



# IPCS Briefing

## The Role of Women in Somaliland's 2021 Elections

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### Executive Summary

The foundations of the right to participation are shaped by the possibility of any individual to be involved in decision-making that impacts their own interests. It is necessary that everyone should be able to participate in society to defend their own interests, and to create accountable leaders and transparent institutions. In Somaliland, women and youth make up the largest number of voters that elect those running for local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. The marginalization of women from decision and policy-making processes makes the link between the state and democratic principles weak. Without a doubt, a state is characterized as democratic when its citizens exercise their political rights, including the right to elect and to be elected equally.

In Somaliland's democratization process, women play an important role in elections. Established women's rights organizations like Nagaad and others play an important role in voting and election monitoring and observing. However, in almost two decades of democratic practices and multiparty politics, Somaliland's government and political parties have failed to include women in the political processes. Thus, their role as a key actor has been missing from the political scene. Despite being the largest group of voters, women remain one of the most disadvantaged segments of society.

Therefore, there is a great need for genuine interventions that critically address the challenges facing women in the political arena. Women's participation in politics has been low in the past three decades partly because of the reluctance of state institutions to adopt policies that advance the interest of women and marginalized groups. Also, there is poor coordination and organization of women groups to overcome those challenges. However, this lack of collective and organized voice among women could be attributed to the exclusion of women from political and decision-making positions in the country.

### Introduction

Since its declaration of independence from the rest of Somalia in May 1991, Somaliland has undergone a remarkable political transformation. It has departed from the customary way of governance to constitutional democratic and elected government under the Constitution which was approved by the public in a referendum conducted on 31 May 2001. Since then, Somaliland has gone through different levels of presidential, parliamentary, and district level elections in which opposing and contesting parties have accepted the results. In fact, democratization and multiparty politics are among the factors that helped the Somaliland state-building processes despite the absence of international recognition.

While Somaliland has earned praise for its democratization process, the significantly low representation of women and minority groups in parliament (both upper and lower houses of government), is a cause for considerable concern. In the combined 2021 elections, 28 women (13 for House of Representatives, and 15 for Local Councilors) ran for elections. While no female parliamentarian member was elected, only three women were elected for local offices. The political exclusion of women in Somaliland is commonly attributed to low financial resources for women candidates, conservative cultural beliefs and patriarchal attitudes, religious restrictions, and lack of governmental commitments. In the 2021 elections, however, most of these assumptions were challenged. For the first time, the government waived registration and party fees for women candidates, political parties adopted a voluntary quota<sup>1</sup>, and the traditional elders nominated women as clan representatives in the local and parliamentary elections<sup>2</sup>. In addition, there weren't any significant challenges from religious clerks or institutions on the issue of female political candidacy. Therefore, these developments indicate that the actors and institutions that were previously considered impediments to women's election

into political leadership positions had declined. Nevertheless, the outcome of the elections has proven that the question as to what the barriers to greater women participation in Somaliland politics are, remains pertinent. This policy briefing attempts to address that question.

## 2021 Joint Elections

As a result of the 2001 public referendum in which the citizens of Somaliland overwhelmingly approved the interim constitution, Somaliland shifted from a customary system to a constitutional democracy<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, this is one of the most important milestones in Somaliland's history. The citizens enthusiastically took part in electing their representatives for local councils, parliament, and executive offices<sup>4</sup>. Certainly, democratization and multiparty politics are part of the success of the state-building processes in Somaliland. The path to multiparty politics without international support or recognition has been another milestone in the development of Somaliland<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, despite all the challenges faced by Somaliland's democratization processes, such as election postponements, Somaliland has managed to conduct credible elections at local, parliamentary, and presidential levels. The most important point to note is that Somaliland's electoral candidates have a strong record of peacefully conceding defeat against their rivals; a trait that is rarely observed in African politics.

The May 2021 elections generated acclaim from local and international observers. Voter turnout was estimated at 64 percent, which is high considering that the election coincided with severe droughts. The opposition parties, Waddani and UCID, won 31 and 21 seats respectively in the House of Representatives, while the ruling party, Kulmiye, won 30 seats<sup>6</sup>. The victory of the opposition parties and the ruling party's ready acceptance of defeat was welcomed by many. Immediately following the proclamation of the election results, the opposition parties, Waddani and UCID, formed an alliance which allowed the opposition to gain control over the Chamber. Meanwhile, in the local councils, the opposition won 5 out of the 7 key mayor posts<sup>7</sup>.

