



The ISIR Digest

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Politics and Security Bulletin

*Geopolitical Crisis and the Upcoming
Somaliland Presidential Elections:
Key Actors, Interests, and Potential
Scenarios*

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The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR)

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The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR) is an independent, nonpartisan organization that uses research to inform its policy advocacy work.

It undertakes impartial policy research, training and analysis to organizations and decision-makers in the horn of African region who are working toward innovative thinking to stimulate formulation of sound public policies leading to positive outcomes in the fields of peace & security, good governance, safeguarding human rights and democracy.

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Introduction

Somaliland's transition from indirect to direct elections in 2002 represented a notable example of democratization in a region typically characterised by despotic and authoritarian governance systems. This transition, along with the subsequent successful series of elections held over the two and a half decades that followed, made Somaliland a case study in democratization in the Horn of Africa region. Both internal and external factors ostensibly played a role in Somaliland's burgeoning democratization process.

Internally, the history of democratic practices in post-1991 Somaliland can be traced back to the period during the military struggle waged by the Somali National Movement (SNM) against Somalia's military dictator, President Siad Barre, from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. Unlike other Somali armed movements during this period, the SNM saw five different leaders transfer the chairmanship during its decade-long armed struggle.

A second important factor that contributed to Somaliland's transition to direct elections was the adoption of a bottom-up and more inclusive peacebuilding process, which extended into the state-building period. Somaliland has a history of repeatedly extending office terms due to elections not taking place on schedule, leading to election related disputes. However, it also boasts a unique track record of resolving election-related disputes

using internal instruments of conflict resolution. During election-related disputes in Somaliland, various stakeholders like politicians, the election management body, and political parties, respected local conflict resolution efforts. These efforts were often initiated by non-state actors such as businesspeople and elders. This stemmed from a political culture that valued reconciliation and compromise for the common good of the people of Somaliland.

A third factor that contributed to Somaliland's transition to direct elections was the absence of external influence. Somaliland's democratization was primarily locally driven. Initially, no foreign governments or external actors were involved or showed interest in the Somaliland elections. The involvement of international actors in Somaliland's democratization process began in 2005, during the third election, when western

donors recognised the emerging democracy in the Horn of Africa. Since then, Western donors have been primary external actors interested in the Somaliland elections, mainly providing the support needed in upholding integrity during the electoral process, while also providing partial funding to the government and occasionally mediating election-related disputes.

Since 2016, Somaliland's leadership has been increasingly assertive in seeking international attention, leveraging its strategic location along the Red Sea and proximity to key international trade routes such as the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a critical shipping passage linking the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden. In 2016, DP World, the UAE's leading global port operator, secured a 30-year concession for the port of Berbera. While this marked a significant achievement and geopolitical spotlighting for Somaliland, some analysts cautioned the potential consequences of involvement by international investors and actors with both economic and political interests into Somaliland's internal politics. There were concerns that such involvement could lead to power imbalances among local actors and shift accountability away from internal actors to external ones.

After successfully holding elections that saw incumbent presidents lose to new aspirants, Somaliland is gearing up for its 4th presidential elections, scheduled for November 13, 2024. The upcoming elections differ from elections held in the past in various ways. First, the country has experienced a series of local and regional conflicts such as the Lasanod conflict in the east, as well as prolonged and violent election-related disputes that have caused massive polarization. In addition, the Somaliland - Ethiopia Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) evidently led to geopolitical tensions. In this ISIR Digest, we analyze what these developments could mean for the upcoming election period. Our analysis will focus on identifying key actors and their interests, as well as potential impacts of these local and geopolitical tensions on the 2024 elections.

Background

Since 1991, Somaliland's political and traditional elders have successfully restored law and order, demobilized militias, and actively pursued national reconciliation and reconstruction efforts. Acknowledging the synergy of these actors, Somaliland pioneered the formalization of the role of traditional elders in the Horn of Africa region, through the establishment of the *Guurti* house (the House of Elders). Furthermore, values such as reconciliation, consensus-building, inclusivity, and compromise have been deeply ingrained and cherished, shaping a unique political culture that sets Somaliland apart from the rest of Somalia. This political culture emerged as a result of the recognition of the importance of symmetry and balance in the distribution of power and resources. While there were instances of people in power trying to assert dominance, the general public's resistance promoted negotiations that ultimately led to win-win solutions.

