ISIR
INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC INSIGHTS AND RESEARCH

SOMALILAND ELECTION STAKEHOLDERS' USE OF DIGITAL & SOCIAL MEDIA

Policy Brief | November 2024

ISIR INSTITUTE

Off Airport Road, Masallaha Hargeisa

SOMALILAND

Phone: +252 63 6226667

www.isirinstitute.com | info@isirinsitute.org |

𝕏 @ISIRInstitute   f @ISIRinsitute   in @ISIRinsitute   ⊙ @isirinsitute

The Institute for Strategic Insights and Research (ISIR)

ISIR INSTITUTE

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.

Table of Contents

SOMALILAND ELECTION STAKEHOLDERS' USE OF DIGITAL & SOCIAL MEDIA

November 2024

Critical Takeaways

- Digital and social media platforms are now essential in political communication, facilitating real-time information sharing, voter mobilization, and direct engagement between candidates and the public. However, they also pose challenges. As Somaliland's 2024 elections approach, it is critical to find a balanced approach that maximizes the benefits of social media while addressing its risks, to maintain a fair and peaceful election process.

- Social media plays a double-edged role in Somaliland's elections. On the positive side, it enhances political participation and accountability, allowing voters, especially the youth, to engage directly with political leaders. On the downside, the unregulated use of social media fosters misinformation, clannism, and polarization, posing risks to peace and democratic integrity during elections.

- To mitigate these negative impacts, improving digital literacy among voters through educational campaigns and using verified social media accounts for political transparency are key. Long-term measures include fostering partnerships between social media platforms and local institutions to combat misinformation and hate speech, and establishing a real-time, accessible platform for tracking election results to boost public trust and engagement in the democratic process.

Abstract

In the past decade, digital and social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formally known as Twitter), Youtube, and recently TikTok, have become essential tools for Somaliland's elections, playing an increasingly significant role in the dissemination of political communication, civic engagement, and general campaigning. This policy brief aims to determine how various election stakeholders utilize digital and social media during Somaliland's electioneering period and to explore the potential impacts of these platforms on peace and social cohesion. The study explores how political parties, media outlets, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the public use media tools to enhance the reach of their campaign messages, disseminate information, and mobilize voters. Given these platforms' rapid growth in reach and influence, social media usage shapes electoral dynamics in Somaliland and presents unique challenges and opportunities during the electioneering period and further in the country's democratization process.

This policy brief is based on qualitative methods, including key informant interviews and thematic analysis of social media content centered on selected keywords. The study evaluates the platforms' dual roles in Somaliland's electoral period; providing strategic insights for balancing the benefits and risks while maintaining electoral integrity. The key informants were drawn from various election stakeholder groups, including representatives from political parties, CSOs, journalists, and voters. A semi-structured interview guide was used during the interviews, allowing flexibility and encouraging in-depth responses. The interview questions were themed around the stakeholders' perceived role of digital and social media in the election, their own digital and social media habits, their observations regarding the challenges arising from the use of these platforms, and the corresponding recommendations for addressing these challenges.

Keywords: Digital and Social Media Engagement, Election Stakeholders, Digital campaigning, Information dissemination, etc.
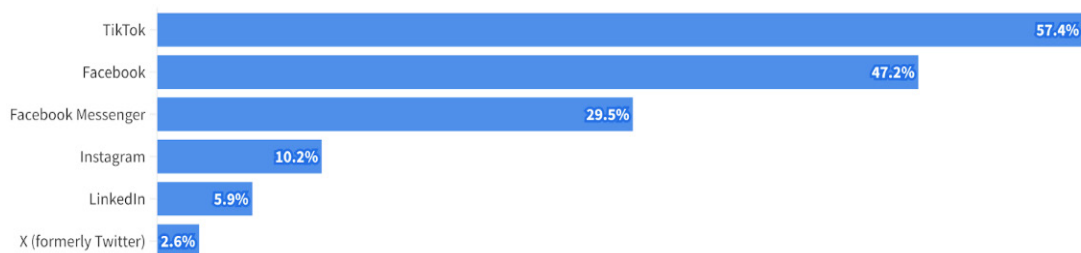
Introduction

