy within the region of the Horn of Africa, which is marked by hostilities and autocratic regimes. However, Somaliland is yet to graduate into a mature democracy and has drawn condemnation in recent years amid sustained term extensions<sup>1</sup> despite the fact that the Somaliland constitution clearly limits office terms for elected officials to five years.

There are only 3 political parties and over 990 candidates in total contesting the elections for seats in the House of Representatives (hereon, HoR) and Local Councils (hereon, LC).<sup>2</sup> The HoR comprises 82 seats, all of which are directly elected, with no seats reserved for women and minority groups. With over 90% of the candidates expected to be newcomers, the elections could see the emergence of a new wave of young and homegrown leaders, despite the absence of affirmative action to

representation for people from minority clans and women. Conversely, there is a myriad of challenges facing the newly elected members of parliament (hereon, MPs) and councilors on ways to tackle corruption, fix the stagnant economy, and create jobs for the rising youthful population.

A major issue on the agenda of Somaliland politics is the relations with Somalia. The upcoming 2021 parliamentary elections, in particular, will have an impact on the relations between Somaliland and Somalia. As there is no consensus between both sides on the political status of Somaliland<sup>3</sup>, the newly elected parliament has a high potential of influencing Somaliland's future. In addition, the Somalia government is currently in the process of electing members of parliament and a president through indirect elections.<sup>4</sup> The post-election term is expected to be a new era in establishing the nature of relations between Somaliland and Somalia.

The objective of this policy outlook is to present an overview of the context, history, and political settings on the upcoming 2021 Somaliland elections, as well as the various political actors and issues driving the race.

1 British Embassy Mogadishu. (2019, November 27). Joint statement on delays to Somaliland parliamentary and local council elections. Gov.UK. Retrieved 12 31, 2020, from <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-on-delays-to-somaliland-parliamentary-and-local-council-elections>

2 Haji, O., Saed. (2021, January 16). Personal Interview. Hargeisa.

3 Askar, A. (2020, June 29). The Future of the Negotiation Track between Somalia and Somaliland: Chances and Challenges. Emirates Policy Centre (EPC). Retrieved 12 31, 2020, from <https://epc.ae/topic/the-future-of-the-negotiation-track-between-somalia-and-somaliland-chances-and-challenges>

4 Crisis Group Africa. (2020, November 10). Staving off Violence around Somalia's Elections. Reliefweb. Retrieved December 21, 2020, from <https://reliefweb.int/report/somalia/staving-violence-around-somalia-s-elections-crisis-group-africa-briefing-n-163-10>

# OVERVIEW OF SOMALILAND'S POLITICAL CONTEXT AND HISTORY OF ELECTIONS

Somaliland was a region of the former Somali Republic between 1960 and 1990.<sup>5</sup> It declared its independence from Somalia in 1991 and has since been seeking to attain international independence. Somaliland has undergone relatively successful stages of nation and state-building since 1991. It has a functioning government, an army, a currency of its own, and an infrastructural presence in most of its territories. Following the Civil War that overthrew the military regime of Siad Barre in 1991 and the declaration of Somaliland as an independent state from the rest of Somalia, the Somali National Movement (hereon, SNM) militia forces, who defeated Siad Barre's forces and declared Somaliland's withdrawal from the union of 1960, initiated a two-year transitional government led by its then chairperson, Abdirahman Ahmed Ali. This was followed by a peaceful transfer of power between five presidents in less than three decades.

Besides Somaliland's successful endeavor in peacebuilding,<sup>6</sup> the process of constitution-making was also taking shape.

In 1993, the clans of Somaliland gathered in the Grand Borama Conference and signed a national charter.<sup>7</sup> This was followed by the 1997 conference in Hargeisa, where indirectly elected representatives approved a more detailed interim constitution. These representatives finalized a draft constitution, which was voted in a public referendum in 2001.<sup>8</sup> Before the first legislative elections were held in 2005<sup>9</sup>, the 2001 constitution laid the framework for Somaliland's transition from a clan-based political system to a multiparty system.

Somaliland passed through a less anarchic path among political actors<sup>10</sup> in contrast to the rest of Somalia during the introduction of the multiparty system.<sup>11</sup> The first elections contested in independent Somaliland were those for LC(2002 and 2012), followed by three election cycles for the presidency (2003, 2010, and 2017) and one term for the bicameral legislature (2005).<sup>12</sup>

5 BBC. (2017, December 14). Somaliland Profile. BBC News. Retrieved December 21, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14115069>

6 Soon after the resistance against the Barre regime ended and the SNM fighters emerged triumphant, the prominent figures in Somaliland society, such as the clan elders, managed to form ad hoc committees to mediate disputes, administer justice, and basically lead the stateless society. See Ibrahim, M. H., & Terlinden, U. (2010). Somaliland: 'Home Grown' Peacemaking and political reconstruction. Accord Conciliation Resources, 21, 76-79. Also see Eubank, N. (2010, January 11). Peace-Building without External Assistance: Lessons from Somaliland - Working Paper 198. Centre for Global Development. Retrieved December 13, 2020, from <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/peace-building-without-external-assistance-lessons-somaliland-working-paper-198>

7 Omar, M. (2014, August 27). Somaliland: Borama Conference in 1993 and its critical importance for the future. Geeska Afrika Online. Retrieved 12 13, 2020, from <https://www.geeskaafrika.com/somaliland-borama-conference-in-1993-and-its-critical-importance-for-the-future/>

