



SOMALILAND NON-STATE ACTORS' FORUM

ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION

STATEMENT OF PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Presidential and party elections were held in Somaliland on 13 November 2024. A competitive campaign offered Somaliland's voters a choice of political alternatives, although the policy platforms of the candidates were not prominently discussed. Political parties and associations were able to campaign freely. Although the conduct of some political contestants fell short of the standards established by law, the National Electoral Commission (NEC)'s Electoral Ethics, Conflict Resolution, and Monitoring Committee took robust steps to discipline party activity.

Pre-election preparations, including voter registration, were generally administered efficiently and transparently by the NEC. On election day, the NEC opened more than 2,600 polling stations across all six regions of Somaliland. SONSAF observers submitted reports from 272 polling stations across the country and evaluated voting procedures as good or very good in more than 90% of observations. In almost all instances, voters were able to exercise their democratic choice freely. However, many polling stations opened late, and widespread challenges with the biometric voter identification system were documented. Some SONSAF observers were initially prevented from observing polling, primarily in Togdheer region. While these shortcomings did not appear to affect the overall integrity of the electoral process, the NEC's response was not always timely, causing delays for many voters, and in some instances contributing to tensions in the vicinity of polling stations.

SONSAF observed several serious incidents during polling. Two men were witnessed attempting to buy voter registration cards in Badhka, Hargeisa, leading to an altercation with waiting voters and with the security forces. In the Calamadaha area of Hargeisa, a polling station security officer inadvertently shot himself while firing in the air to disperse a crowd. However, such incidents were uncommon, and election day was generally calm, if sometimes boisterous.

Toward the end of voting, SONSAF observers witnessed flagrant political interference in polling in Barwaaqo, Berbera by senior party, police, and municipal figures. SONSAF observers were forced to leave the polling station by the security forces. We call on the NEC to investigate this incident further and to take the necessary action, as appropriate.

SONSAF observed vote counting and tallying in 242 polling stations and evaluated counting procedures as good or very good in 95% of observations. However, in at least 23 instances in Awdal, Berbera, Burao, Hargeisa, and Sool, SONSAF observers reported that they were prevented from observing counting, either partially or entirely. Where SONSAF observers were present,



counting and tallying appeared to have been conducted accurately, with the apparent choice of the voter respected.

SONSAF observes that some political actors released results obtained from their party agents and reminds contestants that only the NEC is empowered to disclose election results. SONSAF takes note of the concerns raised by some political actors, including the inappropriate conduct of some senior party figures at the district tabulation centre in Borama, and will continue to observe the electoral process until its conclusion, following which it will issue a final report. In the meantime, SONSAF urges the NEC to renew its efforts to demonstrate transparency and asks all contesting political actors to maintain the peace and pursue any grievances that may arise according to the mechanisms provided by law.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The 2024 elections were the eighth one person, one vote election held in Somaliland since 2002, and the fourth direct presidential elections. For the first time, presidential elections were held alongside elections to determine which three political entities would be recognised as national political parties for a period of ten years. Presidential elections were last held in 2017. According to the Constitution, elections should have been held after five years. However, an extension of the incumbent president's term of office was endorsed in October 2022 by the Guurti, Somaliland's upper house of parliament.

In 2024, the three recognized political parties – Kulmiye, Waddani, and UCID – were joined by seven new political associations seeking to become official political parties. The incumbent president, Muse Bihi Abdi of Kulmiye, sought a second term in office. His challengers were Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi Irro of Waddani and Faysal Ali Warabe of UCID, both of whom contested previous presidential elections.

Somaliland's elections took place in a context of ongoing volatility, particularly given insecurity in the contested eastern regions of Somaliland. Elections were not held in 3 out of the 21 electoral districts of Somaliland, all in the east.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Somaliland's election and constitutional law provide a sufficient foundation for conducting credible democratic elections. The legal framework protects the principles of universal suffrage, equal representation, and the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and requires Somaliland to act in conformity with international law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹

Somaliland operates a multi-party system in which elections are held for the presidency, political associations, and local councils. No more than three political parties can be recognised at any time; the 2024 vote opened the possibility for new political associations to be recognized as political parties, for the first time since local council elections in 2012.

¹ Article 10(2), Constitution of Somaliland.



Since the previous election in Somaliland, the electoral legal framework has been amended. Alongside the decision to combine presidential and party elections, amendments to Election Law No. 91 were made to improve the electoral process, including to clarify the role and powers of the NEC.

