



Building on Somaliland's Successful Elections

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What's new? Somaliland's opposition scored a surprise win in long overdue parliamentary and local elections on 31 May 2021. Despite years of delays, the vote went smoothly and was a milestone on Somaliland's road to democratisation. A 3 August vote for the speaker of parliament was similarly straightforward.

Why does it matter? The 31 May vote revealed both the strength of Somaliland's democratic culture and the limits of efforts to include under-represented constituencies in high-level politics. Women are now entirely absent from parliament and certain sub-clans won fewer seats, partly because of dismal turnout in parts of the east.

What should be done? Somaliland's leaders should redouble efforts to include under-represented communities in governing bodies and work to address disaffection in eastern regions through dialogue. The ruling party should steer clear of heavy-handed tactics that marred the pre-electoral period, while watchdog institutions and civil society should publicise any such actions that still occur.

I. Overview

Somaliland's parliamentary and local council elections represented rare good news in the troubled Horn of Africa. Smoothly run and fairly peaceful, the long-delayed 31 May polls handed a surprise loss to the ruling party, which swiftly accepted the results. While the vote was an undeniable success, there were nevertheless significant disappointments. Security forces harassed and detained some opposition candidates during the campaign. Not a single woman won a seat in parliament, contributing to the continued near absence of women from high-level Somaliland politics. Dismal voter turnout in eastern regions appeared to reflect disaffection with authorities in the capital, Hargeisa, while exacerbating the under-representation of eastern sub-clans in parliament.

As they look toward future elections, including the presidential race in 2022, the authorities should consider measures to boost participation of under-represented communities in government and forswear strong-arm tactics against the opposition. To reduce friction and delays, the government should engage now with the opposition to develop consensus rules for managing forthcoming elections. Overall, the successful 31 May election was an important step in Somaliland's state-building and democratisation efforts. The authorities, civil society and key public institutions should strive

to consolidate these gains and build broad political agreement on how to make continued progress toward stable, peaceful and inclusive democracy in Somaliland.

II. Bumpy Road to a Smooth Vote

Somaliland proclaimed its independence from the Somali Republic in 1991, after a years-long insurgency led primarily by members of Somaliland's dominant Isaaq clan against Somali dictator Mohamad Siad Barre. In the intervening 30 years, Somaliland has developed many trappings of a state. It has its own civilian administration, armed forces and currency, and it runs its own elections. While no country recognises Somaliland's independence, international partners have encouraged the development of its democratic institutions.

Even if the vote was successful in the end, the path to Somaliland's parliamentary and local elections on 31 May was anything but straightforward. For years, Somaliland's upper House of Elders, known as the Guurti, repeatedly extended the elections timetable for the lower House of Representatives (last voted into office in 2005) and for local councils (last voted into office in 2012), citing vaguely defined "dire circumstances" as the constitutional basis for their decisions.¹ The delays meant that the elected members of these institutions overstayed their five-year terms by eleven and four years, respectively. The Guurti has also served well beyond its six-year mandate granted in the late 1990s.

A dispute among Somaliland's three official political parties further delayed proceedings.² The disagreement stemmed from the ruling Kulmiye party's success in the bitterly contested 2017 presidential vote, in which the opposition Waddani party complained of systematic irregularities.³ Waddani then declared it had no confidence in Somaliland's National Electoral Commission (NEC) and refused to collaborate with this body in future elections.⁴ Mediation efforts led by clan elders and civil society actors, as well as active diplomacy by the European Union, eventually helped coax the opposi-

¹ Electoral delays are the norm rather than the exception in Somaliland politics, and the Guurti wields considerable power in determining electoral timelines. The upper chamber can extend the House of Representatives' tenure in the event of "dire circumstances", which Somaliland's constitution describes as "a wider war, internal instability, serious natural disasters ... [or] serious famines". The Guurti has often exercised this power liberally, and its members have a self-interest in doing so. The selection of a new Guurti is supposed to occur one year after the House of Representatives vote is completed, meaning that delays in conducting that poll in turn reset the Guurti's own clock. The local councils' mandate, also extended by the Guurti, expired in April 2019, meaning that these bodies operated without clear legal authority for more than two years.