8 ISN ETH ZURICH. (2001, May 31). The Constitution of the Republic of Somaliland. refworld.org. Retrieved 12 14, 2020, from <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4bc581222.pdf>

9 Somaliland held a Constitutional Referendum in 2001.

10 International Republican Institute Somaliland. (2005, September 29). Parliamentary Election Assessment Report. The International Republican Institute. Retrieved December 14, 2020, from [http://www.somalilandlaw.com/IRI\\_ParElection\\_2005.pdf](http://www.somalilandlaw.com/IRI_ParElection_2005.pdf)

11 Johnson, P., & Raghe, A. (2010, February). How Somali-led peace processes work. ACCORD: An International Review of Peace Initiatives, 1(21), 46-49. [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/accord%2021\\_13How%20Somali-led%20peace%20processes%20work\\_2010\\_ENG.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/accord%2021_13How%20Somali-led%20peace%20processes%20work_2010_ENG.pdf)

12 Bradbury, M., & Healy, S. (2010, February). Introduction: Whose Peace is it Anyway? Connecting Somali and International Peacemaking. ACCORD: An International Review of Peace Initiatives, 1(21), 6-9. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/somalia/introduction-whose-peace-is-it-anyway-connecting-somali-and-international-peacemaking>  
Ibrahim, M., & Terlinden, U. (2010). Somaliland: 'Home Grown' Peacemaking and Political Reconstruction. ACCORD: A Review of International Peace Initiatives, 1(21), 75-76. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/somalia/somaliland-home-grown-peacemaking-and-political-reconstruction>

12 Somaliland National Electoral Commission. (2021, January 6). Elections. SLNEC. <https://slnec.com/nec/elections-2/>



In 2010, Somaliland made remarkable achievement through a peaceful transfer of power as opposition party KULMIYE's candidate Ahmed Silanyo replaced the incumbent Dahir Rayale<sup>13</sup> of the now-defunct UDUB party, both of whom elected democratically. Somaliland has yet to hold a timely election since then. The MPs of the HoR, for instance, were elected in 2005 and continue to hold seats for 15 years without reelection.

This time<sup>14</sup> elections are taking place when both houses of the bicameral legislature passed laws that have seen harmonization of electoral laws and arrangements of two elections at once for the first time. Elections for Guurti, the upper house, also known as the council of elders,<sup>15</sup> are scheduled to be held a year later. This will be an uphill task for the unrecognized young nation in the Horn of Africa.



A woman holding her voter registration certificate.

<sup>13</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2011 - Somaliland, 23 August 2011, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4e5364b51a.html> [accessed 4 January 2021]

<sup>14</sup> Somaliland Parliament. (2020). Somaliland Houses of Parliament. Somalilandlaw.net. [http://www.somalilandlaw.net/somaliland\\_parliament.html](http://www.somalilandlaw.net/somaliland_parliament.html)

<sup>15</sup> Richards, R. (2016). Understanding State Building: Traditional Governance and the Modern State in Somaliland. Routledge.



## Somaliland electoral process explained

- » Through a representative democracy, the election systems set in place in Somaliland follow a proportional electoral system of open lists with multi-member regions/districts.
- » Open lists allow voters to vote for a candidate of their preference irrespective where their citizens vote for a candidate chosen from one of those lists (single vote).
- » Over 990 candidates from three parties will compete in parliamentary and LC elections.
- » 246 candidates in HoR
- » 747 Candidates in LC
- » The Somaliland lower house of parliament –HoR– has 82 members who are elected for five years, but the current members of parliament have held office since 2005 amid unprecedented term extensions.
- » Considerable role of traditional leaders
- » Clan and sub-clan power rotation systems shape the electoral terrain, clan leaders handpick the candidates.
- » There are no specific laws set in place or affirmative action for political participation of women, youth and ethnic minorities.
- » At polling stations, a voter will be issued two different ballot papers, one with a list of candidates for the HoR and one with a list of candidates for the LCs, a voter will then mark their ballot papers and place them inside the respective ballot boxes.
- » The electoral campaign will last between 18 to 30 days. National Electoral Commission determines the length and schedules of campaigns.

## Iris Biometric Voter Registration



Somaliland was the world's first to use iris recognition to create a voter registration list and remove duplicate names from the rolls.

## Elections Fact Sheet

### Electoral Regions

Somaliland is divided into **6 electoral regions** and **23 electoral districts**.



### Political Parties

Only the three registered political parties can nominate candidates.



### Nominations

Each party nominates **82 candidates** to run for House of Representatives seats and **249 candidates** to run for Local Council seats.

### Eligibility to Vote



More than **1,000,000 people** in Somaliland are registered voters.

To be an eligible voter, one must be a citizen of Somaliland over **15 years of age**, be registered as a voter and be issued with a voter's card.

