

## Election 2024: Once Again, Somaliland Back on Track

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### Introduction

Somaliland is a self-proclaimed 'country' from the Republic of Somalia. It broke from the Republic in May 1991. Prior to that, the two Somali-inhabited territories formed a republic right at the time of independence. Italian Somaliland and British Somaliland, present-day Somaliland, joined hands and declared the formation of the Republic of Somalia on July 1, 1960. The union lasted for about four decades. The circumstances leading to the split relates to Somalia's turbulent political history.

Although the initial two years of union after independence were promising in terms of laying down the basis for civil political discourse and competition, the trend was short-lived. Late in the 1960s the military, led by Major General Siad Barre, toppled the civilian government and instituted a dictatorial regime that ruled Somalia under iron fist. It showed little respect to rights and freedoms, and also undermined the need to maintain the delicate balance in terms of power sharing among the various Somali clans. Moreover, less than a decade after grabbing power, the military regime instigated a major war with Ethiopia which lasted for nearly two years (1977-78)<sup>1</sup>.



*Two of the candidates, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (the winner) and Muse Bihi Abdi (the outgoing) casting their votes in the 2024 Somaliland election (Photo credit to AP)*

The war that was fought in the context of the heyday of the Cold War brought a realignment of patron-client relationships in the Horn of Africa, with the US and its allies moving to Somalia and the USSR and those within its orbit switching to Ethiopia. Eventually, Somalia lost the war and that brought discontent among political forces in the country. This was also further strengthened by the policy of mutual destabilization of the two countries using each other's dissidents.

In this context, the Somali National Movement (SNM) hailing from the northern part of the country emerged as a formidable force. When finally General Siad Barre was toppled and fled the country, Somali descended into chaos with various armed groups controlling their clan lands and at the same time vying for power at the capital. Likewise, SNM and allied groups controlled Somaliland. However, unlike groups in the remaining part of Somalia trying to control the central government, they declared the independence of Somaliland. With that Somaliland has become a self-proclaimed 'independent country', while the

successive government that came to power in the Mogadishu fiercely opposite it and consider it as part of the Republic of Somalia.

Ever since, Somaliland has been craving for international recognition as a sovereign entity. Though lacking international recognition thus far, the fact that Somaliland, stretching on a litter over 176, 000 square kilometers of land, is located on the southern coast of the Gulf of Aden and west of the Indian Ocean with about 850 kilometers of coastline makes it strategically attractive for countries in the region and beyond for doing business. As a result several countries have representation in the territory mainly in the form of business missions.

## **Background**

Over the past three decades and more, Somaliland has been a beacon political stability in an otherwise turbulent Horn of Africa region. Perhaps this can be explained in reference to its careful merging of both modern and traditional elements in the exercise of democracy. On the one hand, it allowed multi-partyism and electoral politics leading to the formation of a representative chamber in the country's parliament and a head of state directly elected by the people. On the other hand, it formalized the Guurti (the House of Elders), as an upper House of parliament which secures the support of traditional clan-based power structures.<sup>2</sup>

Some ten years after it broke away, in 2001 Somaliland held a referendum to formalize its claim for independent statehood. The outcome was a constitution affirming independence and the introduction of a multi-party system.<sup>3</sup> Since then, several presidential and parliamentary elections have been held, though with delays in schedules. The first of such an exercise was the 2002 local elections followed by a presidential election a year later in April 2003 and the parliamentary election in November 2005. The first presidential election was won by Dahir Rayale Kahin. The president extended his term by two more years citing logistical problems to hold election, political disagreement and security concerns, among others.

However, in the next cycle of elections held in 2010, Dahir Yayale Kahin was unseated by opposition contender, Ahmed Silanyo. Like his predecessor, Ahmed Silanyo also extended his term by two more years citing exactly similar reasons. However, when the presidential election was finally held in 2017, he was defeated by Muse Bihi Abdi. In an interesting pattern of 'history repeating itself', the fourth presidential election which was supposed to be held in 2022 was also postponed by a similar two more years. When it was finally held this November 2024, the incumbent was defeated by a candidate from the opposition. From the preceding, three observations can be drawn. First, all the elections were postponed by two years on various pretexts. Second, in all the elections incumbents lost the bid. And finally, in spite of irregularities in observing schedules power transfer has been smooth and peaceful.

## **Election 2024**

This year's election held on November 13, 2024 is the fourth presidential election in two decades since 2003. The constitution of Somaliland determines that the number of political parties in the territory shall not exceed three. It also provides that they shall not be formed on the basis of regionalism and clans. In tune to this constitutional provision, three political parties competed in the fourth presidential election. President Muse Bihi Abdi of the ruling Kulmiye party, seeking a second term, run against Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi "Irro" of the Waddani party, and Faysal Ali Warabe of the UCID party.