² Somaliland's constitution limits the number of political parties to three.

³ "Bulsho News: 'Umaan Tanaasulin Muuse Biixi Ee Waxan U Tanasulay Danta Qaranka Murashaxa Wadani'", video, YouTube, 21 November 2017; "Somaliland: Waddani party calls the president to dissolve National Electoral Commission", *Horn Diplomat*, 22 March 2018. Somaliland's third party, Justice and Welfare (UCID) backed Waddani's complaints at first, but later dropped its objections. "Two Somaliland parties agree on local and parliamentary poll date", *Halbeeg*, 12 January 2019.

⁴ "Waddani position on the extension of the House of Somaliland Representative", *Somaliland Standard*, 23 January 2019.

tion back to the table.⁵ The parties finally resolved the outstanding issues in August 2020, with Waddani dropping an earlier demand that some NEC commissioners stand down so that the parliamentary and local council polls could move forward.⁶

As campaigning kicked off, police actions raised concerns that the government was interfering with the electoral process. In the months leading up to the vote, police detained nearly a dozen candidates from both Waddani and its fellow opposition party, the Justice and Welfare Party (UCID), accusing some of maintaining contact with politicians in Somalia, a treasonous act under Somaliland law. (Others whom authorities detained were not officially charged.)⁷ In holding the opposition figures, the police appeared to contravene legal provisions prohibiting the arrest of candidates during the campaign.⁸ A handful of candidates subsequently withdrew, apparently intimidated by the experience.⁹ Pressure from civil society, the NEC and the Supreme Court convinced authorities to halt the practice, however, and those detained were released.¹⁰

In contrast to the bumpy run-up, election day on 31 May came off smoothly. No major security incidents occurred, and international monitors reported few irregularities.¹¹ Turnout was around 64 per cent of registered voters, a high rate by most standards, although it fell below expectations in Somaliland.¹² The opposition scored a surprising victory, with Waddani picking up 31 seats in the House of Representatives, compared to the ruling Kulmiye party's 30. UCID secured another 21, forming an immediate alliance with Waddani to give the opposition control of the chamber.¹³ In the local council votes Kulmiye secured the most seats overall, with 93 of 220, but Waddani and UCID performed strongly there as well, securing a combined 127 positions for their alliance. This showing allowed the opposition to obtain five of the seven key mayoral posts up for grabs, as in Somaliland the local councils vote to select mayors.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Somaliland civil society representatives, June 2021. "Bluff, call, blink: President Bihi and opposition parties reach yet another agreement brokered by the EU ambassador to Somalia", *Somaliland Chronicle*, 26 February 2020.

⁶ "Somaliland: National political parties reach agreement on elections", *Somaliland Standard*, 12 July 2020.

⁷ "Somaliland: Police furnish damning evidence against two arrested candidates, two others on the run", *Somaliland Sun*, 1 April 2021.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Somaliland civil society representatives and government officials, June 2021. Law Lr. 91/2020, Somaliland House of Representatives, 2020.

⁹ Donor consortium report seen by Crisis Group.

¹⁰ "Somaliland: NEC urges state to cease arrest of candidates in May elections", *Somaliland Sun*, 27 April 2021. Some of the candidates who had been detained went on to win their races.

¹¹ "Report of the Brenthurst Foundation Somaliland election monitoring mission", Brenthurst Foundation, June 2021.