Social media has profoundly reshaped the landscape of Somaliland elections, transforming how political campaigns are conducted and how voters engage with candidates and issues. This study found that election-related discussions, content, and narratives are primarily posted and amplified on X, TikTok, and Facebook. These platforms have become essential tools for political communication in Somaliland, allowing candidates to interact directly with the public and bypass traditional media gatekeepers. These digital networks facilitate real-time dissemination of information, mobilization of voters, and creation of narratives that influence offline and grassroots narratives. However, the increasing penetration of social media has also raised concerns about the spread of misinformation, not to mention political polarization which increases during elections, especially presidential elections. By amplifying both accurate and inaccurate content/fake news at unprecedented speed, social media has the potential to influence online and offline public opinion. Consequently, understanding social media's dual role as both an empowering tool and a destabilizing force is crucial for assessing its impact on electoral processes, especially now that Somaliland is about to hold Presidential and Party elections.

Somaliland has made significant strides in building democratic institutions over the past two decades, and elections have played a pivotal role in maintaining relative peace and stability. However, the growing influence of digital and social media in political processes presents new challenges, as seen in the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for 13 November 2024. The penetration of smart mobile phones, internet access, and social media platforms in Somaliland (as shown in the graph below) have opened new avenues for political actors to communicate with voters, particularly the youth. However, the use of social media platforms by election stakeholders is largely unregulated, except for the social media provisions that have, for the first time, been included in the political parties and media code of conducts. As Somaliland prepares for its upcoming elections, addressing the adverse impacts of digital and social media on the electoral process and peacebuilding efforts is critical.

SOCIAL MEDIA STATISTICS IN SOMALI REGION

Percentage of social media users in the Somali region as a %age of on internet users

Platform	Percentage
TikTok	57.4%
Facebook	47.2%
Facebook Messenger	29.5%
Instagram	10.2%
LinkedIn	5.9%
X (formerly Twitter)	2.6%

Source: DataReportal

Social media statistics for Somali regions (Source: DataReportal)

The impact of social media in Somali--land is shaped by the distinct demographics and socio-cultural characteristics of its users. With a predominantly young population in Somaliland—61% under 20 and 74% under 30[1]— there's heightened engagement with digital platforms, particularly among the youth, who adapt quickly to technology.

One respondent indicated that social media was their primary source of information, "My primary source of information is social media, especially Facebook because it is more accessible and is constantly updated."[2] However, low literacy rates (31% among adults)[3] complicate this dynamic, as many struggle to critically engage with text-based posts and often rely on videos on platforms like TikTok and Facebook.

This literacy gap fuels misinformation, as individuals may take unverified posts or rumors at face value, particularly in an election context where tensions run high. Political parties, activists, and even civil society groups may inadvertently contribute to this problem by sharing unverified or complex content without adapting it to the audience's literacy levels. To safeguard electoral integrity and stability, Somaliland must carefully manage the impact of digital and social media on public perception and social unity during this critical period.

Since 2000, the role of media in Somaliland's elections has evolved significantly, reflecting the region's political landscape and its efforts to

build a stable democratic process. In the early 2000s, traditional media outlets—predominantly print media, TVs, and a single state radio,—were the primary sources of information; these platforms generally promoted government narratives, with limited alternative political perspectives.

However, as Somaliland's political environment gradually opened up, the media landscape began to diversify. By the mid-2000s, the introduction of private media outlets played a pivotal role in shaping electoral discourse, facilitating a more pluralistic media environment. The mid-2010s saw the rise of digital media and social networks, further transforming the spread and coverage of electoral discourse in Somaliland. The rise of webpages, specifically, has become an important complement to social media platforms because they serve as a centralized, more permanent, and consistent point of reference for audiences seeking in-depth information. Today, "the state-run media don't get large audiences because they seem to only focus on messages about peace and sometimes political issues…Social media have a wider range of audience because they focus on different issues, mostly community issues," said a journalist.[4]

Consequently, political actors have become increasingly reliant on social media to reach voters directly through the publication of campaign messages, live-streaming rallies, and using targeted advertisements.