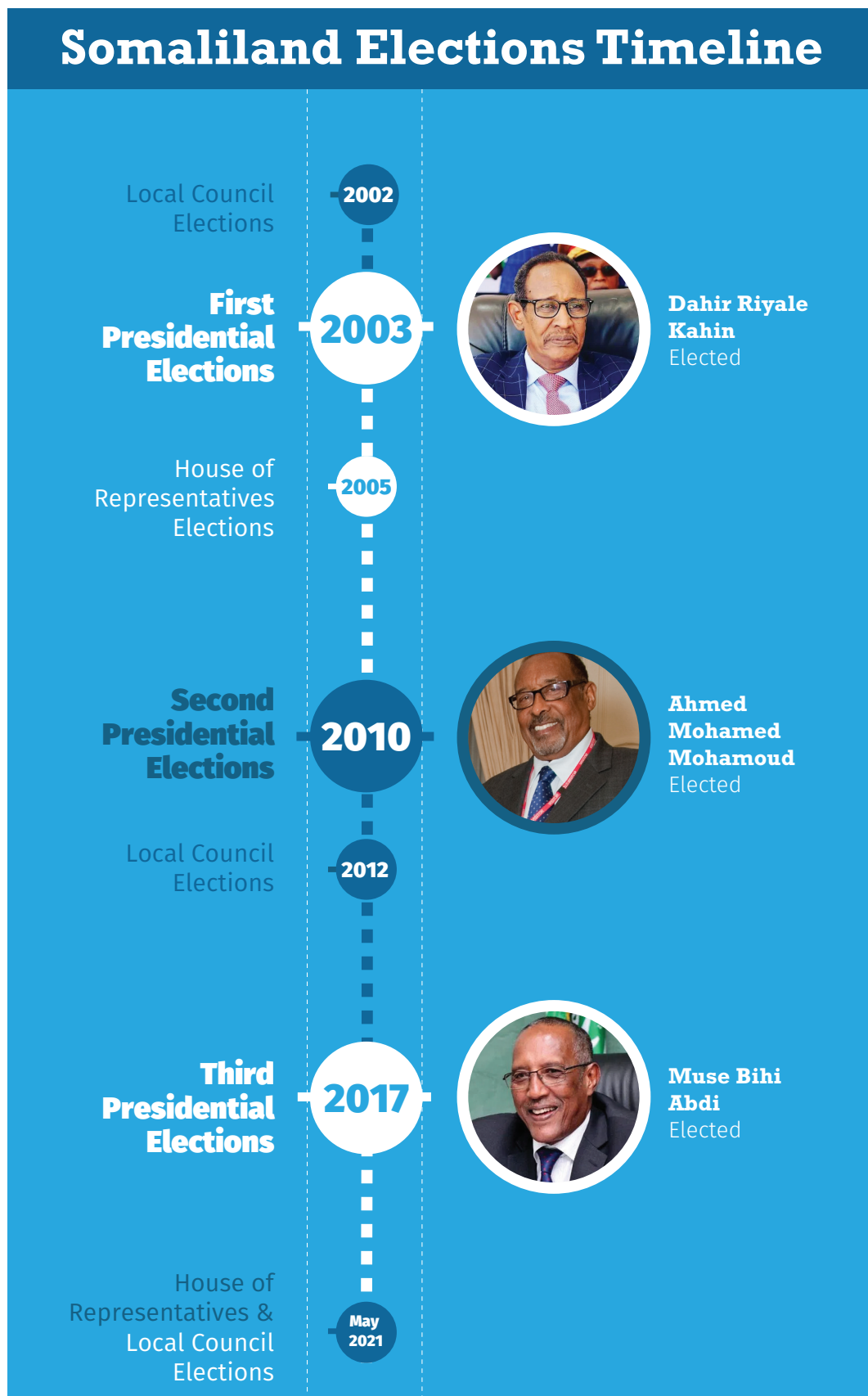
### Candidate Qualifications

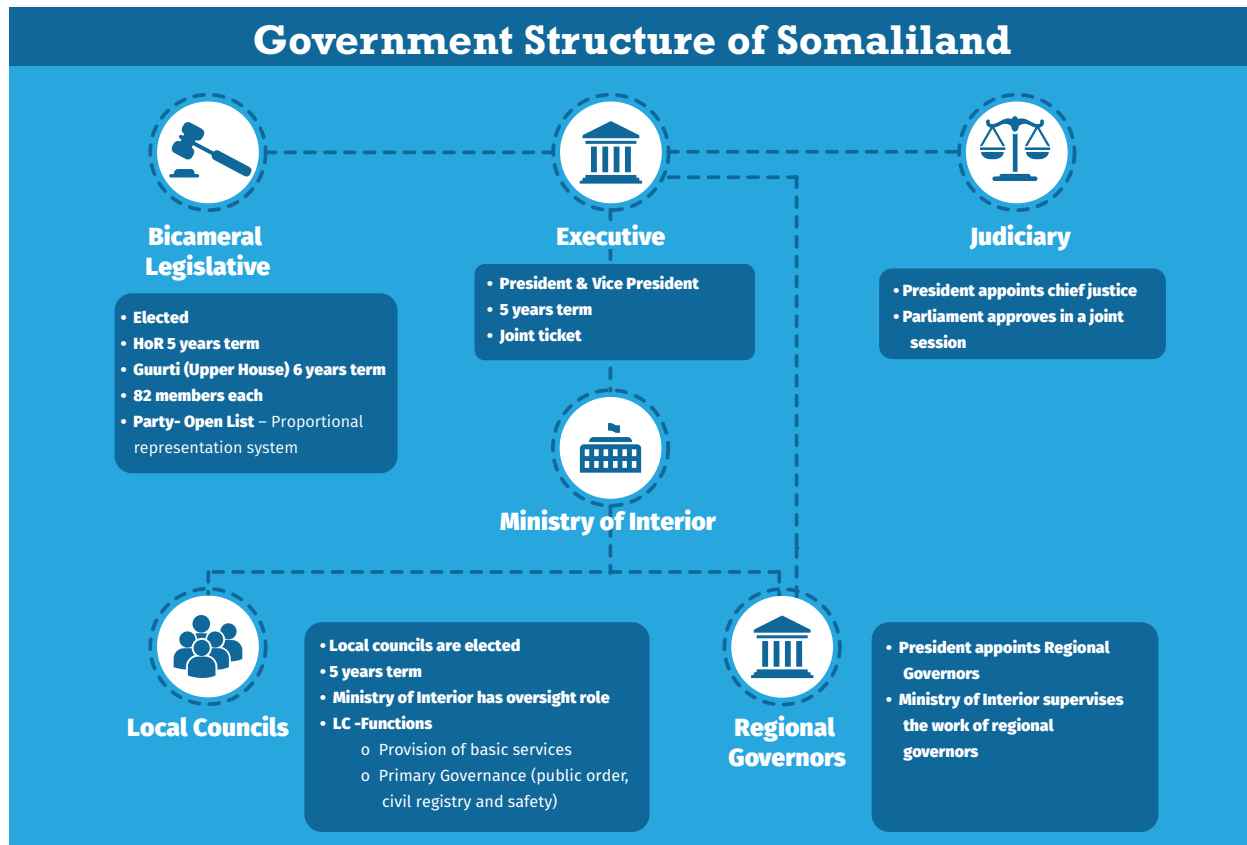
Minimum Age Requirements  
**LC** 25 yrs & undergraduate degree  
**HoR** 35 yrs & high schools.