¹² The turnout had been similar in the 2017 presidential election. But expectations were that more people would show up at the polls, due to a voter registration drive that had broadened the electorate by 34 per cent (from 704,089 possible voters in 2017 to 1,065,847 in 2021). This increase was due to a combination of expanded time for registration, migratory patterns and the typically heightened interest in parliamentary and local council races. Civil society organisations complained that the civic education programs carried out after registration were lacklustre outside cities. Turnout suffered especially in the countryside, reflecting the continued challenge of encouraging rural participation. Crisis Group interviews, Somaliland government official and civil society representatives, June 2021.

¹³ UCID has languished as Somaliland's third party. In the 2017 presidential election, UCID candidate Feisal Warabe received only 4 per cent of the vote. "Results", Somaliland National Electoral Commission.

III. Surprising Results

The opposition victory was the second since Somaliland declared independence from Somalia in 1991. The first came in 2012, when opposition candidate Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud “Silanyo” unseated incumbent Dahir Riyale Kahin to become president.

After the electoral commission announced the 2021 results, Kulmiye swiftly acknowledged defeat, while an array of international actors applauded the process, casting it as a demonstration of the Somaliland people’s commitment to political participation and democratisation.¹⁴ Widespread acceptance of the vote was a much-needed boost for the NEC, which had been forced to defend its impartiality in 2017 amid opposition complaints.¹⁵

Kulmiye’s poor performance surprised observers both inside and outside the party.¹⁶ Many perceive its disappointing showing at the polls as a popular rebuke of its most prominent member, President Muse Bihi Abdi, whose leadership some Somaliland observers have described as increasingly narrow or clan-centric.¹⁷ Shifting alliances within the powerful Isaaq clan, from which Bihi hails, the result of a fraying relationship between two major sub-clans, likely also influenced the outcome.¹⁸

While most results reflected traditional clan loyalties that serve as the primary organising principle of Somaliland’s politics, some voters appeared to reject clan-based jockeying. Somaliland’s international partners and local civil society organisations particularly praised the election for ushering in to parliament the first elected member of the minority Gabooye clan – Barkhad Jama Hersi of the Waddani party.¹⁹ Hersi ran on a non-clan platform and relied heavily on social media to circulate his message, a strategy that helped him garner more than twice as many votes as his closest opponent.²⁰ One observer told Crisis Group that his victory could indicate growing

¹⁴ “Statement by International Partners on Somaliland Parliamentary and Local Council Elections”, European Union, June 2021. Somaliland’s Supreme Court affirmed the results on 7 July 2021.

¹⁵ The NEC’s term runs through 2024. Crisis Group interviews, diplomat and Somaliland government officials, June 2021.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Somaliland civil society representatives and researchers, June 2021.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, former Somaliland government official and Somaliland civil society representatives, June 2021; Crisis Group analyst’s interviews in a previous capacity, 2018-2020. Bihi earned widespread praise, however, for his quick acceptance of the electoral results.

¹⁸ The elections signify strains in the *jeegan* (rainbow) alliance that dominated Somaliland’s last two political cycles. This alliance melds the Isaaq’s Haber Jecllo and Haber Awal sub-clans, and carried both President Silanyo (Haber Jecllo) and his successor Bihi (Haber Awal) to victory in 2010 and 2017, respectively. Yet under Bihi’s tenure this relationship has withered, with Haber Jecllo members arguing that they have been left out. A visible manifestation was the removal of Kulmiye party stalwart Mahmoud Hashi (Haber Jecllo) from the party’s central committee during its congress in October 2020. Hashi has since worked to mobilise constituencies to show his worth, according to close observers, and channeled those votes toward UCID, helping explain its surprise showing at Kulmiye’s expense. Crisis Group interviews, former Somaliland government official and Somaliland researcher, June 2021. “Somaliland: Kulmiye Party Reveals list of members of the Party’s Central Council”, *Somaliland Standard*, 12 October 2020.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, UN official and Somaliland civil society representatives, June 2021.