Narratives within Somaliland's elections have also evolved. The rise of social media platforms has amplified local

---

1 https://somalia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/slhds2020_report_2020_signed_copy.pdf
2 Member of the Public, Hargeisa, Interview October 24, 2024
3 https://www.haliaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Somaliland-Education-Fact-Sheet.pdf
4 Journalist, Hargeisa, Interview October 23, 2024

voices and become powerful tools for storytelling, giving young Somalilanders a space to share perspectives that were previously missing from mainstream media. This shift has democratized information, allowing for grassroots reporting on social issues, politics, and culture. Unlike traditional media which operate within the contexts of policies, leadership, and editorial teams, the rise of social media has allowed for decentralized content creation. Each individual now has the power to share their opinions and stories without the oversight of traditional gatekeepers, leading to both greater freedom of expression and challenges in ensuring accuracy and accountability. This weakens accountability, and, as one journalist opined, "declines social values because social media is personal and is not institutionalized, which makes it difficult to hold users accountable, while traditional media channels are institutions and it is easy to reach them and hold them accountable."[5]

---

5 Journalist, Hargeisa, Interview October 23, 2024

Social Media; A Double-Edged Sword

Somaliland's political discourse has traditionally been shaped by a limited number of media outlets. However, according to one representative from the CSO sector, the rise of social media platforms has disrupted this traditional media landscape, "fostering greater political participation among citizens, encouraging them to engage in discussions about the electoral process, and aiding the mobilization of electoral activities."[6] Although this rise has fostered a more open and vibrant political discourse, it amplifies misinformation and the spread of fake news and has led to increased polarization.

Increased Accountability

One of the primary impacts of social media access in Somaliland has been the enhancement of political participation. Through platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and X, urban citizens now engage in discussions on political issues, express opinions, and mobilize support for various causes. This shift is particularly important in a region where face-to-face political engagement can be challenging, as expressed by a member of the public, "Social media gives me direct access to political figures in some range because most of them have social media channels."[7] Furthermore, social media enables Somaliland's diaspora to maintain a connection with domestic politics, often bringing broader perspectives to local events. This enhanced level of engagement reshapes Somaliland's political culture, creating a populace that is increasingly informed, involved, and vocal about their demands for effective governance and political reform. Social media's role in championing accountability among Somaliland's leaders is another profound change. In the past, political leaders could operate with limited public scrutiny, relying on a media landscape that was either state-run or aligned with powerful individuals to communicate information skewed in their favor. Today, social media serves as a digital watchdog, where citizens and activists exercise citizen journalism by quickly sharing information about government actions, highlighting injustices, and exposing instances of corruption and poor governance. Citizens within the country and in the diaspora hold discussions on events in Somaliland on social media, highlighting perspectives that were absent before the rise of social media. This is especially crucial in Somaliland's political context, where institutional mechanisms for transparency and accountability are still developing. Social media has thereby emerged as a tool for public oversight, democratizing the power to question authority and demand better governance.

Songs as accountability

In the forthcoming elections, political songs have featured greatly during the campaign period, with music becoming a crucial tool for shaping

---

6 Civil Society Member, Hargeisa, Interview October 24, 2024

7 Member of the Public, Hargeisa, Interview October 24, 2024

ISIR

political narratives. Throughout history, songs have been used as a tool for political expression, and in the context of elections, musicians craft songs that highlight the achievements, or sometimes even the failure of political candidates to keep them accountable. As a short-form video platform that allows users to create and share bite-sized and visually engaging content, TikTok became ideal for catchy political songs. This view was shared by a political party representative, who opined that the 2024 election is different. "In earlier elections, we did not have TikTok, and even Facebook was not popular; but now we can reach more voters through TikTok."[8] With the assistance of these platforms, these songs gain popularity in a very short time and serve as campaign anthems that are played at rallies, circulated on social media, and broadcasted through various media outlets. Recently, individual Somali musicians as well as music bands, the most famous one being Xidigaha Geeska (Horn Stars), have been creating songs that serve as a form of social commentary. These songs bring attention to issues that might be overlooked in the mainstream political debate and help create a political environment where voters are encouraged to think critically about the promises and policies of political candidates.

8 Political Party representative, Hargeisa, Inter-
   view October 24, 2024

Clannism, Misinformation, and Polarization

In the 2024 election period, political parties and associations have demonstrated the transformative use of social media, marking a clear shift from when political campaigns were confined to rallies, print media, TV, and radio. Platforms such as TikTok and Facebook, the two most used social media platforms by Somalis, have become central tools for political engagement, reshaping campaign strategies in ways that mirror and adapt to global trends, but within the unique political context of Somaliland. Unlike previous elections, it has now become the norm for political parties to form 'influencer partnerships' and increasingly turn to social media influencers, particularly TikTokers, to enhance their outreach and engagement ahead of the November elections. Influencers with large audiences, seen as relatable and trustworthy by their followers, often help shape political opinions and encourage voter participation by endorsing candidates or engaging in political discussions on the platforms. This strategy aims to leverage the massive popularity of social media platforms, where influencers promote political agendas through targeted ads and hashtags in a more relatable and entertaining manner. By recruiting these influencers, parties hope to increase visibility, drive voter engagement, and ultimately improve their chances of electoral success.

