

2019

PUNTLAND'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS:

UNSTEADY TILT TO DEMOCRACY OR INTERMITTENCE TO STAGNATION





<< A man is helped to cast his ballot in Somalia
PHOTO | AFP

Introduction

The Puntland State of Somalia, established as a semi-autonomous regional administration in 1998, is the first Federal Member State in Somalia. Puntland was established through a consultative community conference, which formed an interim regional government and adopted an inaugural charter envisioning a transition from a clan-based system to a democratic system in three years (“2015_06_01_Puntlands_Political_Transformation.pdf,”).

Puntland, alongside Somaliland – a self-proclaimed republic, is largely touted as a successful example of Somali originated, owned, and managed governance structure that has hastened and sustained stability (Musau, 2013). In its short history,

Puntland has overcome ethnic strife, internal Islamist divisions, political precariousness, and security threats. However, the regional state is yet to fulfill the political aspirations of its people. It is struggling economically as it is largely donor-dependent for social services, be they health, education, or food.

Puntland has conducted indirect presidential and parliamentary elections in 1998, 2001, 2005 and 2014. In these elections, clan elders chose the members of parliament (MPs), who represented their communities in the regional parliament. The selected MPs then elected the President, Vice-President, and Speaker of Parliament (“electoral-crossroads-somalia.pdf,” 2017.). The regional state is currently headed by its fifth president. In the years that followed the 2014 presidential

elections, Puntland had declared its desire to transition to democracy by conducting popular elections in late 2018 for the Puntland parliament and president in early 2019. However, lack of political goodwill and resources have generally impeded the quest for popular elections in the past.

Moreover, the regional state has failed to set up the fundamental socio-political context necessary to institutionalize electoral reforms, which would have transformed it into a full democracy. For instance, no census has ever been undertaken to enable the demarcation of constituencies as electoral units for purposes of voter registration and engaging the public in an electoral process that would promote popular trust in the elections.

Further, the electoral commission as constituted today is neither truly independent nor capable of managing general elections, thus significantly affecting the dream of holding fair popular elections. Ultimately, the clan selection mechanism has become an indispensable and viable alternative. In the forthcoming January 8, 2019 presidential elections, 66 members of parliament are expected to cast their votes to elect the region’s president.

Unlike in the past, where presidential elections were characterized by constitutional disputes, political delays and deferments, the 2019 presidential election is on schedule, though, there is fear of postponement. Thus far, more than 20 candidates have expressed interest to contest for the presidency.

Study Methodology

Data Grid Somalia undertook a study in October 2018 to assess the upcoming Presidential election. The study sought to establish the major election issues in Puntland; gauge the perceptions of the opinion leaders on the electoral process; identify the factors that would likely influence the choice of president; identify the desired traits or qualities of the president-to-be; and examine factors that continue to impede the holding popular election in Puntland.

The study design adopted a qualitative approach involving the use of in-depth interviews to collect data from various opinion leaders: politicians, clan leaders (traditional elders) and civil society members in the regional state towns of Garowe and Galkacyo.

The study employed a purposive sampling technique to select 26 respondents: nine politicians, 12 clan elders and five members of the civil society groups to participate in the study. The use of this technique led to the selection of respondents who are informative and possessed the characteristics, roles, opinions, knowledge, or experiences that are particularly relevant to the study.

Findings of the Study

The Major Election Issues in Puntland's Forthcoming Presidential Elections

According to political stakeholders consulted, the following factors are likely to influence the choice of the president as it is either considered a priority issue or habitual influencer that will determine the election outcome.

Clan Affiliation

Puntland State was founded on tribal footing and consideration. Therefore, it has clan as its fulcrum, around which all other matters revolve (Gonnelli, 2013). The community conference which formed the state deliberately adopted a clan-based system, in line with the spirit of its foundation. In Puntland, just like everywhere else in Somalia, the clan factor is an important determinant of power; it is customary that the majority clan reigns over smaller clans.

Through this dogma, the Mohamud Saleeban sub-clans of the Majerten clan have always taken the presidency in Puntland. Except for an interim period from 2004-2005 where Mohamed Abdi Hashi of the Dhulbahante clan served as President, the other four Presidents have hailed from the Mohamud Saleeban sub-clans of Majerten.

As such the Mohamud Saleeban factor is likely to influence the choice of the president as a candidate from this specific sub-clan might be elected. Just like in previous elections, in the January 2019 presidential election, clan identity will be a consensual factor that will greatly influence the choice of the president (Gonnelli, 2013). However, according to some interviewees the Mohamud Saleeban are determined to front an outsider, who will champion their interest once elected president, a guise to show they believe in nationhood, equity and democracy

Security

Infiltration by the Al-Shabaab, possible aggression from Somaliland and threats from the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), are the major security threats facing Puntland. A president who is capable of protecting the territorial integrity of the state – defend Puntland against internal instability by Al-Shabaab, external aggression from ISIL, and stands up to expansionist Somaliland – is preferred by the people of Puntland according to a majority of the interviewees.