Somaliland's declaration of independence from Somalia in 1991 and its subsequent efforts in peacebuilding and state-building coincided with a period of relative political stability in the Horn of Africa (HoA). Historically, the HoA region has been synonymous with geopolitical crises, instabilities, and proxy wars; however, starting from the 1990s, there was a shift towards relative political stability. This shift was influenced by the end of the Cold War, the collapse of Somalia's central government, and Ethiopia's regional hegemony which, together with neighboring Djibouti, had vested interests in Somaliland's stability, both for their security and because Somaliland has not posed political or

economic competition. Furthermore, the global order has remained predominantly Western-dominated, with other potential competitors showing limited economic or political interest in a region perceived to be plagued by terrorism and piracy.

In the past decade, the relative political stability in the Horn of Africa region has been intermittently disrupted by a series of local, regional, and international events. Since 2016, Somaliland's political culture has shifted from a focus on peacebuilding and inclusivity to a more assertive and exclusionary political culture (Tahir 2022). In 2016, Somaliland and the Emirates-based DP World's conglomerate signed a

30-year concession agreement for a \$400 million investment in the Berbera port and corridor, with Ethiopia owning a 19% stake. This agreement later led to tensions involving Somalia's federal government, Somaliland, and the UAE, with Somalia's legislative bodies such as the federal parliament and senate house also being involved.

Another significant event was the 2020 agreement between the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the Republic of Somaliland, in which the two parties recognized each other's sovereignty and exchanged representative offices. This agreement was never publicly disclosed or formally approved by the respective parliaments. The People's Republic of China has since expressed concerns and dispatched a delegation to Hargeisa to exert pressure on these newly established relations. However, this did not stop Taiwan from providing direct support to Somaliland's National Electoral Commission (NEC), specifically during the 2021 parliamentary and local council elections.

Somaliland leaders also became more assertive in their local governance, arguably emboldened by international engagements. Political leaders began to believe that the state was strong enough to use its institutions and instruments of force and power over its territories, marking the end of the consensus-building period. They could impose their will on other local clans and political actors. A notable example is the prolonged election-related disputes where, for the first time, the government dismissed the initial efforts at peacebuilding by traditional elders and business leaders, terming these efforts unsuitable for state-building. The President emphasized that state institutions should address the conflict instead. Additionally, the government handled election-related disputes heavy-handedly, resulting in the death of demonstrators. In 2023, the Lasanod conflict erupted, and was exacerbated by Somaliland political leaders' shift from consensus-building to their reliance on instruments of state powers.

Local and External Actors and their Influence on Previous Presidential Elections

Over the years, Somaliland's democracy has retrogressed to a clan-based system. The political alliance between two major clans during the 2010 and 2017 presidential elections successfully influenced the outcomes, fostering the belief that voting results were predictable based on clan alliances. Additionally, over the past 14 years, Somaliland's budget increased from \$61 million¹ to \$400 million, making the public sector more attractive and rewarding through contracts, jobs, and even corruption. The combination of these political and economic factors has introduced a new political economy, where economic and political interests have increased, ushering in a new political-economy reality in Somaliland.

The involvement of regional actors in Somaliland has been relatively restrained. Ethiopia has supported Somaliland's security, while Djibouti has co-opted Somaliland's elite, positioning itself as a friend to Somaliland, except during President Egal's administration (1998-2002). In

the previous two presidential elections, Djibouti's interests appeared to align with the Kulmiye party candidates. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) emerged as a new actor in the 2017 elections after securing a 30-year concession agreement in 2016.

Since 2005, the International Community (IC)—comprising Western diplomats and donors—has provided technical, financial, and mediation support to Somaliland elections. The financial support from the IC has been particularly helpful in enhancing the integrity of the electoral processes, especially in procuring ballot papers and equipment. Their technical support has also bolstered trust in the Somaliland National Electoral Commission (NEC). Generally, the IC's interests have focused less on who wins the elections and more on advancing the democratization process. Occasionally, they have taken a more assertive stance, conditioning their support on the electoral process being inclusive and consensus-based, rather than adopting an autocratic approach.