Increase in clannism

The political parties' partnership with social media influencers —which are not institutionalized media houses — contributes to clan-based polarization. Since these TikTokers independently create content, they often invoke past clan conflicts to sway voters toward their affiliated political groups. It has become a norm for TikTokers to publicly express their support, or withdrawal from their 'influencer partnerships' with parties, citing the need to honor their allegiance to their clans' decisions. As one interviewee posited, "Somaliland's political structure is based on the traditional clan system, and this does not support the democratic governance of elections. I have concerns about that."[9] Another interviewee also expressed concerns over the increasing clan-allegiances during elections, noting that "enhancing the clan system is displacing the democratic system in the political parties."[10] In other words, the influence of clan elders has played a significant role in this election, particularly in shaping the perspectives of young social media influencers. As the role of clan leaders becomes more prominent, the democratic system is at greater risk, as these power structures are not easily compatible. Therefore, although there has been a broader shift towards digital activism and youth involvement in Somaliland's election campaigns, widening clan-based campaigns and

9 Electoral Commission member, Hargeisa, Interview October 31, 2024
10 Member of the public, Hargeisa, Interview October 24, 2024

ISIR

politics still pose a significant concern, especially in the upcoming 2024 elections where the risks associated with clan-based politics are becoming more pronounced.

Mis/disinformation & impersonation

Another growing concern that has been posing significant risks to the integrity of the electoral process is the spread of "fake" information. Misinformation[11], disinformation[12], and impersonation[13] have all been pervasive challenges in Somaliland's elections, making it harder for voters to access accurate information and make informed choices.

Misinformation, particularly, can often emerge when language is misunderstood or misinterpreted as many users rely on social media for immediate updates. One interviewee expressed that "traditional media is more trustworthy for me because it has rules and regulations and operates as a tangible industry where information is cross-checked by several people."[14] However, due to the poor digital literacy in some demographics, it becomes challenging for voters to discern fact from fiction.

When asked about the challenges faced in verifying election-related information on social media platforms, a representative from the CSO community mentioned that it is often "the reluctance of the government institu-

11 Spread of misleading information unintentionally
12 Deliberately fabricated information to manipulate
13 The act of purposefully pretending to be someone else
14 Member of the Public, Hargeisa, Interview October 24, 2024

tions and officials to provide accurate information, especially when the information is against them or the event, which leads the opposition parties to raise complaints regarding power abuse, suppression of free speech, and human rights violations."[15] The lack of accountability and accurate collateral resources to verify the information on social media poses a challenge. In Somaliland's electoral environment, where clan affiliations can strongly influence voter loyalty, targeted disinformation campaigns can create false narratives about a candidate's stance or track record, influencing key voter groups. For instance, if a candidate is portrayed as being unsupportive of policies that benefit a certain clan, even if it's untrue, this narrative could lead members of that clan to lose trust in the candidate. This divisive tactic can also undermine the perceived legitimacy of the electoral process, especially when widely shared and echoed by influential voices online.

Codes of conduct during the elections

Given the concerns mentioned above, Somaliland's Electoral Commission and other stakeholders have been taking substantial steps to regulate the influence of social media on the electoral processes. Somaliland's Electoral Commission has implemented frameworks aimed at promoting fair and transparent elections, and among these developments are both the Political Parties' Code of Conduct and the Media Code of Conduct. Social media provisions have been included in both

15 Civil Society member, Hargeisa, Interview October 24, 2024

ISIR

codes of conduct.