²⁰ “History made in Somaliland as a minority candidate, son of former singer scoop more votes”, *Garowe Online*, 6 June 2021.

disenchantment with clan politics, at least among a small segment of the electorate in Hargeisa, where most of his votes came from.²¹

Another positive element was the apparently limited involvement of external actors in the campaign. Somaliland has deepened relations with Gulf Arab states in recent years.²² In 2017, some reports accused external actors of pouring money into political parties, though no substantive proof ever emerged publicly.²³ Elsewhere in the Horn of Africa, competition between Gulf states has sometimes helped fuel regional and domestic disputes, including between Somalia's government and federal member states, with politicians accusing their opponents of seeking financial backing from one monarchy or another.²⁴ Money may well have played a role in Somaliland's election; indeed, interlocutors told Crisis Group that some candidates spent significant amounts on the campaign trail.²⁵ Yet no evidence has emerged thus far of substantial foreign support for parties or candidates.²⁶

IV. Inclusion Issues

While the election came off smoothly, the outcomes were not as representative of the electorate as might have been hoped.

One very disappointing result was the exclusion of women from parliament. Previously, the lower house had only one female member; now, there will be none. There were thirteen female candidates of the 246 running for 82 seats, and some lost by a narrow margin in a small number of competitive races.²⁷ The outcome was only marginally more inclusive in the local council elections, where fifteen female candidates won three seats in 220 races.²⁸ There had been some efforts to produce a more representative outcome. Before the polls, the three political parties agreed that each would present at least six female candidates for parliament (one for each region), but Kulmiye and Waddani both fell short of this mark. President Bihi also waived registration fees for women and minorities in an attempt to level the playing field. Though im-

²¹ Crisis Group interview, diplomat, June 2021.

²² Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°65, *The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa*, 6 November 2018.

²³ "Somaliland: Sources of Campaign Financing in 2017 Presidential Elections", Center for Policy Analysis, June 2018.

²⁴ Crisis Group Briefing, *The United Arab Emirates in the Horn of Africa*, op. cit.

²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Somaliland civil society representatives, July 2021. The average administrative cost per vote in Somaliland has also increased over time. See "The Economics of Elections in Somaliland", Rift Valley Institute, 2015; and "An Overview of the 2021 Parliamentary and Local Council Elections", Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (Hargeisa), 2021.

²⁶ Insulation from this type of financing should not be taken for granted, however, as the local council and parliamentary elections predominantly revolve around local politics, while forthcoming political battles with wider repercussions, such as the presidential race, may draw greater interest.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, June 2021. The female candidates spanned the three parties and Somaliland's clans. All regions had at least one female candidate, though dispersion was uneven with Sahil region offering five. Donor consortium report seen by Crisis Group.

²⁸ "A Vote for Change: Somaliland's Two Decades Old Electoral Democracy", Institute of Public Policy, May 2021.

portant, these steps clearly proved insufficient to enhance women's political representation.²⁹

The representation of some clans also suffered as a result of dismal turnout in the east, where popular acceptance of rule by Somaliland authorities remains extremely uneven. The eastern parts of the Sool and Sanaag regions, as well as the district of Buhoodle in Togdheer, are primarily inhabited by the Dhulbahante and Warsengeli sub-clans of the Darod clan. They have been subject to a long-running territorial contest between Somaliland and Puntland (a Somali member state).³⁰

The Warsengeli sub-clan appeared particularly indifferent to the vote. Few votes were cast in eastern Sanaag, where the Warsengeli reside, resulting in the loss of four parliamentary seats previously held by Warsengeli representatives.³¹ The low turnout could be interpreted as the sub-clan's rejection of government efforts to include them in Somaliland's politics. Still, official fears that local militias might use violence or interference to thwart the vote were not borne out, for the most part, and Puntland said little about the proceedings, despite having demanded a halt to voter registration in Sanaag earlier in the electoral cycle.³²