Even though election results and voting behaviors remain largely clan and identity based, there were a few exceptions to this rule. The enormous win by Barkhad Jama Hersi of the minority clan Gabooye is indicative of a shift away from clan-based voting. Hersi won with 20,000 votes, the highest number in parliamentary history, and his victory marked a win for an entire community marginalized and excluded from politics. Hersi led an anti-clan campaign<sup>8</sup> and focused on attracting voters through his progressive ideas and vision for Somaliland. He used social

media to build a strong support and allies, and his message was received well and resonated with a lot of young voters. The high number of votes that Hersi received indicates a growing level of rejection of clan-based politics. Another case that further demonstrates this trend is the sweeping victory of Hargeisa's Mayor, Abdikarim Ahmed Mooge who won with 26,000 votes. Despite the satisfaction with election conduct and results, the absence of women from the 82-member parliament is disappointing.

Despite the fact that women are active in voter registration, campaigning, voting, and fundraising processes, there continues to be little female representation in political leadership. Women are more active in the electoral process than men. However, their active participation and engagement has not translated to an increase in women in political leadership positions. In addition, women's political inclusion is considered unimportant, untraditional, and even foreign. Clan elders are powerful stakeholders in elections as they control candidate nominations and endorsements, manage campaign funds, and influence voter decisions<sup>9</sup>. As such, the low representation of women in politics is in part due to the gatekeeping of political space by traditional elders.

Somaliland's highly functional traditional system overpowers democratic values of inclusion and equality, especially when observing the electoral cycle. In addition to the lack of governmental will to promote political inclusivity, there is a lack of legal mechanisms to challenge exclusionary politics that have resulted in the marginalization of a significant portion of the community i.e., women, minority groups, youth, and people with disabilities from politics. Moreover, methods that local organizations and international donors use to promote political inclusion for marginalized groups have been unproductive.

## Challenges to Women's Political Inclusion

Efforts to increase political inclusion of marginalized groups are driven by donors and civil society organizations. The focus and implementation of projects on political inclusion are highly problematic. There are a number of international donors that support Somaliland's elections in numerous ways and with the help of local partners, these donors implement various election related projects. However, the timing of these interventions is often late, and resources are fragmented and distributed across numerous organizations which jeopardizes the overall impact and success rate of these projects.

Donor organizations are often accused of adopting top-down strategies in their project design and implementation. Therefore, the lack of consideration

for local input and context threatens the sustainability of projects and often leads to unmet goals. On the other hand, local implementers lack the long-term strategy, vision, and commitment to transform societal norms in order to increase the political influence of women and other marginalized groups. Local organizations are often accused of focusing on project-based issues, meaning that social problems are only relevant as long as there is a project and a donor pushing them. That undermines the long-term social change needed for women's political inclusion. These deeply flawed systems of project design, prioritization, and implementation result in unsuccessful political inclusion projects that fall short of expectations. Thus, intensive reform of the approach of donors as well as that of local organizations is necessary. The inefficiencies and poor commitment of both international and local actors on the issue of political representation further contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of minority groups.

Meanwhile, inclusive governance has also not been a priority in the clan-based democracy of Somaliland. Politics has been a space historically reserved for men, especially those from dominant clans. Women, youth, minority groups, and people with disabilities have been and continue to be left out from political decision-making. There have been numerous efforts to increase women's political participation by establishing a 30 percent gender quota since 2007. A bill to establish greater political representation for women and minorities was introduced, but was rejected by parliament in 2020<sup>10</sup>. As a result, in the May 2021 elections, only 3 women were elected for local council positions while 1 person from the minority clan of Gabooye was elected for parliament. Meanwhile, no one with a known disability has held a political leadership position since Somaliland's independence. In the absence of comprehensive data, anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been a significant increase in the number of young people elected to parliament and to local councils in recent elections. However, it is safe to say that inclusive governance continues to be a distant goal championed by donors and civil society organizations and fiercely opposed by political leaders.

Political inclusion efforts have not taken root because of lack of governmental will and clan support. Political changes in the country have historically been initiated by presidents; however, the successive Somaliland governments have continuously shown little interest and a lack of commitment on the issue. Meanwhile, clan elders, the most powerful electoral stakeholders, have generally expressed dissent for female political inclusion.