### Electoral Disputes

The Supreme Court certifies the final results and hears all election-related disputes.

**\$50 Million** was estimated to have been spent on campaign finances by the candidates during the 2012 local council election. With two elections combined that figure is expected to double.





## Hybrid Political System Impedes Democratic Progress

Somaliland maintains hybrid political order that integrates traditional political institutions into its governance system.<sup>16</sup> The system stems from the 1993 inter-clan conferences, where the current structure of governance was put in place with the establishment of the Guurti or the upper house of parliament, mainly taken by representatives from traditional clan leaders, as the house retains mandate for all matters concerning dispute settlements.<sup>17</sup> Seen as an obstacle to the progression of the democratization process, clans play a major role in the political discourse. For instance, seat arrangements for the cabinet and other legislature bodies are allocated along clan lines using a pre-

agreed clan power-sharing formula developed during the formative stages of Somaliland. As the institutionalized clan system has taken center stage and functions along the parallel democratic institutions, it could well prove a major stumbling block.

The successful peacebuilding and state formation Somaliland exhibited in the past is yet to be translated into democratic gains. Whereas Somaliland adopted a modern constitution that stipulates universal suffrage, which guarantees full participation of all its adult citizens, considering the past elections, the basic right to vote and run

<sup>16</sup> Kibble, S., & Walls, M. (2009, December 4). Tradition and Modernity in Somaliland Beyond Polarity: Negotiating a Hybrid State. Progressio.org.uk. [https://www.progressio.org.uk/sites/default/files/Tradition\\_and\\_Modernity\\_in\\_Somaliland\\_conf\\_paper09.pdf](https://www.progressio.org.uk/sites/default/files/Tradition_and_Modernity_in_Somaliland_conf_paper09.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Bradbury, M. (2001). Somaliland (3rd ed.). CIIR. <https://www.progressio.org.uk/sites/progressio.org.uk/files/Somaliland-Country-Report-Mark-Bradbury.pdf>

for office is not applicable.<sup>18</sup> Traditional institutions enjoy a great deal of legitimacy and have the authority to endorse one candidate over the other. In practical terms, one has to go through a vetting process within the clan structures and then secure an endorsement from the wider clan before getting any party ticket. It bars reformist and progressive candidates, particularly women and young aspirants, hence accommodates old-style politicians who are willing to maintain the status quo. Amid heightened competition and powerplay amongst clans, stakes are high in the upcoming elections.

In addition, this is also in part due to the gaps in the electoral laws governing the elections that do not specify delimitations for electoral constituencies for members of parliaments or municipal councils. In the current setup, seats for the HoR are contested across the whole region instead of certain identified constituencies, while those for LC elections have vied along with towns and cities. Here is where the clans' and sub-clans' structures step up and become even more relevant at the expense of ensuring voter equality.<sup>19</sup>

## Sustained Term Extensions

Term extensions, often seen as a breach of the constitution, have become the modus operandi in Somaliland politics, with every single administration involved in this practice, thus purposely playing delay tactics to sanction extensions.<sup>20</sup> The outgoing members at the HoR were elected in 2005; that was Somaliland's first and only parliamentary elections, and Somaliland is yet to assume timely election patterns.<sup>21</sup>

As Somaliland does not enjoy international recognition and as such faces economic challenges, which can justify term extensions, what concerns many people is the frequency of elections being sustained over the last three decades, hence straining the democratic process.

The traditionally taken upper house has made a total of 28 term extension occasions shared between the president, HoR, LC, and itself.<sup>22</sup> With the Guurti always on the side of the incumbent and collaborates on the single issue of election delays, there are claims that the institution is politicized,<sup>23</sup> and this is the primary factor behind the undermining role it plays.<sup>24</sup>

Over the years, this practice has also proved to be the primary cause for election-related disputes between incumbents and opposition parties who translate term extensions as ways, which the ruling party seeks third terms when the mandated terms expire.