The Political Parties Code of Conduct, a comprehensive framework designed to ensure that presidential parties and sub-parties abide by ethical campaigning standards, includes provisions addressing social media conduct. The code urges all political parties and their supporters to avoid spreading misinformation, hate speech, and divisive language online, particularly content that could incite tribal tensions or defame opponents. For example, Articles 4,7, and 8 of the Parties' code of conduct clearly state that 'the parties' actions and sayings shouldn't cause divisive rhetoric or deceive voters' decisions by discrediting opponents.' The code outlines penalties for non-compliance, depending on the nature of the infractions. By agreeing to these terms, political actors commit to not only fair competition but also the integrity of online public discourse. Simultaneously, the Media Code of Conduct complements the regulations on political parties by providing guidelines for media entities, including digital journalists and traditional news outlets. The media code enforces journalistic standards that mandate fact-checking, balanced reporting, and clarity of sources, particularly on digital platforms. Provisions mandate journalists to be neutral, avoid endorsements or politically charged commentary on social media, and avoid inflammatory language that could incite unrest or bias. Signing these codes before the election reflects Somaliland's commitment to a transparent and peaceful electoral process while addressing the unique challenges of digital media in election reporting.

In conclusion, stakeholders' use of digital and social media in Somaliland's elections reveals the transformative impact of digital platforms on the country's electoral processes. Through qualitative analysis, it is evident that while these digital tools serve as vital channels for information dissemination, political engagement, and political accountability, they also present challenges. The study identifies these challenges as the increase of clannism, the spread of misinformation, and disparities in digital literacy levels, which can marginalize certain demographic groups. While regulatory oversight is evolving, the findings suggest that enhanced policy frameworks and digital literacy programs could further maximize the positive impacts of social media use in elections. More importantly, this policy brief contributes to the existing body of information on how Somaliland's digital and social media engagement aligns with broader global trends in political communication while emphasizing local nuances. As Somaliland continues to grow in the digital age and its democratic journey, the role of digital and social media will remain pivotal, necessitating a strategic approach from all stakeholders to maximize benefits while mitigating risks.

Recommendations

As Social media and digital tools increasingly become central in the political arena, it is important for election stakeholders including govern-ment bodies, political parties, civil society organizations, and the media to effectively tackle the adverse implic-ations of these platforms.

The following recommendations (Incl-uding longterm suggestions) are essential for understanding how social media can foster an informed elector-ate and encourage political account-ability, thereby strengthening demo-cratic practices.

- Political parties and candidates should use their verified social media accounts to share election-related content and promote peace. Verified accounts will help ensure transparency and trust in their messages and will minimize impersonation and confusion amo-ng the public.

- CSOs and Educational Institutions should jointly launch civic educ-ation campaigns to improve digital and media literacy among voters, especially youth and elders. Educating citizens on fact-checking sources and how to engage critically with online content can reduce the impact of mis/disinformation.

- CSOs, media groups, social media influencers, and academia should jointly develop Standard Operating Guidelines to which each social media user would be expected to subscribe.

- The Ministry of Information should create/strengthen partnerships with social media companies like Facebook, X, and TikTok to ensure rapid response to the spread of hate speech, fake news, incitement to violence, and attempts to silence competing voices. The Ministry along with the Media Monitoring Centre should set up specific measures during election periods and improve content moderation in local languages.

- The Electoral Commission and the government should jointly create a live, accessible platform for tracking election voting and results (compatible with all devices and designed for user-friendliness, and can engage the public in the democratic process). This would strengthen trust in the election process, as individuals can witness the unfolding of events firsthand.

Citations

- Civil Society Member, Personal Communication, October 24, 2024

- Electoral Commission member, Personal Communication, October 31, 2024

- Hali Access Network (n.d.). *Somaliland Education fact sheet.* EDUCATION FACT SHEET - SOMALILAND. https://www.haliaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Somaliland-Education-Fact-Sheet.pdf

- Journalists, Personal Communication, October 23, 2024

- Kemp, S. (2023, February 14). *Digital 2023: Somalia - DataReportal – Global Digital Insights.* DataReportal. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-somalia#:~:text=Somalia%20was%20home%20to%201.95,percent%20of%20the%20total%20population.

- Member of the Public, Personal Communication, October 24, 2024

- Political Party representative, Personal Communication, October 24, 2024

- SLHDS (2020). *The Somaliland Health and Demographic Survey 2020*. UNFPA.org. https://somalia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/slhds2020_report_2020.pdf

SOMALILAND ELECTION STAKEHOLDERS' USE OF DIGITAL & SOCIAL MEDIA

Policy Brief | November 2024

ISIR INSTITUTE:

Off Airport Road, Behind the Adam's Inn
Hargeisa, Somaliland
T: +252 63 6226667