¹ http://www.somalilandlaw.com/Commentary_2010_Budget.pdf

Emerging Local and External Actors and Their Potential Impact on the Upcoming Presidential Elections

After the 2017 presidential elections, Somaliland experienced increasingly exclusionary politics which adopted less consensus-driven and more assertive approaches. This shift, coupled with economic grievances arising from the new political economy, catalyzed unprecedented levels of social and political polarization. In response to the government's refusal to disband the NEC in 2018, the opposition organized protests in Hargeisa, Burao, and Erigavo. Among their list of complaints included accusations of mismanagement of the 2017 presidential election by the NEC, the unconstitutional two-year extension of the presidential office term in 2022, the delay in registration of new political associations, and the dispute over the licenses of the three current political parties. The government deployed police units, including the elite Rapid Response Unit (RRU), to suppress the protests, resulting in loss of lives. This infuriated and emboldened the Ga'an Libax Mountain militias who then exerted military pressure on the government to change its inflexible stance. The government's assertive approaches and heavy-

handed protest management also led to a major conflict in mid-2023 in Lasanod between the Somaliland National Army and local militias allied to clan militias from the neighboring Puntland administration. To resist the government's increasingly assertive and non-accommodating approaches regarding political association registration, political party licenses, and the presidential office term extension, local militias positioned themselves in the Ga'an Libax mountains. In response, the government deployed the elite RRU unit, eventually leading to a confrontation between the local militias and the RRU, resulting in the loss of an unknown number of RRU officers.

In August 2023, the Somaliland National army experienced significant setbacks after more than eight months of an armed standoff with the SSC-Khatumo. This setback prompted clan militias from clans bordering the Dhulbahante clan to mobilize armed groups referred to by the government as "civilian defense forces" [Difaaca Madaniga ah]. Meanwhile, the Somaliland government recruited over 3,000

new army officials in an effort to wage a counter-offensive to reclaim lost ground.

The upcoming November 13 presidential election will be held at a time when the country is experiencing massive polarization following armed conflicts involving the national army, the police, and clan militias. These conflicts have eroded trust in the national security institutions, particularly the Rapid Response Unit (RRU) and the National Army, which were previously respected and trusted by civilians. In addition, these institutions have not been immune to the massive polarization, and the risk of division within the

Sea deal."² and 'sovereignty breach'.³ The MoU also soured Somaliland-Djibouti relations.⁴

In the next section, the digest explores various potential impacts of local, regional, and international dynamics on the upcoming presidential elections. It examines the interests of key regional and international actors, assesses their strengths, and explores the likely outcomes.

security forces cannot be ruled out.

The most geopolitically seismic development was the Memorandum of Understanding between Somaliland and Ethiopia in January 2024, in which Somaliland agreed to grant Ethiopia access to the Red Sea in exchange for formal recognition. This unexpected move surprised regional and international diplomatic actors, sparking a series of geopolitical shake ups. The Federal Government of Somalia approached Egypt and Turkey for support to confront what they perceived as "Ethiopia's attempt to annex territory with the Somaliland

2 <https://apnews.com/article/somalia-somaliland-ethiopia-coast-deal-cf55ea156e44370253c591864b62c264>

3 <https://diplomat.so/articles/457/Somali-President-Accuses-Ethiopia-of-Sovereignty-Breach-in-Joint-Press-Conference-with-Egyptian-Counterpart>

4 <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2024/01/24/ethiopian-mou-sours-djibouti-somaliland-relations,110151473-art>

Potential influence of internal and external actors in the upcoming presidential elections

The upcoming presidential election in Somaliland is set against a backdrop of massive local polarization and political tensions. Unlike the previous three Presidential elections (2002, 2010, and 2017), numerous regional and international actors may now show a keen strategic interest in the election. For instance, Ethiopia has been a close ally of Somaliland since the 1990s, valuing Somaliland's contribution to its national security through border protection. Consequently, Ethiopia has supported Somaliland by providing security training to its national army while maintaining neutrality in local politics. However, it remains unclear whether and how the Somaliland - Ethiopia MoU might affect the upcoming elections, with Ethiopia reportedly showing interest in supporting Somaliland's resolve to manage the upcoming elections as a strategic ally.

Djibouti has long been a close ally of Somaliland and has co-opted Somaliland's elite by using Djiboutian businessmen and providing travel documents to Somaliland's elite. In previous presidential elections, Djiboutian businessmen have been

known to support the ruling party candidate. Currently Djibouti has not yet distanced itself from these businessmen, which can be interpreted as Djibouti aligning its interests with the Kulmiye candidate—the incumbent President. However, the relationship between Djibouti and the incumbent president of Somaliland has soured following the MoU between Somaliland and Ethiopia.⁵ Djibouti's current position in the upcoming election remains unclear, including whether Djiboutian businessmen will continue to financially support the incumbent president. Furthermore, it is uncertain if the diplomatic relations between the two leaders will improve over the next five months.