18 Hansen, S. J., & Bradbury, M. (2007). Somaliland: A New Democracy in the Horn of Africa? *Review of African Political Economy*, 34(113), 461-476. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03056240701672585>

19

20 Somaliland Forum. (2006, May 9). A Term Extension Too far: Guurti Resolution is Unconstitutional and Unacceptable. Somalilandlaw.com. [http://www.somalilandlaw.com/elders\\_term\\_extension.html](http://www.somalilandlaw.com/elders_term_extension.html)

21 International Republican Institute Somaliland. (2005). Parliamentary Election Assessment Report. IRI. [http://www.somalilandlaw.com/IRI\\_Parlection\\_2005.pdf](http://www.somalilandlaw.com/IRI_Parlection_2005.pdf)

22 Centre for Policy Analysis. (2019, October 29). Facts and Figures about Somaliland Elections. cpahorn.net. <https://cpahorn.net/facts-and-figures-about-somaliland-elections/>

23 Jama, I. H. (2010). Making the Somaliland Constitution and its Role in Democratization and Peace. *ACCORD: An International Review of Peace Initiatives*, 1(21), 89-90. [https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Whose\\_peace\\_is\\_it\\_anyway\\_connecting\\_Somali\\_and\\_international\\_peacemaking\\_Accord\\_Issue\\_21.pdf](https://rc-services-assets.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/Whose_peace_is_it_anyway_connecting_Somali_and_international_peacemaking_Accord_Issue_21.pdf)

24 ISCO Somaliland. (2019). The Challenges of Democratization in Somaliland and the Way Forward. ISCO Somaliland. [https://www.somaliland.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Brief\\_paper-on-Somaliland-Elections\\_of\\_ISCO\\_Somaliland.pdf](https://www.somaliland.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Brief_paper-on-Somaliland-Elections_of_ISCO_Somaliland.pdf)

The first instance when Somaliland elections have drawn international intervention was in 2009, for matters relating to the unilateral term extensions of Guurti and the subsequent elections-related political crisis between the three political parties.

As the disputes reach their apex, an external intervention was required to resolve the impasse that finally ended in all three parties signing a six-point memorandum of understanding (MOU) that paved the way for the 2010 elections.<sup>25</sup>

## **Lack of Diversity of Candidates: Marginalization of Women and Ethnic Minorities**

Enclosed within a male-dominated political ambiance that embraces the traditional system to its governance structures as well as the absence of nascent democratic institutions and lack of commitment from the leadership, women in Somaliland face a great deal of political exclusion. With only one woman MP in the parliament of 164 Somaliland, trails its neighbors by a sizable margin wherein neighboring Somalia, women make up 24% of MPs, Djibouti 26%, and Eritrea 22%. All of these are post-conflict states as Somaliland. Women activists in Somaliland faced a new setback recently when the proposed affirmative action proposing 30% quota seats to be allocated specifically to women and other minorities was rejected by the parliament.

It is even worse for people from ethnically marginalized communities such as the Gaboye clans to achieve representation in public offices. There is not a single elected councilor or MP who represents them in the current setup.<sup>26</sup>

While there are nonspecific rules excluding people from minority clans and women to contest in the elections, they are placed in a disadvantaged position and have an uneven correlation when compared to the rest of the society. While dispersed across different regions and with limited resources, they lack the necessary support bases to secure enough votes. Nonetheless, in recent years there are calls for minority clans to organize in certain regions instead of participating in elections in all the regions and mobilize resources with the target of attaining representatives.

In spite of these distinctive challenges facing women and ethnic minority groups, they are not giving up.<sup>27</sup> The trend of women's candidacy is increasing by the day, however small the number of women candidates is. While in the 2002 LC elections, no woman made it to the party lists, in 2012, a significant surge of 140 women candidates took part. As a result, 10 women councilors across the whole constituencies were elected.

<sup>25</sup> International Crisis Group. (2009). Somaliland: A Way out of the Electoral Crisis. International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/somaliland/somaliland-way-out-electoral-crisis>

<sup>26</sup> Centre for Policy Analysis. (2020). Press Statement: A Call Against the Rejection of Quota for Women and Minorities by The House of Representatives. Centre for Policy Analysis. <https://cpahorn.net/press-statement-a-call-against-the-rejection-of-quota-for-women-and-minorities-by-the-house-of-representatives/>

<sup>27</sup> Hassan, H., Ayan. (2020, October 3). Personal Interview. Hargeisa.

Women activists have changed their approach and are now taking to new fronts (i.e., shaking up the traditional system), where women began engaging with clan leaders, with some already capturing clan loyalty. Their advocacy also worked in the level of appealing to political parties and

led to an agreement between the parties that set a certain number of women candidates, also known as voluntary candidate quota, regardless of clan support from each of the three parties.

## **THE ISSUES AHEAD OF 2021 ELECTIONS**

### **Parliamentary Elections**

Citizens will be going to the polls with mixed feelings. On the one hand, they hope to bring forward issues that matter to public life, such as unemployment that stands at a staggeringly high 75%, tackling corruption, development in infrastructure of roads and bridges.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, many will be loathed knowing that past elections could not solve major problems. Notwithstanding, preceding candidates used to set expectations high during election cycles, as they made impressive promises that ultimately never materialized despite overstaying for 15 years. Moreover, clan pride still guides the majority of the voters' behavior.

As the public wants to see changes in their living standards, a new cadre of politicians will be hoping to take their chance. There are encouraging prospects; this election will see the emergence of highly educated progressives who want to break barriers and transcend clan borders.

