



Somaliland's 2021 and 2024 Joint Elections: Democratic Gains, Gaps, and the Path Forward

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Executive Summary

Since adopting multiparty democracy through the 2001 constitutional referendum, Somaliland has conducted eight democratically contested elections, earning recognition as an island of democracy in the Horn of Africa—a region characterized by authoritarian governance and protracted conflicts. The May 31, 2021, and November 13, 2024, joint elections represent the most recent milestone in this trajectory, distinguished by several unprecedented achievements that reinforce Somaliland's homegrown democratic credentials.

One of the key achievements is the Government of Somaliland's commitment to finance the election and contributing over 75% of election costs, with the European Union and Taiwan contributing the remaining, primarily to civil society organizations and for electoral technical support, respectively. This marked a decisive shift toward local ownership, reducing donor dependency that had historically contributed to election postponements. Equally significant was the government's remarkable non-interference throughout the electoral process—from campaigning through vote tallying—placing Somaliland among the few African governments that refrain from manipulating electoral outcomes. The government also broke precedent by barring funding for ruling-party local and parliamentary candidates and prohibiting the use of public assets for personal campaign purposes, such as government-owned vehicles and facilities.

Despite these achievements, significant

challenges persist. Legal gaps in the electoral framework necessitate ongoing amendments before each election, indicating underlying weaknesses. The National Electoral Commission (NEC) lacks permanent professional staff, relying on temporary university students during elections—a practice that compromises institutional memory and technical capacity. In addition to that, the rejection of the proposed quota for women and minorities by parliament underscores deep-seated socio-cultural barriers. Given the emphasis on this point, clan elders retain disproportionate influence over candidate selection, undermining party institutionalization and merit-based political participation.

The paper proposes key recommendations to guide policymakers in Somaliland; therefore, it recommends:

- Institutionalize the electoral commission by establishing permanent NEC staff at regional and district levels to maintain continuous voter registration, preserve institutional memory, and reduce election-time recruitment that compromises process integrity.
- Decolonize electoral financing by having the government assume full responsibility for election funding, incorporating electoral budgets into annual national appropriations, eliminating donor-driven vulnerabilities, and ensuring timely elections.
- Strengthen political party institutionalization by developing internal democracy, respecting membership seniority, reducing clan elder dominance in

candidate selection, and creating pathways for women's ascension to decision-making positions.

- Address women and minority marginalization by implementing targeted interventions, including financial support for women candidates by building on President Bihi's initiative to cover NEC fees, capacity building for campaign management, and constitutional mechanisms to ensure representation, and finally;
- Reconcile traditional and modern governance by developing frameworks that respect clan elders' societal roles while limiting their electoral influence, enabling political parties to fulfill their democratic functions independently.

Introduction

The Republic of Somaliland presents one of Africa's most remarkable yet underappreciated democratic stories (Yeshaneh, 2026). Emerging from the ashes of Somalia's military regime, which systematically destroyed Somaliland's cities and infrastructure between 1981 and 1991, Somaliland has built a functioning democratic system through indigenous reconciliation processes and homegrown institutional innovation (Bradbury, 2008; Murithi, 2008; Walls, 2018). The May 31, 2001, constitutional referendum, in which citizens overwhelmingly approved the interim constitution, formally introduced multiparty politics and set Somaliland on a democratic trajectory that would see it conduct eight different levels of elections over two decades.

Somaliland's constitutional architecture deliberately limits political parties to three parties, as stipulated in Article 9(2) of the Constitution (Republic of Somaliland, 2001). This unique provision aims to prevent clan-based fragmentation and encourage cross-regional coalition-building. The 2002 local elections, which were the first direct election since 1969, served a dual purpose: electing local councilors and determining which political associations would attain national party status (Ahmed et al. 2003). The Union of

Democrats Party (UDUB), Kulmiye Party, and Justice and Welfare Party (UCID) emerged as the three legitimate parties, subsequently contesting the 2003 presidential election—a contest decided by merely 217 votes out of nearly half a million cast (ICG, 2006). This demonstrates both the competitiveness of Somaliland's democracy and the maturity of its political class, as the opposition ultimately accepted defeat after exhausting legal appeals.

The 2005 parliamentary elections further consolidated democratic practices, but the subsequent decade witnessed troubling patterns of election postponement (ICG, 2009). The presidential election scheduled for 2008 was finally held in June 2010, while local councilors elected in 2002 with five-year terms remained in office for nearly a decade (Abokor & Ali, 2018). This local council left the office after the 2012 local elections. The House of Elders (Guurti) repeatedly extended the terms of the president, local councils, and parliament, emerging as the most significant obstacle to democratic consolidation (Human Rights Watch, 2009). These postponements eroded citizen confidence and damaged Somaliland's reputation as a democratic exception in an authoritarian neighborhood.