²⁹ "Political parties agree to each nominate six women and one minority as candidates in parliamentary elections", *Somaliland Sun*, 5 September 2020; tweet by Muse Bihi Abdi, @musebihi, president of Somaliland, 4:21pm, 1 March 2021. Ahead of the 2012 local council elections, Somaliland switched from closed party lists (where the order of candidates is fixed by the party itself and the voter cannot express a preference for individual candidates) to an open list system (which voters can choose favoured candidates) as a means of improving transparency. This change may have contributed to an even more negative electoral environment for female candidates, however, as they tend to attract fewer voters in a male and clan-dominated society and thus struggle to get elected from open lists. "Preparing for local elections in Somaliland", *Progressio*, April 2012. Some female candidates run into further challenges when clan members argue that they are unreliable, saying they may represent the clan which they were born into or the one into which they married. Crisis Group analyst's interviews in a previous capacity, 2018-2019.

³⁰ Some from Sool and Sanaag seek to create their own administration outside the remit of both Somaliland and Puntland. Crisis Group analyst's interviews in a previous capacity, 2019. Puntland claims these areas under a common Darod/Harti clan banner, to which the Dhulbahante and Warsengeli belong. Somaliland bases its claim on the colonial boundary, which included these areas. For more on this subject, see Markus V. Hoehne, "Between Somaliland and Puntland", *Rift Valley Institute*, 2015; Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°141, *Averting a War in Northern Somalia*, 27 June 2018; and "Overlapping Claims by Somaliland and Puntland: The Case of Sool and Sanaag", *Institute for Security Studies*, 2019.

³¹ In some areas where Puntland has a more dominant administrative presence, such as Badhan town and the vicinity of Las Qorey, voting was not held. Crisis Group interviews, former Somaliland government official, opposition figures, current government official and Somaliland researchers, June-July 2021.

³² On election day, a small skirmish occurred in Buhoodle, while in the lead up to the vote in Sool's regional capital Las Anod, gunmen fired at an opposition campaign headquarters (on 23 May) and threw a grenade at a polling site (12 January). Local militias were likely responsible for the incidents, according to an NGO security report seen by Crisis Group. "Puntland demands end to voter registration by Somaliland in Sanaag", *Goobjoog*, 12 January 2021. After the vote on 31 July, an electoral official was killed by unknown gunmen in Las Anod. "Regional chairman of Somaliland national election commission shot dead in Las Anod", *Somaliland Chronicle*, 1 August 2021.

The news was in some respects less discouraging in the eastern parts of the equally contested Sool region, from where the Dhulbahante hail.³³ Turnout among the Dhulbahante was higher than among the Warsengeli, but their overall representation still dropped from seven to six seats, a setback for Somaliland's attempts to fully incorporate Sool under its political umbrella.³⁴ During the 2005 parliamentary elections, authorities allocated half of Sool's seats to the Dhulbahante because voting did not take place in major towns like Las Anod, which was then controlled by Puntland.³⁵ There were no guaranteed allocations this time. While Somaliland has steadily expanded its administrative presence in Sool, Dhulbahante representation in the lower House has paradoxically decreased.³⁶

Representatives from the dominant Isaaq sub-clans picked up where the Darod sub-clans lost, causing some potential friction. The Haber Yonis and Haber Jelco of the Isaaq gained four and three seats, respectively.³⁷ Overall, Isaaq representation in the House of Representatives increased from 57 to 61 seats, or nearly three quarters of the institution.³⁸ Non-Isaaq clans in the west and east frequently complain about the distribution of seats by region in the House of Representatives, arguing that it under-represents them compared to their size. Many non-Isaaq members even walked out of parliament in protest in the lead-up to the 31 May vote.³⁹ But authorities ignored demands to reallocate the regional distribution, applying the 2005 election formula instead.⁴⁰ The results may thus harden widely held perceptions in Somalia and elsewhere that Somaliland is little more than an Isaaq-dominated clan entity.⁴¹

³³ The Dhulbahante primarily inhabit the eastern parts of Sool, in addition to the district of Buhoodle in Togdheer and some smaller areas of Sanaag.