There is a firm conviction within the Somaliland population that the major problem has been clan politics that resulted in the absence of efficient government. Since its birth, an incompetent political class that exploited clan dynamics ruled Somaliland. Reformist candidates will be campaigning on the platforms of confronting corruption and bad governance in an effort to energize the largest demographic, the youth, which is estimated around 70% of the whole population.<sup>29</sup>

With the upcoming parliament likely to assume the necessary role of checks and balances, it is hoped that the newly elected parliamentarians will be more effective in developing legislative agendas that will try to address a multitude of problems facing the electorate, including political, economic, and social. Specific focus is on the establishment of the Parliamentary Oversight Committee on National Budgets with a mandate to assess the extent to which the executive branch performed for the budgeted revenues and expenditures before a new one is approved.

28 Osman, Y., Nafisa. (2020, November 2). Personal Interview. Hargeisa.

29 Jama, O., Ahmed. (2020, December 15). Personal Interview. Hargeisa.



# Local Council Elections

The Public has shown particular interest in the LC in the sense of anticipating that they will bring a much-needed change in delivering basic services in the urban areas, such as improvements in infrastructure, sanitation, transparency, and accountability amid the perceived existence of widespread corruption. Citizens' demographic characteristics might influence their expectations. The more educated citizens in parts of urban areas might be expecting better representation and a break from the past, calling for structural changes and reforms. Nevertheless, not many late candidates are joining the race on the platforms of experience, education, and track records.

In contrast, those residing in the rural and peri-urban areas might not have higher expectations, despite experiencing poorer service delivery and lack of genuine representation. In these areas, the clan and traditional leaders claim legitimacy and maintain a monopoly when it comes to selecting candidates. Ironically, clan preferences for candidates are not based on political platforms or agenda but rather on the basis of intraclan power rotation.

## ACTORS

### The Political Parties

The race to elect representatives and local councilors involves only three political parties, as well as no provision for independent candidate participation as stipulated in the constitution and electoral laws governing the elections (Law No: 91/2020). Though the current setup of political party's' formal registration licenses are up for grabs in 2022, as new political associations are formed every ten years with the top three emerging formally registered political parties.<sup>30</sup> The initial motive behind limiting the number of political parties was the intention to preclude clan configuration, but events witnessed in recent elections have proven otherwise.

Political parties approach the upcoming elections with the opposition anticipating forming a coalition and challenging the ruling party to secure parliament speakers and major cities' mayors while the incumbent KULMIYE is set to flex its muscles to consolidate its grip on power, having sustained election successes since it came to power in 2010. However, all three parties demonstrate incapacity to uphold intra-party democracy and need to address those challenges urgently. There is an authoritarian nature of all three political parties. Delegates of the central committees are selected through clan arrangements, while topmost positions, including those for party leaders, are not contested, and those with dissenting views face immediate expulsion.

30 Vergee, A., Abokor, A., Yusuf, H., Warsame, A., Farah, M., & Hersi, M. (2015). The Economics of Elections in Somaliland. Rift Valley Institute. <http://riftvalley.net/publication/economics-elections-somaliland>

Somaliland political parties demonstrate a lack of ideological difference or distinctive blueprint for political, economic, and social development. All appeal to the electorate on the platform of clan identity. Parties receive candidate lists from clan leaders who may have compromised qualities of aspirants with a good track record, who are cleaner, more educated over corrupt politicians. Consequently, a tendency has developed where political parties go into elections without presenting major policy issues important to the public but still went on to win elections.<sup>31</sup>

Another challenge facing parties in Somaliland is their failure to promote intraparty democracy. The topmost positions are rarely contested and at times saw those with dissenting voices and expressing different views against the wishes of party leaders facing immediate expulsion from the parties.

Both UCID and WADDANI's chairperson's retained positions since parties were formed while the ruling KULMIYE replaced its former leader and president of Somaliland, Mr. Silanyo, to the current President Bihi, a move that was not seen as democratic but rather handpicked and pre-arranged.

In regards to foreign policy, all three parties are uniformly aiming to meet the public demand, which includes Somaliland attaining international recognition. Whether the new parliament initiates a shift in policy as to whether to continue dialogue and talks with Somalia remains to be seen. In 2011, then-President Ahmed Silanyo went to the parliament to get approval for his government's engagement with Somalia. Both the ruling party and main opposition party have a relatively similar stance and supported the continuation of dialogue with Mogadishu, while the UCID party that does not enjoy significant support has its leader opposed to this process and advocates for a regime change in Mogadishu.

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31 ISIR Think Tank. (2019). Democratization process in Somaliland: A Critical Perspective. ISIR Think Tank. <https://isirthinktank.com/democratization-process-in-somaliland-a-critical-perspective/>

# Party Profiles

## KULMIYE

### (Peace, Unity, and Development Party)



**Muse Bihi Abdi**  
President

This is undoubtedly the most successful political party in Somaliland politics. Since it was formed in 2002, it immediately rose to prominence and scored second highest marks in the 2003 presidential elections, narrowly missing out the top spot by mere 80 votes. It came to power in 2010 with Ahmed Silanyo becoming the first elected president to replace a sitting president in Somaliland before he retired from politics in 2017. KULMIYE controls the HoR and mayors in key cities, including the capital Hargeisa. In the 2017 presidential elections, KULMIYE, led by Muse Bihi Abdi, the incumbent president, was reelected. KULMIYE, led by former SNM fighters, credits itself for its role in the revolt against the former military regime and enjoys considerable popularity. Having just concluded its general assembly meeting, it has reelected President Muse Bihi to lead it in the upcoming 5 years.