According to reports, the electoral process comprised a considerable logistics and financial effort. In a country of about six million people, 1,227,048 were registered to vote across 2,648 polling stations countrywide. It is also reported to have been the first election in which Iris biometric system was deployed, capable of offline checking, to 1,068 polling stations. Over 13, 000 polling officials were recruited and more than 5, 000 officers were deployed to ensure security.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the electoral commission decided to limit polling stations to only 500 voters for efficiency reasons. It also partnered with both mainstream and social media in the country for purposes of accurate reporting and voter awareness.

There wasn't a major different on campaign agendas among the three candidates. The challenges of Somaliland's economy, including high inflation and unemployment, particularly among the youth, as well as the need for bettering access to foreign finance and development aid constituted the main domestic political agendas of campaign. In the realm of matters of foreign policy, all the three candidates promised voters to remain vigilant for achieving international recognition.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this, the postponement of the election that should have been held in 2022 as well as the handling of the Las Anod<sup>6</sup> conflict by the incumbent were also exploited by the opposition candidates.

Under the circumstances, Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi of the opposition Waddani party won the election with a convincing 64 percent of the vote cast, while the incumbent Muse Bihi Abdi took 35 percent of the vote.<sup>7</sup> In light of the preceding, observers affirmed that the election went well. The process was reported to have been free and fair.<sup>8</sup> Others also stated there weren't any serious irregularities and electoral malpractices in the process.<sup>9</sup> The president-elect is expected to be sworn in on December 14, 2024.

### **The Road Ahead**

The election has now concluded. Voters gave their verdict. Observers praised the process as free and fair. Transfer of power is going well without controversy. What do all these mean for Somaliland going forward? They mean a lot for Somaliland itself, its relation with Somalia proper and some autonomous regions in Somalia, the Horn of Africa as a region and beyond.

First, the successful conclusion of the electoral process helps to further solidify its democratic credence which the territory has been showcasing to the world in the last two decades. In a turbulent region where elections are mired by irregularities and violence, the mere fact of holding and concluding a credible election would help Somaliland further entrench the democratic means of resolving political differences and project itself to the region and beyond as a beacon of peace, stability and democratic governance.

Second, the president-elect is popularly perceived to be more diplomatic and a unifying figure than confrontational. If this holds true after he assumed office and throughout his term, it will be a good omen for Somaliland in terms of oiling relations and mending fences with Puntland, particularly in regard to the dispute over Las Anod. It also will be useful at least to contain the tension with Somalia which still considers Somaliland as its renegade province.

Third, countries in the region which are wary of breakups and, therefore, not forthcoming to be the first to recognize a breakaway region, would "shay away" from any forthright discouragement or denunciation of Somaliland's unabated claim for independent statehood. This softens any overt or covert influence to reverse Somaliland's course toward independence. After all, countries in the region, unlike Somaliland,

are in various forms and levels of political instability owing to their failure to put in place a democratic mean of resolving political differences.

Fourth, the success in this cycle of the electoral process would also consolidate its diplomatic capital. In its craving for international recognition, Somaliland has always relied on its democratic credence as a charm offensive on the international community. The success this time around would build on the hitherto practice in this regard. As a result, it would be fair to assume that the international community gets the incentive to do or continue to do business with Somaliland, if not extending outright recognition in the short term.

#### Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the first war between Ethiopia and Somalia took place 1964 soon after Somalia got its independence. The war, known as the first Ogaden War, marked the first military conflict between the newly established Republic of Somalia and Ethiopia lasting from February to April 1964. It was preceded by a rebellion in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia, inhabited by Somali speaking people, in mid-1963 seeking self-determination to join the newly formed Republic of Somalia.

<sup>2</sup> Pegg, Scott and Michael Walls (2018) Back on Track? Somaliland after its 2017 Presidential Election. *African Affairs*, 117(467): 326-337. [https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10047668/1/Pegg\\_Back\\_on\\_Track.pdf](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10047668/1/Pegg_Back_on_Track.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Brooke-Holland, Louisa (2023) Political developments in Somaliland (Research Briefing) 7 March 2023 Number 9733 available at [CBP-9733.pdf](#)

<sup>4</sup> The Brenthurst Foundation Election Observation Mission to Somaliland (November 43, 2024), "The 2024 Somaliland Presidential and Political Organizations Elections" available in <https://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org/news/report-of-the-brenthurst-foundation-observer-mission/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/somaliland-a-change-of-leadership-in-the-context-of-regional-developments-and-its-quest-for-recognition-192234>

<sup>6</sup> Las Anod is a city in the Sool administrative region that is one of the areas over which Somaliland and Puntland are in dispute.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpvzxcg3n3dmo>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thebrenthurstfoundation.org/news/report-of-the-brenthurst-foundation-observer-mission/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.horndiplomat.com/2024/11/16/international-observers-of-somalilands-elections-release-preliminary-assessment/>