³⁴ Of the six incoming Dhulbahante members, four come from Sool region, one from Togdheer and one from Sanaag. Donor consortium report seen by Crisis Group. In Buhoodle, voting was not held in the district capital and overall turnout was low. Crisis Group interviews, Somaliland government official and local researcher, June 2021.

³⁵ "A Vote for Change: Somaliland's Two Decades Old Electoral Democracy", op. cit.

³⁶ The pre-2005 House of Representatives, whose members were selected through a negotiated process among sub-clans rather than a direct election, had nine Dhulbahante representatives. Mark Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland* (Oxford, 2008). The incoming speaker of the House of Representatives is from the Dhulbahante (as was the previous one), however, allowing the clan a bit more influence in Hargeisa.

³⁷ Donor consortium report seen by Crisis Group.

³⁸ Another notable shift included a significant reduction in the Arab sub-clan of the Isaaq from five seats to one. A member of the Arab sub-clan explained its poor showing as the result of internal divisions and a lack of organisation. Crisis Group interview, Arab sub-clan member, July 2021.

³⁹ "Somaliland: MPs walk out of Parliament Session", *Somaliland Standard*, 6 August 2019. The number of representatives of the Gadabursi sub-clan of the Dir, which inhabits the western Awdal region, also dropped from thirteen to twelve. Dir sub-clans in Somaliland's west, however, have traditionally been less vocal than their eastern Darod counterparts about attempts to find alternatives to Somaliland, and turnout was generally higher there. The difference owes partly to the fact that the region is more dependent on Somaliland and geographically has fewer realistic alternatives than the far-flung east, which borders Puntland. Crisis Group interviews, Somaliland researcher and civil society representative, June-July 2021.

⁴⁰ This formula is based on the distribution of seats in Somaliland's 1960 assembly, but multiplied by 2.5. "Parliamentary Election Assessment Report", International Republican Institute, 29 September 2005.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, diaspora activist originally from Sool, July 2021.

V. Navigating Future High-Stakes Votes

The parliamentary and local votes in May kicked off a busy electoral calendar that will culminate in the November 2022 presidential election. The winner-take-all nature of that contest will raise the stakes among Somaliland's political elites, who now have to find ways to forge consensus around rules and procedures for the forthcoming vote while avoiding excessive delays.

Somaliland's elites have historically found ways to build consensus about how to manage elections mainly because they are united by the overriding goal of preserving Somaliland's reputation for peace and stability. They hope that good opinions of Somaliland will lead to international recognition of its statehood claims.⁴² Political contestation has increased in recent years, however, with the tensions around the 2017 election particularly exposing the need for continued consensus building to avert a crisis.⁴³

More broadly, the parliamentary and local council elections have upset the status quo and forced Kulmiye from its dominant position. All three parties now command support. The 31 May outcome should particularly reinvigorate Waddani, which posted a poor showing in the 2017 presidential election, and offers the newly formed Waddani-UCID alliance an opportunity to control key institutions. Yet party politics in Somaliland are notoriously unstable and fealty to parties is low, mainly because there are few ideological differences that separate them.⁴⁴ It remains to be seen whether elected individuals will stick to their parties or ditch their tickets in favour of crossing party lines.⁴⁵

The battle for the pivotal position of House of Representatives speaker, who wields significant influence over forthcoming votes, was emblematic of the fluid nature of Somaliland politics. The vote for speaker was on 3 August. Shortly before the vote, nine members of parliament decamped from UCID to Kulmiye, upsetting post-electoral calculations.⁴⁶ A few others subsequently moved from Kulmiye to the opposition.⁴⁷ This jockeying aggravated tensions, with opposition leaders Abdirahman Irro and Faisal Warabe accusing the ruling party of engaging in coercive and purportedly corrupt

⁴² "High Stakes for Somaliland's Presidential Elections", Institute for Security Studies, 2017.