Puntland is in perennial territorial dispute over Sool, Sanaag and Ayn, with Somaliland, a dispute that is as old as the state itself and is largely perceived as the biggest test to Puntland's territorial integrity. Settling this dispute in an amicable manner is a priority for the people of Puntland.

The dispute is a bottleneck to the state's sovereignty.

According to some interviewees, there is deep seated fear among the people of Puntland that a military confrontation ostensibly resulting from the dispute but prompted by the current president's underhandedness to extend his term, might postpone the presidential election and jettison the state into political uncertainty.

This underlying current of trepidation is believed to be behind the Puntland military leadership's recent (October 26, 2018) public foray into political debate.

Additionally, reforms in the security sector – currently the security sector in Puntland is bedeviled by poor training, poor quality and lack of public trust – and promotion of peaceful coexistence in Galkacyo, through genuine partnership with Galmudug state, are also priority areas that the elected president is expected to address.

Rule of Law

Presently, the judiciary in Puntland is weak and not independent. According to interviewees strengthening the judiciary is a top priority for the state as it enhances the democratization process, which has stalled.

A properly functioning judiciary that stands for the rule of law will also enable the government to fight corruption, which is currently perceived to be rampant in government. Misappropriation and misuse of the meagre resources, is pulling back Puntland's embryonic and troubled economy. Therefore, concerns about the rule of law is another factor that will likely influence the choice of president.

Support for Strong Federal States

Unwavering support for Strong Federal States is a significant consideration when choosing the president. According to clan elders and politicians, a candidate who is seen as a strong advocate of federal system of governance and one who is fervently opposed to centralist governance or quasi federalism is likely to be the next president.

Similarly, pronouncement of willingness to collaborate with the federal government and seek solution to issues ailing federalism in Somalia will advantage a candidate over his or her challengers. Interviewees acknowledge any presidential candidate, who is perceived to undermining the status of Puntland as originator of strong federal system will have an uphill task to ascend to the presidency.

Sound Economic Policy & Economic Stability

According to the interviewees, Puntland currently lacks a sound economic policy, which has significantly affected its economic growth and stability. The state also lacks the ability to regulate the economy and the Somali currency, which, though, is usually a federal function. Additionally, maritime control and regulation of the Somalia blue economy is wanting – currently there is massive foreign exploitation of the ocean.

The concession of the Port of Bosaso to the United Arab Emirates is largely perceived to be disadvantaging the people of Puntland. Some interviewee termed the concession a rip-off.

Currently the economy is donor-dependent, as most of the government programs are funded by donors. Hence, proposition of a sound economic policy by a candidate will likely influence the candidate's ascension to the presidency.

Democratization

According to (Shire, 2017) the challenges to the democratization process in Puntland and the factors that have hindered transition to democracy are: absence of demarcated boundary, lack of voter registration and lack of consultation with clan elders.

Currently clan elders play a pivotal role in the political system as they select members of the parliament, who in turn elect the president. However, the political environment is not conducive to free and fair elections as the system is corrupt considering that presidential candidates greatly influence the selection of MPs.

This has fueled public distrust of the electoral system and seeded doubts as to the fairness of the presidential election. Interviewees reckon that the primary consideration for choosing the president will be the willingness of a candidate to transition the state into one man one vote and change the clan system into democratic system.

Perceptions of the Electoral Process in Puntland

Weak electoral system that is vulnerable to manipulation

According to politicians and members of the civil society groups interviewed, the clan-based system originated and preserved by clan elders (Isim) and sub clan elders (Nabaddoon) is no longer trusted by the common citizens who feel that it is unfair.

The elders are believed to be compromised - money is the overriding qualification and major consideration for selection of members of parliament. Public interest is not considered in the political process – the decision to select MPs or elect the president is not determined in the best interest of the people as public interest is not considered. Consequently, the clan elders have lost respect and the people have lost confidence in the electoral system as the system is deemed corrupt, unjust, and unethical.

Lack of public participation and the entrenched interests are considered the leading impediments to the democratic process. Therefore, the influence of the clan in the political dispensation and the elusiveness of democratic elections, both believed to be perpetuated by clan elders and the political elite, have greatly undermined the people's confidence in the upcoming presidential election ("2015_06_01_Puntlands_Political_Transformation.pdf;").

Lack of dispute resolution mechanisms

Currently Puntland lacks a constitutional court to arbitrate and resolve disputes arising from the selection process – this means disgruntled persons have no means to seek a remedy when needed. As a stopgap measure provided for by the constitution through electoral procedures addendums, the president nominates a temporary, seven-member vetting committee to vet and confirm candidates selected by clan elders. However, the vetting committee is a controversial body that has the potential to cause discord in the State, since it is perceived to be manipulated by the incumbent president. Contrary to norms, the vetting committee for the forthcoming elections was yet to be named as at the time of conducting the study.