Despite its general robustness, gaps persist in the legal framework and in its practical application. For instance, dispute resolution mechanisms could be made more efficient and transparent, to mitigate perceptions of political interference. Moreover, campaign financing is insufficiently regulated. While each party is required to report its campaign revenue and expenses 90 days after the elections, there is no guaranteed public disclosure of these reports. This lack of transparency creates the potential for manipulation and inequality. Somaliland's law enforcement agencies have a limited capacity to monitor and enforce these already limited regulations.

While political actors generally express confidence in the judicial authorities, continued emphasis on strengthening the constitutional separation of powers would promote, enhance, and protect the impartiality of the judiciary. This would improve the judiciary's ability to oversee elections and provide checks and balances on the exercise of executive and legislative powers.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The NEC, comprising 7 commissioners, has the overall responsibility of administering Somaliland's elections, in accordance with Somaliland's legal framework. Individual commissioners were assigned the responsibility to oversee electoral delivery in specific geographic regions. To administer election day, the NEC recruited more than 12,500 staff.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Between May and December 2023, the NEC registered a total of 1,227,048 eligible voters, an increase on the 1,065,847 voters registered for the 2021 elections. Turnout for voter registration was high, particularly in urban areas, although some drought-affected areas, particularly in Togdheer region, faced challenges in including all eligible rural voters. Most voters were registered in the Maroodi-Jeex region. In the first phase of voter registration, which lasted 15 days, voters registered at 176 locations. This was followed by registration continuing at designated centres in 23 constituencies and border areas for a further 15 days. The NEC employed biometric technology to ensure accuracy and to prevent duplicate registrations. Overall, voter registration occurred peacefully, with no major security incidents recorded during the process.

ELECTORAL PREPARATIONS



Overall, the NEC met its stated timeframe, enabling electoral preparations and recruitment to proceed effectively. The awarding of contracts for necessary election materials, the training of election personnel, and the distribution of ballots, were all conducted effectively.

Due to the efforts of the NEC in stakeholder engagement, mistrust was reduced among political actors, and an overall enabling environment for the election exists. However, NEC's efforts to engage civil society about its planning and activities could sometimes have been more transparent.

VOTER EDUCATION

The NEC made considerable efforts to engage in voter education, and delegated responsibilities among different civil society organisations to ensure widespread outreach to voters throughout the country. However, voter education programmes started late in the process, limiting the time available for voter education efforts to be effective. In a society with many rural voters, some of whom are illiterate, voter education efforts could also be better targeted to ensure citizens are appropriately prepared for election day.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

The NEC made significant efforts to include women in the elections. Among the key initiatives implemented by the NEC was the launch of an awareness campaign aimed at educating women about their voting rights, conducted in collaboration with Nagaad, the largest women's umbrella organization in Somaliland, and a member of SONSAF. Nagaad also established a situation room call centre, providing a platform for women to report any violations or harassment encountered during the elections.

The NEC stated it would attempt to recruit at least two female staff members at each polling station in election day. According to SONSAF's observations, nearly 70% of polling station chairpersons were women.

PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

The NEC made meaningful efforts to ensure the participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process. A customized training program for individuals who are hearing impaired was developed in collaboration with the Somaliland National Disability Federation (SNDF). SNDF also implemented tailored voter education programs for persons with disabilities.

ELECTION OBSERVATION

The NEC invited both domestic and international groups to observe the polls. SONSAF was the only accredited domestic observer group and recruited, trained, and deployed more than 300 observers, of whom 150 were women. Additionally, SONSAF recruited, trained, and deployed 20 persons with disabilities to observe the election.



The election law does not provide a sufficiently detailed statutory mandate for either domestic or international observers. In accordance with its powers under the law, the NEC issued on 7 November a Code of Conduct for International and Domestic Observers. However, the NEC did not consult observer groups in developing the Code, leading to the inclusion of some provisions inconsistent with regional and international best practice for election observation.

CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT

Between 19 October and 10 November, Somaliland's election campaign was conducted vibrantly, competitively, and in a largely peaceful manner. SONSAF, as part of the Somaliland Civil Society Election Forum (SCISEF), monitored campaign activities throughout.

Political parties and political associations were free to campaign throughout the country, apart from in El Afweyn, where the NEC suspended campaigning on 23 October due to security concerns caused by ongoing intercommunal tensions.

While most parties and political associations adhered to the campaign regulations and agreed campaign schedule, some unfortunate incidents led to both fatalities and injuries. These mostly consisted of reckless driving by party and association affiliated individuals. Some citizens expressed concern at campaign supporters driving at high speeds through urban areas at night, particularly in Hargeisa.