⁴³ Protests in Hargeisa and Burco after the 2017 presidential election killed at least two. "Two killed and several injured in Somaliland after demos over poll irregularities erupted", *Hiiran Online*, 17 November 2017.

⁴⁴ UCID stands out for adhering to social democratic values in the mold of some Scandinavian political parties.

⁴⁵ As an initial indication of how party politics does not always carry sway, Kulmiye retained the mayor's post in Berbera despite holding a minority share of the local council there, casting doubts on the strength and unity of the opposition alliance. "Somaliland: Kulmiye party outwits the UCID-Waddani coalition in Berbera", *Somaliland Sun*, 15 June 2021.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Waddani party member and individual close to Kulmiye, June-July 2021. "Ruling Kulmiye party joins forces with UCID MPs to grab parliament speaker", *Somaliland Standard*, 17 July 2021.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Somaliland researcher, journalist based in Hargeisa and UN official, July 2021.

practices in their outreach to opposition members.⁴⁸ In the end, the opposition alliance held on to just enough votes to secure the position, bolstering their earlier victory.⁴⁹

The next step is the election of the Guurti, due by 31 May 2022. Parliament's upper house is composed exclusively of Somaliland clan elders.⁵⁰ While the institution was instrumental in laying the foundations of Somaliland's governance structure, it is in need of revitalisation, as representatives in the institution have served for more than two decades without a check on their power.⁵¹ The guidelines for the selection of the next Guurti are unclear, as the constitution leaves this subject to future legislation. Navigating this selection process will need to be a priority for the House of Representatives, working with the current Guurti.

The licences for Somaliland's political parties will also expire in 2022. Somaliland awards ten-year licences to operate as a political party to only three organisations at a time. Political associations that want to become parties are subject to a popular vote, with the top three becoming the official parties.⁵² In 2002 and 2012, this vote occurred in concert with local council elections, but recent legislation passed by the previous House of Representatives and the current Guurti calls for a separate election to be held just for the political parties in 2022.⁵³

Finally, President Bihi is expected to seek a second term in the November 2022 election. The opposition's legislative and local council victories suggest that he needs to change course and govern more inclusively if he wants to prolong his time in office. That said, the previous two Somaliland leaders benefited from term extensions granted by the Guurti that allowed them to serve more than five years. Nervous chatter is already heard saying Bihi may bid for a similar extension, which the newly emboldened opposition would certainly stand against if it manages to consolidate its alliance.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, Somaliland researcher, August 2021. "SAAB TV: 'Gudoomiyayaasha Xisbiyada Mucaaradka Ayaa Dhaliilo U Soo Jeediyey Madaxweyne Muuse'", video, YouTube, 29 July 2021.

⁴⁹ Abdirizak Khalif of the Waddani party won with 42 votes, besting Kulmiye candidate Yasin Haji Mohamoud's 39. The first deputy speaker's post went to an MP originally from UCID but who switched over to the Kulmiye ticket, while the second deputy is a member of UCID.

⁵⁰ The combination of the democratically elected House of Representatives with the clan-based governance of the Guurti is often cited as an explanation for Somaliland's successful state-building exercise. "What Future for Democracy in Somaliland?", Rift Valley Institute, June 2013.

⁵¹ Some original Guurti members have since died passing their seats on to family members. The deaths have altered the body's original composition. "High Stakes for Somaliland's Presidential Elections", op. cit.

⁵² They also need to demonstrate at least 20 per cent representation in all Somaliland's regions. Crisis Group interview, Somaliland government official, June 2021. Once new parties are announced, current elected officials will be obliged to join one of them.

⁵³ "Somaliland: Upper house approves reopening of political associations", *SomTribune*, 28 June 2021. Close observers note that the government may use the licence expirations to exert leverage over the opposition parties. Kulmiye is more confident than the opposition about maintaining its status. Opposition parties' concerns about survival could lead them to seek a deal with the ruling party to bypass this process and ensure their continuity. Crisis Group interviews, diplomat, Somaliland civil society representatives and researchers, June 2021.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, former Somaliland government official and Somaliland civil society representatives, June 2021.