Furthermore, the 2010 presidential election marked another milestone when Kulmiye's Ahmed Mohamed Mohamoud Silanyo defeated incumbent Dahir Rayale Kahin, achieving Africa's rare peaceful transfer of power from a sitting president to an opposition candidate (ICG, 2006). In addition to that process, the 2017 presidential election introduced iris biometric technology—a world-first application for voting purposes—demonstrating Somaliland's willingness to innovate in pursuit of electoral integrity (Abokor & Ali, 2018). However, the opposition questioned post-election disputes over results and the Electoral Commission's neutrality, delaying progress toward the long-overdue parliamentary elections.

Against this backdrop, the 2021 joint elections represented a critical test of Somaliland's democratic resilience. With

1,298,133 registered voters and 799 candidates competing—including 29 women (13 for parliament)—the electoral logistics were unprecedented. The NEC expanded polling stations from 1,642 to 2,709 to accommodate COVID-19 protocols and reduce queues. Over 30,000 personnel, including security forces, managed Election Day operations. The advanced iris-scan technology, first deployed in 2017, again prevented double voting and fraud.

The political context preceding the elections was fraught with contention. Following the 2017 presidential election, opposition parties questioned the Electoral Commission's neutrality and demanded its dissolution. Lengthy negotiations among election stakeholders eventually produced a consensus to form a new commission, though disputes immediately reemerged over alleged party affiliations of specific appointees. The Waddani party questioned Commissioner Abdirashid Mohamoud Ali, better known as "Riyo-Raac," about his neutrality, alleging he is associated with the ruling Kulmiye party. Only through sustained dialogue and compromise—hallmarks of Somaliland's state-building tradition—did stakeholders agree to move forward.

Another contentious issue concerned sequencing: whether local council or parliamentary elections should occur first. This debate reflected deeper political calculations about which level of election would advantage which parties. Again, stakeholders reached a compromise, deciding to conduct joint elections—a logistical challenge never before attempted in Somaliland. President Muse Bihi Abdi's willingness to proceed despite his party holding a majority in the outgoing parliament mirrored former President Rayale's 2005 decision, demonstrating institutional commitment above partisan advantage.

The elections produced significant outcomes. Turnout reached 695,915 voters (65.30% of card-holders), though lower than 2017's 80% participation. This decline reflected multiple factors: COVID-19 concerns among elderly

voters and clan-level disputes in which unsuccessful aspirants discouraged their supporters from participating, to name a few. The results saw Waddani emerge as the strongest parliamentary force, followed by Kulmiye and UCID, creating a more balanced political landscape.

The second joint elections were held in 2024, combining the presidential election with the authorization of political parties. Following a two-year extension of the president's term—marked by political violence that resulted in the deaths of Somaliland armed personnel and civilians—a peaceful transfer of power once again took place in Somaliland. In a landslide victory, the opposition leader ascended to the office. In this election, there were 1,227,048 registered voters and 2,637 polling stations.

In the 2021 and 2024 joint elections, international observers, including the Brenthurst Foundation, described them as evidence of Somaliland's effective statehood and unique social contract. In the 2021 election, the European Union and Taiwan contributed approximately 25% of the election funding, but government funding predominated—a crucial step toward electoral sovereignty. However, the path to this achievement revealed persistent challenges requiring urgent attention to safeguard Somaliland's democratic future.

On another note, President Bihi's decision to combine two critical elections and his refusal to interfere in the electoral process during both the 2021 and 2024 elections reflect a long-standing commitment to neutrality and non-interference—principles that resonate with many African leaders. This behavior is not new; it traces back to 1990, when the Somali National Movement (SNM) was operating from the jungle. At that time, Bihi chaired the SNM's sixth and final congress in Baligubadle. During the six-week-long congress, Abdirahman Ahmed Ali Tuur was elected as the sixth chairman of the movement, defeating his rival, Engineer Mohamed Hashi Elmi, a close friend of Bihi. Despite their personal friendship, Bihi remained neutral

throughout the proceedings. This consistent pattern of impartiality, evident in both the SNM congress and the recent 2021 and 2024 elections, underscores President Bihi's unwavering dedication to democratic principles and non-interference.

Legal and Institutional Gaps

Institutional weaknesses are frequently cited as the primary driver of state fragility across Africa, with many Western scholars arguing that such fragility undermines the continent's ability to foster environments conducive to democratic principles (Adejumobi, 2000; Kühne, 2010). Somaliland, however, presents a compelling counter-narrative. Having emerged from a devastating war with Somalia's military regime, which left its cities and infrastructure in ruins, Somaliland's citizens—without external support—laid the foundation for functioning state institutions and a resilient, homegrown democracy (Phillips, 2020; The Brenthurst Foundation, 2021; Njeri, 2022). Over the past twenty years, Somaliland has conducted nine democratic elections, including a constitutional referendum in 2001, consistently demonstrating a capacity for peaceful political transition. The 2024 joint elections, which combined the presidential vote with the authorization of political parties, marked a significant evolution in its electoral system (The Brenthurst Foundation, 2024). Despite a two-year presidential term extension that led to political violence, the process culminated in a peaceful transfer of power, with an opposition leader securing a landslide victory—further cementing Somaliland's reputation for democratic stability in an otherwise fragile region.