## UCID (Justice and Welfare Party)



**Faisal Ali Hussein**  
Chairperson

Formed in 2001 by Faisal Ali Warabe, who returned from the diaspora, UCID is the oldest party in Somaliland and has not won a single election. Settled in third place, the party hopes to overcome its worst election defeat in 2017, garnering just 4% of the total votes cast. Its leader stood as a candidate for all three presidential elections and remained to be the chairperson since its formation in 2001. In 2005, UCID and KULMIYE (at the time main opposition party) formed a coalition that challenged then-incumbent UDUB and managed to jointly lead the parliament where both the speaker and two deputies went to the opposition.

## WADDANI (National Party)



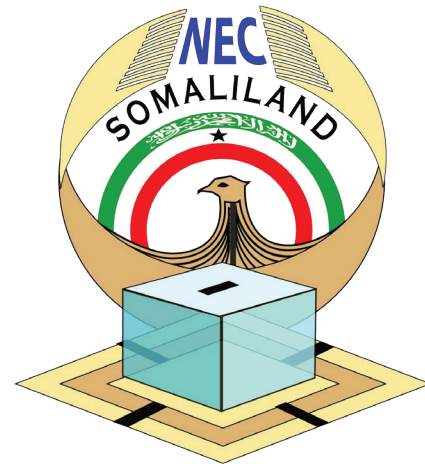
**Abdirahman Mohamed**  
**Abdillahi**  
Chairperson

Formed in 2012 by then Parliament Speaker Abdirahman Abdillahi, it has quickly gained broad support and become the second party with the highest votes in 2012 and 2017. Being the main opposition party, WADDANI expects to get the majority in the parliament for opposition parties to take the speaker and major cities' mayors by convincing the UCID party to join them in an alliance.

## Bodies Managing the Election: SLNEC

The Somaliland National Electoral Commission (hereon, SLNEC), established in 2001, is the body responsible for organizing all elections under the Elections and Voter Registration Act Law 91/2020.<sup>32</sup> Since its formation, the electoral commission has successfully conducted six different election cycles, a constitutional referendum, and installed the biometrics recognition system for voter registration.<sup>33</sup> It succeeded all of these when Somaliland is not yet internationally recognized, thus demonstrating the capacity to organize elections and has even been lauded by international election observers.

The newly appointed commission echoed their commitment as preparations are underway for the next elections and are confident of delivering credible elections. However, in recent years, the electoral management body has drawn a number of criticisms, most notably in the 2012 LC elections and the subsequent presidential elections in 2017, as some opposition parties accused SLNEC of mishandling the electoral results and demanded transparency. Incidents of election-related violence ensued while there were no significant improvements in the aftermath of the 2017 presidential elections. In the event that long-standing concerns are not addressed may well present a challenge in the upcoming elections.



There are also key gaps to be pointed out, particularly on the issue around the autonomy of the commission, which has been the center of the dispute between the three political parties for the last two years (2018-2020). The institution lacks the necessary legal framework that would have strengthened its independence. The institution does not have its own establishment act with its mandate currently incorporated within the electoral laws, as the law 91/2020. Once SLNEC is established on a separate act, it would exercise its own independence in terms of financing, legal frameworks, and administration.

In addition, the fact that there is no assurance of tenure beyond the five years term for commissioners creates insecurity. Over the last two years, political parties were engaged in a protracted dispute concerning the number of commissioners each party had to nominate. In the current setup, the executive maintains the upper hand, where the opposition parties nominate two out of the seven members and has the sole power to veto members nominated by the opposition parties before it submits the full list to the parliament for approval.

<sup>32</sup> Somaliland National Electoral Commission. (2020, December 6). Legal Framework. slnec.com. <https://slnec.com/nec/laws-publications/>

<sup>33</sup> Burt, C. (2018, January 4). Somaliland election saw Iris ID technology deployed. BiometricUpdate.com. <https://www.biometricupdate.com/201801/somaliland-election-saw-iris-id-technology-deployed>

# Elections Funding

Somaliland can be commended to the fact that it has managed to finance its elections from its budgets as well as financial support from development partners. The table below is from a Rift Valley Institute research showing the costs and funding of the pre-2017 elections. Somaliland also plans to fund all of its election-related expenses gradually, as it continues to grow its economy.

The second slant is the campaign finances for political parties and candidates. Rift Valley Institute estimated that budgets for administering the

elections are just a small fraction of the campaign finances; it reported that in 2012 local council elections, as much as \$50 million were mobilized for campaigning financing purposes (See table below). In 2021 elections, for the LCs and HoR at the same time, the figure is expected to rise considerably. Funds are raised by candidates through the clan channels, but also in recent years, it has been observed that corporations have an interest in financing campaigns. With no regulations limiting spending or the source of funds, there may be a risk to consider.

**Comparative Administrative Costs of Four Elections in Somaliland, 2002–2012 (in US Dollars)<sup>34</sup>**

<b>Expenditure Type</b>	<b>Local council election 2002</b>	<b>Parliamentary election 2005</b>	<b>Presidential election 2010</b>	<b>Local council election 2012</b>
<b>Donor expenditure</b>	750,000	1,672,705	3,070,113	8,826,480
<b>Government contribution (approximate)</b>	346,982	500,000	1,145,000	2,200,000
<b>Total cost (approximate)</b>	1,096,982	2,172,705	4,215,113	11,026,480
<b>Total votes</b>	440,067	670,328	538,246	820,160
<b>Cost per vote</b>	2.49	3.24	7.83	13.44

<sup>34</sup> Vergee, A., Abokor, A., Yusuf, H., Warsame, A., Farah, M., & Hersi, M. (2015). The Economics of Elections in Somaliland: The Financing of Political Parties and Candidates. Rift Valley Institute. <http://riftvalley.net/publication/economics-elections-somaliland>

## Other Actors: Role of CSOs, Diaspora, and International Community

Civil society organizations (hereon, CSOs) in Somaliland have had a visible role throughout the process of holding elections. Through network organizations for women, youth, media, and other non-state actors, they used to participate during the awareness-raising programs for voter registrations and civic education campaigns, as well as their involvement as local election observers. The SLNEC encourages those organizations to take an active and constructive role. The Somaliland media also has a working relationship with SLNEC in an effort to prevent the negative role of the media. Hence, the upcoming elections will also be no different and would need the active role of civil society to educate voters on a number of issues, not least on procedures for voting with two different ballot papers, which is a new exercise to the voters.