VI. Building Comity

Though an overall success, the parliamentary and local council elections of 31 May have shown the twin challenges that Somaliland's elites face in upholding universal suffrage while promoting representation for women, minority clans and other under-represented constituencies. They also serve as a reminder that the eastern region's commitment to and participation in high-level politics is still an open question. In order to set the stage for further peaceful elections, and for stable and inclusive governance, Somaliland authorities and their international partners should take the following steps.

First, President Bihi should appoint a high-level committee to examine the reasons behind the failure of women to achieve representation in parliament and provide recommendations for the way forward. One proposal would be to reintroduce the idea of a quota for parliament. Although members of parliament have rejected this approach in the past, the 31 May results together with expressions of disappointment from Somaliland's international partners might help to change minds.⁵⁵ Political parties could also do more to promote female candidates in their ranks, for example by encouraging party leaders to campaign more vigorously on their behalf.

Secondly, another immediate priority is the political inclusion of non-Isaaq clans. Somaliland's president can ensure continued representation for these groups in Hargeisa by making future appointments in his cabinet and in other high-level positions with under-represented communities in mind. In addition, the coming Guurti cycle can serve as an avenue for boosting non-Isaaq membership in parliament. As selection to the body will be subject to negotiations among Somaliland's clans, political leaders can push for greater inclusion of under-represented communities, including those that suffered losses in the House of Representatives vote.

Thirdly, Somaliland needs to combine this approach with more effective outreach in order to address the apparent political disaffection on the part of the inhabitants of the eastern regions. The guiding principle should be to resolve this problem through dialogue involving Somaliland authorities, locals and others, including Puntland along with Somalia, that claim jurisdiction in the area. Extending Somaliland's military presence as means of advancing the region's political incorporation is likely to continue to produce limited results.

Fourthly, authorities should not repeat the strong-arm tactics that they used against opposition candidates at times during the 2021 campaign. The detention and harassment of these candidates during the campaign were widely viewed as a worrying display of political intolerance and encountered strong domestic opposition. Had they not been curbed, they might have compromised the integrity of the election and been a source of instability. Somaliland's watchdog institutions, including the electoral commission and judiciary, as well as civil society organisations and international partners, need to closely monitor the run-up to the coming votes and be prepared to mobilise together to pressure the government to desist from any form of electoral interference. Maintaining a level playing field is critical if Somaliland is to continue the positive development of its democratic culture.

⁵⁵ "Somaliland: A call against the rejection of quota for women and minorities by the House of Representatives", *Horn Diplomat*, 28 September 2020.

Finally, the May vote's success was the result of consensus building among elites, and especially the political engagement of Somaliland's three parties. It took time to achieve these goals after the bitter fallout of the 2017 presidential election, but in the end the result was smooth proceedings, including a successful House of Representatives speaker vote in a tense environment. In the same vein, Somaliland's government should consult with all parties to determine mutually acceptable rules of the game for forthcoming votes, in order to avoid delays or last-minute disputes. Authorities should also engage persistently with the new parliament to develop wider agreement on the conduct of elections, given the institution's key role in crafting legislation to govern the conduct of future polls.

VII. Conclusion

Somaliland rightly won praise for completing peaceful parliamentary and local council elections that led to an uncontested win for the opposition at both the central and local levels of government. The results are a refreshing piece of good news in the volatile Horn of Africa, where violence often erupts around big votes and entrenched interests make opposition victories rare. Somaliland's political elites should capitalise on these gains by fostering greater inclusion of under-represented communities and maintaining consensual politics in forthcoming electoral cycles. Both will be key to preserving and reinforcing Somaliland's growing track record of peaceful and democratic elections.

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Regional Offices and Field Representation

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