## Moving Forward and Future Priorities

Future priorities should focus on supporting locally led, organic campaigns for greater political representation and visibility of under-represented groups in the medium term (and not only immediately before elections). Minimal donor involvement should be envisaged in civic engagement programs, so it does not damage or undermine local voices and ownership. There is an increased skepticism of the impact of donor investments in political representation programs, and in some cases, donor's involvement in the issue has caused more harm than good. Therefore, increased involvement from development partners on this issue could result in more backlash. It is highly recommended that where there are local voices in support, donors should support gender and other minorities' quotas but not try to take the lead. Donors must be aware that their involvement can have unintended consequences and, in fact, cause more harm than good.

In this regard, this paper proposes a number of policy options and recommendations to address the challenges facing women. However, this can be achieved only if the mandated government institutions, with the help of the public at large, take the lead in finding appropriate solutions to ensure that relevant and timely interventions are carried out in issues regarding women's political representation. Therefore:

1. The government should develop and implement policies that promote women's political representation and inclusion. If establishing a gender quota isn't feasible; then, other arrangements should be explored to ensure women and other marginalized groups are included and represented in politics.
2. The National Electoral Commission needs to improve the electoral process in terms of election timelines by fixing election calendars. This will in return help political candidates, specifically women, better prepare for elections. Many female candidates expressed that the late announcement of the 2021 election date and the rejection of the quota bill by the parliament at the end of 2020 have delayed their nominations and shortened their campaign period.
3. Improving female participation in economic activities is important not only for women's immediate benefit but also for national economic development and growth. Furthermore, with increased economic empowerment and security, more female political aspirants could be encouraged to compete for political seats.

## Endnotes

- 1 The three political parties, namely UCID, Waddani, and Kulmiye agreed to adopt a voluntary quota whereby each party would nominate at least 6 female candidates (one candidate per region); however, only UCID fulfilled this promise while Waddani and Kulmiye came short.
- 2 A few female candidates have shared that they have been nominated by their clan elders; however, only one female candidate, Suad Ibrahim, has been publicly endorsed by her clan elders. It is, therefore, hard to confirm how many have been officially approved by clan leaders, but anecdotally, according to female candidates, there are a few others that had the support of their clans.
- 3 International Crisis Group (2006). Somaliland: Time for African Union Leadership. Africa Report N° 110. Addis Ababa/Brussels/Hargeisa: International Crisis Group.
- 4 Bradbury, Mark (2008). *Becoming Somaliland*. London: James Curry Publishers.
- 5 Renders, Marleen (2012). *Consider Somaliland: State-Building with Traditional Leaders and Institutions*. Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- 6 International Crisis Group (2021). *Building on Somaliland's Successful Elections*. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N° 174. Nairobi/Brussels: International Crisis Group.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Elections in Somaliland are often a power competition between and among clans. Thus, candidates rely heavily on the support, backing, and votes of their clans. As such, candidates focus on organizing, mobilizing, and convincing, almost exclusively, their clan members to vote for them, and rarely campaign among the general public. Nevertheless, Hersi ran a national campaign based on his vision for the country and what he would like to change. He appealed to the youth and asked support from everyone regardless of their clan affiliation, which was very novel to Somaliland elections.
- 9 Academy for Peace and Development (2021). *A Vote for Change: Somaliland's Two Decades Old Electoral Democracy*. Hargeisa: Academy for Peace and Development.
- 10 Somaliland Chronicle (2020). *Somaliland Parliament Votes Against Women and Minority Quota in Election Bill*. Available at <https://somalilandchronicle.com/2020/09/27/somaliland-parliament-votes-against-women-and-minority-quota-in-election-bill/>. Accessed March 2022.

## About the Institute

THE INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES (IPCS) is a teaching and research center at the University of Hargeisa, Somaliland. It was established in 2008 by the University of Hargeisa and Eastern Mennonite University in the United States of America to provide a multidisciplinary approach to understanding and addressing conflict and violence in the Horn of Africa. The IPCS was the first Institute of its kind to engage in teaching and research in areas of peace and conflict studies, and remains the only one in the Somali-speaking region in the Horn of Africa. The Institute provides interested scholars, institute members, and students with the opportunity to engage in intensive interdisciplinary study and research on Somaliland and Somali-inhabited regions in the Horn of Africa.

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