The committee is viewed as non-transparent, non-inclusive and thus not trusted. The committee is viewed as a tool for trickery in the political process where incumbent presidential candidates duplicitously challenge persons selected for the position of MPs by their clan leaders, who they view as hostile. Generally, the clan elders are opposed to the composition of the committee since they are not consulted or engaged in the process.

Though it is usually biased and naturally tends to favor the incumbent president, the vetting committee was intended to neutralize elders from single handedly appointing a candidate without consultations with sub-clan community members.

The Qualities of the Preferred President

Local person

The clan elders and members of civil society groups interviewed asserted that the people of Puntland want their president to be a local person, not a diaspora person. They said the president should have experienced the problems in Puntland and fully understand the history and challenges Puntland is facing. In Puntland the diaspora is regarded as opportunistic people who reap where they have not sown.

Solid support for Federalism

The people of Puntland are strong proponents of federalism. Key to strong affinity for federalism is the fear of a centralized government dominated by a few clans (Musau, 2013). Puntland's vision for a federal approach to governance is steadfast. Interviewees asserted, the president to be elected should be committed to federalism – he should support federalism with delineated powers and should work towards demarcating the unclear functions between Mogadishu and the federal member states.

The people of Puntland want the status of Mogadishu as the capital of the country defined, regional state borders established, and the 4.5 system discarded so as to transition to democracy. Currently the people of Puntland perceive federalism as a top down prescription – prescribed by the Mogadishu based Federal Government (FGS). According to politicians and clan elders interviewed, the federalism process advocated or fronted by the FGS is deceptive and intended to undermine the regional states.

The 4.5 system currently used is a biased system with inherent flaws intended to disadvantage the people of Puntland. Further, they reckon that Villa Somalia cannot be trusted with the federal process as it is a puppet system, manipulated by foreign and tribal interest.

Leadership and Public Service Experience

Leadership and experience in public service is also a primary consideration when electing the president, according to interviewees. A candidate, who has extensive experience in public service and has held leadership position in the past in Puntland, with a clean track record and not perceived to be corrupt, is the leader desired in Puntland.

Challenges to Popular Elections in Puntland

Lack of goodwill from the political leadership

The charter that formed the Puntland State envisaged a transition from the clan-based system to a democratic system in three years. However, the state was plunged into a vicious political conundrum by leadership complexities and shenanigans, which made the transition clause in the charter a pipedream. According to clan elders, civil society group members and politicians interviewed, the biggest impediment to transition to democracy is the lack of political will by the government, especially the president.

Additionally, the interviewees noted that there is a serious lack of accountability by the Puntland government. Reforming the political and governance systems in Puntland still largely depends on the whims of the incumbent president, who always tends to want to maintain power and avoid accountability, by stonewalling democratization processes.

Clan elders who resist to cede power

Though clan elders are a source of stability as they have provided a fragile sense of order in the formative years of the state, there is massive discontent with how they select candidates for parliament. According to politicians and members of the civil society interviewed, clan elders have advertently failed to pressure the government to invest in a credible democratic electoral system.

The power to select MPs, bestowed upon clan elders, is a hindrance to the democratization process as they do not want to cede the power to select MPs.

The clan elders have become an ancillary of the clan-based election process. Politicians and members of the civil society interviewed noted that the clan elders are in a lucrative political business – where they sell positions of leadership to the highest bidder.

The current system gives clan elders disproportionate power over any other actor in the political system. It is because of this entrenched interest that the clan elders will not pressure the political leadership to reform the governance system.

Weak Civil Society Organizations

The civil society, including the media, in Puntland is weak, lacks vision and the capacity to play a leading role in reforming the political processes. They see issues through a clan prism and are lackeys of the ruling elite.

The civil society is a compromised voice. It cannot independently initiate political discourse that can lead to reforms in the political process. Politicians argue that the civil society in Puntland is beholden to the powers that be and captive to their donors, who are inclined to a conformist agenda.



ABOUT DATA GRID SOMALIA

Data Grid Somalia (DG) is an independent commercial research firm that aims at enhancing economic, political and social atmosphere in Somalia by providing cutting-edge data that is reliable, accurate and accessible.

One of the key areas of economic challenges and good governance in Somalia is lack of data to compete in business and to govern Somalia in general. Data Grid is to narrow this gap and create national economic, political and social data grid.

VISION

“To establish a state-of-the-art data bank that allows Somalia to progress and investors to rely on”

MISSION

“To provide sufficient, reliable and cost-effective data that can be used to enhance Somalia’s economic, political and social progress and add value for our client’s input”

OBJECTIVES

To maintain the highest threshold of professional conduct and intellectual standards in order to deliver objective, reliable and accurate research outcomes/data to our distinguished clients.

CORE VALUES

- Integrity
- Independence
- Ethical
- Quality

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Data Grid intends to undertake a comprehensive opinion poll for the Puntland presidential election, in the last week of December 2018.

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