On 29 October, both Kulmiye and Waddani parties were temporarily barred from campaign activities due to breaches of campaign protocol, including the failure to respect campaign start and end times. The NEC imposed fines on several individuals as well as political parties and associations for breaches of campaign ethics. Those fined included ruling party Kulmiye, opposition party Waddani, and associations Kaah and Horseed. Among those fined were Abdirnasir Buuni, Minister of Parliamentary and Constitutional Affairs, a Kulmiye official, Mustafe Qodax, head of Kulmiye's campaign, as well as the Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives, Ali Hamud Jibril of Waddani, following a complaint by Kulmiye for defamatory remarks made during a speech in Borama, and Ismail Aden Osman, also of Waddani, who was also ordered to apologize to the Police Chief of Somaliland after making derogatory remarks.

The NEC's relevant committees effectively responded to these violations of the Code of Code and issued appropriate financial penalties, which appeared to be effective in dissuading further violations.

In response to armed individuals attending some party rallies, the NEC restricted campaigning at night, and reminded parties that it was their responsibility to regulate the behaviour of their supporters. This reasonable restriction on when campaign activity could occur improved the conduct of subsequent campaign events.



During the campaign, political parties and associations made a concerted effort to increase women's participation in the electoral process. Many women participated in campaign rallies, in part because parties and associations provided them with transport and other logistical support.

SONSAF received reports of the police harassment of some female campaigners from both political associations and political parties contesting the elections during the campaign. At least 35 female campaigners were arrested, with at least 8 women held in custody for at least one week, all from the Maroodi-Jeex region. The reasons for arrest ranged from the alleged involvement in physical or verbal altercations to the alleged misuse of, or irregularities accounting for, campaign funds.

ELECTION DAY

On election day, SONSAF observed nearly 300 polling stations across the country, representing more than 10% of the overall polling stations established nationwide. While most SONSAF observers were freely able to observe polling, there were some initial limitations on observer access, particularly in Togdheer and Hargeisa.

Overall, opening procedures were assessed as good or very good in about 76% of observed stations. However, more than half of polling stations observed by SONSAF opened late, of which a quarter (40 out of 159) opened late by 1 hour or more. In 12 observed cases, stations opened more than 2 hours late. Most of the polling stations which were observed opening late were in Hargeisa. Many of the complaints registered from voters and party agents related to these delays.

In nearly 99% of observed polling stations, ballot boxes were shown as empty to the agents and observers present before being sealed. In 96% of observed polling stations, ballot boxes were sealed correctly, although 8% of ballot boxes observed in Saaxil and 6% of ballot boxes observed in Hargeisa were not correctly sealed. In 99% of observed cases, ballots remained correctly secured before polling. While most equipment was present at polling stations, the flashlight to verify the presence of ink on voters' fingers was either not present or not functional in 26% of observed polling stations at the time of opening.

In nearly all observed cases, SONSAF observers assessed polling station staff as performing their duties impartially during polling procedures. The role of security forces was also generally positively assessed during polling, although there were a few instances where this was not the case. In the view of SONSAF observers, voters requiring assistance, including persons with disabilities and the illiterate, were almost always helped appropriately by polling station staff.

Adherence to the stated electoral procedures was generally good. However, in four instances, SONSAF observers noted that more than one person was allowed to vote at the same time, and on one occasion a SONSAF observer noted that a voter received more than one ballot. The most



common problems were deficiencies with the electoral equipment, particularly with the biometric voter identification system, as well as its associated components.

During voting, SONSAF observers noted the presence of campaigning or campaign material at or in the vicinity of polling stations on 18 occasions, representing about 7% of SONSAF's observations.

In total, SONSAF observers witnessed the counting and tallying of votes in 242 polling stations across all regions of the country. In 95% of observed polling stations, counting was assessed as being efficiently conducted, with the polling station staff in 96% of observed polling stations being assessed as performing well or very well. In general, the closing and counting procedures were most positively assessed in Awdal and Togdheer regions. In all counts observed by SONSAF, the intention of the voter was respected during the tallying of ballots.

ABOUT SONSAF

SONSAF, established in 2008, is a leading civil society platform that aims to engage and enhance the voices of Somaliland's non-state actors, and previously observed elections in Somaliland in 2010, 2012, 2017 and 2021. SONSAF has 67 members drawn from the fields of peacebuilding and democratization, security, poverty reduction, human rights, infrastructure, and good governance. For more information about SONSAF, see <https://www.sonsaf.org/>