Outside the region, the UAE stands as the largest investor in Somaliland. The UAE has undertaken several long-term projects in Somaliland and is keen to ensure their continuation. Notably, Abu Dhabi has invested in DP World's development of the Berbera port. Additionally, it has funded the Hargeisa-Wajale corridor to target Ethiopian markets. Given the UAE's

⁵ <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2024/01/24/ethiopian-mou-sours-djibouti-somaliland-relations,110151473-art>

close ties with both Ethiopia and Somaliland, it is plausible that its interest in the upcoming elections is centered on maintaining peace and stability in Somaliland. This is especially significant after the recent MOU, where the UAE has adopted an impartial stance compared to most other Arab League members. It also appears that the UAE is intent on challenging the Turkey-Somalia agreement.

Taiwan has emerged as a key international partner of Somaliland. However, from the outset, the opposition has questioned Taiwan's neutrality, likely due to the lack of transparency surrounding the Taiwan-Somaliland agreement. In 2021, Taiwan supported Somaliland's iris biometric voter verification system (IBVVS) with 2,500 sets of equipment valued at \$2 million USD.⁶ The Somaliland National Electoral Commission now insists on introducing IBVVS in the upcoming elections, although opposition parties and political associations are against it. Additionally, it is believed that Taiwan will provide budget support for Somaliland's upcoming presidential elections.

Western countries have historically supported democratization in Somali-

land and have maintained neutrality in its local politics. However, their influence in Somaliland over the past few years has been ineffective. This could be partially explained by the emerging multipolar world and USA's disengagement. Unlike in previous elections, Western efforts—whether through technical support or mediation -- may not be as impactful, and local and regional actors may be able to pursue their interests unimpeded by Western influence. Additionally, with the diminishing presence of Western actors, regional and emerging powers are likely to seize the opportunity to advance their interests in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea region through the Somaliland elections. The dwindling influence of the Western actors may also impact election integrity as their role and funds have been important in building confidence in the process of procurement of the ballot papers.

⁶ https://www.roc-taiwan.org/smd_en/post/327.html

Policy Recommendations

These policy recommendations are directed to the Government of Somaliland and election stakeholders, including international partners and regional actors. The aim is to support Somaliland in managing the upcoming elections and fostering a stable, democratic environment conducive to long-term peace and development amid a complex geopolitical landscape.

These strategic recommendations are based on enhancing political stability and fostering democratic practices. They also provide possible solutions for international diplomacy in light of Somaliland's current and most recent geographic and political dilemmas.

- **Strengthen Electoral Integrity and Transparency:** Election stakeholders should agree on implementing stringent measures to ensure transparency and integrity of the electoral process. This includes the adoption of international electoral monitoring standards. The Somaliland National Electoral Commission has to enhance its independence and trustworthiness among all the election stakeholders. The role of Western donors has been historically important for election integrity.
- **Strengthen Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Develop and implement effective conflict resolution mechanisms to address internal disputes and prevent them from escalating into violence. This should include support for local peacebuilding initiatives and the establishment of a mediation framework that involves respected local and international figures.
- **Promote Inclusive Political Processes:** Encourage and facilitate inclusive dialogue among all political factions and clan representatives to prevent electoral violence and ensure broader consensus in governance. The international community has to support initiatives that promote political participation across diverse groups and mitigate the influence of clan-based politics.
- **Enhance Security Sector Governance:** Strengthen governance and oversight of

the security sector to ensure that it remains neutral during electoral processes and is capable of protecting citizens without engaging in political conflicts.

- **Address Security Risks through International Cooperation:** Somaliland should pursue broader international cooperation to address security risks that may arise from local and regional tensions. This involves working with international partners to mediate and resolve local and regional tensions that could impact Somaliland.
- **Cultivate Strategic Alliances:** Somaliland should seek alliances that can provide positive political and economic benefits. This includes strengthening ties with countries that have a vested interest in Somaliland's stability and democratic processes while balancing these relationships to avoid being drawn into geopolitical rivalry.
- **International partners should ensure their support is not perceived as favouring one party:** Somaliland's international partners must consider local tensions when supporting the elections. Their financial or technical assistance should not be perceived as bolstering one party over others.

About The ISIR Digest

The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR) produces a bi-monthly newsletter titled "ISIR Digest." This publication focuses on offering in-depth analysis and perspective on the latest political and security developments in the Horn of Africa region. It is designed to serve a range of stakeholders in the peace and security sectors, including diplomatic missions, development partners, and policy and research institutions.

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