Nevertheless, this democracy is not without its challenges, particularly within the legal framework governing elections. A recurring issue is the continuous amendment of electoral laws prior to each election, which exposes underlying weaknesses and gaps. For instance, different laws—such as Laws No. 21, 23, and 14—have historically governed the electoral system, and while the adoption of Law No. 91/2020 aimed to

consolidate the nation's electoral framework, it also introduced complications, such as revoking legal impunity for local council members. More critically, legal ambiguities persist. Articles 67(5) and 81(6) of the same law disqualify candidates convicted of a crime within the last five years, both for candidates of the House of Representatives and Local Council, respectively. But do not address how to handle a candidate convicted after their name has already appeared on the ballot papers. Additionally, the distribution of parliamentary seats among regions remains a politically sensitive and unresolved issue. These legal gaps often exploited or left unaddressed by a reluctant former parliament, continue to pose risks to the consistency and credibility of the electoral process.

Beyond legal inconsistencies, the neutrality of electoral institutions has faced significant tests. The General Law for National Elections and Voters' Registration Law (Lr. 91/2020) clearly vests the NEC with the authority to vet candidates' credentials, ensuring impartiality. However, in a notable procedural breach during the 2021 elections, this responsibility was delegated to the National Commission for Higher Education and the National Examination Board—both executive branch entities—through an informal understanding. This transfer of authority compromised the neutrality of the vetting process, resulting in inconsistencies where some candidates with questionable credentials were permitted to run while others with similar documents were disqualified. Such actions undermine public trust in state institutions and call into question the integrity of the electoral process. To safeguard its democratic gains, Somaliland must reinforce the independence of its electoral body and address the legal and procedural gaps that threaten to erode the credibility of its elections. While Somaliland has rightly earned widespread praise for its democratic resilience, the long-term viability of its political system depends on strengthening the institutional architecture that underpins it.

The Women and the Minority Question

Despite women constituting the majority of voters and playing crucial roles in Somaliland's peacebuilding—including the landmark Borama Conference—their representation in elected office remains negligible. The 2021 elections saw only 29 female candidates among 799 contestants, with just 13 seeking parliamentary seats. This underrepresentation reflects deep-seated socio-cultural barriers embedded in Somaliland's patriarchal clan structure.

The Xeer Somali (customary law) governs clan relations and fundamentally disadvantages women. Clan elders, who exercise decisive influence over candidate selection, are typically reluctant to endorse women based on the perception that women belong simultaneously to two clans—their father's clan by birth and their husband's clan by marriage. This “*Dhalasho iyo Dhaxdin*” (birth and marriage) dilemma means women lack an unequivocal clan, making elders reluctant to invest clan resources in candidates whose loyalty may be divided.

The financial dimension compounds this exclusion. Clan members collectively fund endorsed candidates through contributions collected from the male clan members. This process is better known as “*Qaadhaan*” in Somali. Women, historically exempt from paying *Qaadhaan*, are consequently ineligible to receive campaign funding from clan sources. This creates a circular trap: exclusion from clan financial obligations justifies exclusion from clan financial support. As a result of this deep-rooted social structure, which is predominantly patriarchal and male-dominated, women candidates must rely on personal resources or external support, placing them at a fundamental disadvantage against male counterparts backed by clan treasuries.

Undoubtedly, financial limitations are one of the main obstacles that male youth, women, and minorities face when participating in politics at national, regional, and local levels. This obstacle increasingly serves

as a significant barrier for all groups when contesting government positions in the decades of Somaliland's democracy. Given the emphasis on the above argument, the absence of the economic capacity of those important sectors of society is the result of prolonged unemployment and a long history of political and social exclusion against those groups. Women, youth, and the marginalized lack property to sell during elections, unlike elderly men. Even if they own property, they lack the courage to sell it due to uncertainty about the election's outcome. This situation is such an obstacle and a critical issue that requires national policies and strategies to tackle and address it, such as providing financial support to empower these groups to participate more fully in the electoral process.

The 2021 elections demonstrated this vicious cycle and how women are challenged by the existing social settings. For example, three exceptionally qualified women—Sadia Muse Ahmed (long-time civil society leader), Suad Ibrahim Abdi (researcher, civil society leader, and former Progressio country representative), and Suad Yusuf Odowa Armiye (successful entrepreneur)—all lost despite qualifications exceeding those of many elected male parliamentarians. Their defeats reflected not capacity deficits but societal perceptions, including traditional elders' belief that women, regardless of individual merit, remain unsuitable for political leadership.