There is a significantly great number of Somaliland diaspora living abroad and have demonstrated substantial contribution to the past elections in terms of fundraising for the candidates and also returnees running for public offices. In fact, two of the three

political parties contesting are led by politicians who returned from overseas. In the upcoming elections, members of the diaspora will be involved mainly as candidates. The only shortcoming will be that there are no legal professions set in place for them to vote in the respective areas they reside.

Somaliland's international partners have long supported the process of democratization and, in particular, the election cycles since the beginning. Their contributions range from technical support to financial assistance. The body overseeing the elections receives regular capacity-building assistance from a number of Somaliland's development partners: mainly the EU, the USA, and the UK. The relationship built over the years between Somaliland and its Western partners could be strained by the absence of diverse candidates owing to the concerns they had raised when the parliament refused to pass a bill that would have allocated specific quotas for women and ethnic minority clans.

## THE NEED FOR ELECTORAL REFORMS

This paper on Somaliland elections in 2021 uncovered the strengths and challenges facing Somaliland in its transition towards democracy. The Chief challenge is the adoption of a hybrid governance system and its part in what is termed as "sustained term extensions" seen as a detriment to

the standards of credible elections. Yet, if addressed ahead of time by relevant stakeholders, mainly the institutions tasked with delivering elections, this could turn into an opportunity. Reforming those institutions will make an impact on the integrity of the elections.



Not only institutional and technical reforms but also legal reforms are needed. Many people believe the Somaliland electoral system and its underpinned laws pose a great challenge to providing genuine representation for all of its citizens. The pastoral community, whose livelihoods are often challenged

by the unfavorable weather conditions, finds it difficult to cast their votes due to the seasonal migrations they are engaged in. Age limit also prevents youth from seeking seats in the legislative bodies that require persons over the age of 35 to contest.<sup>35</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### To the National Electoral Commission

1. The 2017 post-election observers report<sup>36</sup> recommended the focus to make electoral reforms a priority in an effort to emphasize the integrity of the process. One of the key suggested reform agendas was to pass a bill establishing the "National Electoral Commission." However, three years on, little progress has been made. With the timing of the upcoming elections very close and may not allow electoral reform, this paper suggests for immediate follow up once those elections are held. Nevertheless, SLNEC could still undertake some technical aspects of the reform process as abridged below.
2. Emphasize improving public confidence by addressing technical challenges encountered in past elections. Transparency

is essential to assure citizens that multiple voting does not take place. The major shortcoming of the iris biometric recognition employed during voter registration in 2017 was that there were no technologies set in place to verify the ownership of the persons presenting the voter registration ID card. Thus, a more advanced verification system would be needed to be employed during Election Day.

### To the Political Parties

1. The Somaliland political parties need to make efforts to enhance intraparty democracy and shift away from relying on clan politics. This time citizens' expectations are high, anticipating that public services will improve as more diverse and competent legislatures and councilors will be elected. It is therefore paramount that all political parties

35 Somaliland Parliament. (2007). Somaliland Houses of Parliament. Somalilandlaw.net. [http://www.somalilandlaw.net/somaliland\\_parliament.html](http://www.somalilandlaw.net/somaliland_parliament.html)

36 Saferworld. (2018). Somaliland decides: the domestic election observers' report on the 2017 presidential election. Saferworld. <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1174-somaliland-decided-the-domestic-election-observersa-report-on-the-2017-presidential-electio>

develop respective political platforms and choose the right people who would make those promises happen. The three political parties need to sign a memorandum of understanding outlining selection criteria first in regard to the vetting of candidates by assigning joint monitoring task force.

2. Develop party-specific distinctive political platforms. Over the years, citizens moaned about the lack of policy differences among the political parties, which could resurface yet again during the upcoming elections. Each political party ought to invest time in an effort to bring credible programs before the public during the campaign trails. The voters need choices based on policies, not on personalities.
3. The parliament's failure to approve a specific quota for women and ethnic minorities means that there will be a lack of diversity in candidates, as many clans will be expected to put forward male candidates. The political parties have a role to play to ensure minority groups are represented. Provide women and other minority candidates with the necessary support they require, such as campaign finances and advocacy.

## **To the Somaliland Civil Society Organizations**

1. The CSOs can take a more constructive role to engage on issues of reform, election credibility, and diversity of candidates. A vibrant and robust civil society is paramount to ensure peaceful, free, fair, and credible elections with a particular focus on taking the role of a watchdog. CSOs-Observers should establish ways to oversee the whole election process and need to institutionalize domestic observers' missions.
2. In order to support political participation and help create space for women candidates, Somaliland CSOs should take into account that deeper cultural and religious norms exist that go beyond seat allocations. The focus should rather be on empowering women to be able to understand their rights to participate in the national development discourse.



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