On top of that, the parliamentary rejection of a quota for women and minorities further entrenched exclusion. Proponents argued that quotas would ensure genuine representation for women and marginalized groups; opponents countered that quotas constituted unconstitutional segregation. However, political parties attempted internal remedies, agreeing to field one female candidate per region (totaling 18 women parliamentary candidates), but this voluntary measure proved insufficient against entrenched clan dynamics.

On another note, the experience of Barkhad Jama Batun, a minority candidate who won the largest parliamentary vote in Hargeisa, illustrates both progress and complexity. Analysts attribute his victory to multiple factors: personal popularity, endorsements from political leaders such as President Abdirahman Mohamed Abdilahi Irro, who was an opposition leader during this election, and Dr. Mohamed Abdi Gabose, a prominent politician, and his strategic campaign to associate with another popular figure, the current mayor of Hargeisa, Abdikarim Ahmed Moge. Whether this represents a genuine erosion of minority discrimination or exceptional circumstances remains debated, and the next election result will tell the conclusion. Crucially, his running mate from the same minority group lost, suggesting Barkhad's victory reflected personal rather than group-based mobilization.

Government Financing and Election Sovereignty

The 2021 and 2024 elections marked a decisive shift toward electoral sovereignty. Government funding covered over 75% of costs, reversing the donor-dependent model that had prevailed since 2002, when the European Union first assisted through GTZ. Between 2002 and 2016, donors handled technical aspects including training, budget preparation, and equipment provision. This dependency rendered Somaliland vulnerable to donor pressures and contributed to election postponements when funding faltered.

The 2017 presidential election began the transition, with President Silanyo's government reallocating funds from state institutions to cover electoral costs. The 2021 and 2024 elections completed this shift, with government financing predominating and the recalled trained staff taking leadership roles. At the same time, Taiwan and the European Union contributed 25% of the election funds to cover some technical aspects of the election and supported civil society rather than core electoral functions. The government's commitment to covering

the election costs deserves commendation.

This reassertion of local ownership aligns with Somaliland's broader state-building tradition. From the 1991 Burao Conference through the 2001 constitutional referendum, Somaliland built institutions through indigenous processes without international recognition or significant external assistance. Electoral financing now follows this pattern, reducing external leverage over domestic political processes.

Addressing the Challenges for a Better Electoral Process

The NEC requires permanent professionalization. Currently, the Commission operates with temporary staff recruited during election cycles, primarily drawing university students who require extensive training before each election. This practice compromises institutional memory, increases costs, and introduces quality inconsistencies. The Commission should establish permanent regional and district offices with full-time staff responsible for continuous voter registration, civic education, and electoral planning. Continuous registration would eliminate costly registration drives before each election and enable more accurate voter roll maintenance. The chair, deputy chair, and secretary at each district should serve continuously, building local expertise and community relationships.

On another note, parliament should undertake comprehensive electoral code reform, consolidating all electoral laws into a single, coherent statute that eliminates ambiguities requiring pre-election amendments. Specific attention should address candidate eligibility timelines (resolving the post-nomination conviction question), credential verification protocols (restoring NEC's exclusive authority), and campaign finance regulations. The reformed code should establish clear mechanisms for dispute resolution, reducing ad hoc political negotiations that currently characterize electoral crisis management.

Furthermore, and very importantly, the government should institutionalize electoral

funding by establishing a dedicated electoral budget line in annual appropriations. Rather than treating elections as exceptional expenditures requiring supplementary budgets, the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development should allocate predictable, multi-year funding enabling long-term planning. This approach would eliminate donor dependency entirely, protecting Somaliland's democracy from external pressures while demonstrating genuine sovereignty.

On top of that, political parties require internal democratization to fulfill their constitutional role. Current practice allows clan elders to select candidates, reducing parties to electoral vehicles for pre-existing clan formations. Parties should develop transparent candidate selection processes prioritizing party membership, seniority, and demonstrated commitment to party platforms. Moreover, internal party elections for leadership positions would reduce the gerontocratic control that currently excludes women and youth. Therefore, party laws should require women's representation in leadership structures, creating pathways for women's political advancement independent of clan endorsement.

Therefore, addressing women's exclusion in politics is necessarily important, where comprehensive strategies must address multiple barriers facing women. Building on President Bihi's initiative covering NEC fees for women and minority candidates, the government should establish a Women's Political Participation Fund providing campaign support, capacity building, and mentorship. On the other hand, political parties should reserve leadership positions for women, enabling them to influence candidate selection and party strategy. Moreover, civil society organizations should coordinate women's political mobilization, overcoming the fragmentation that currently dilutes women's collective voice. Though it is difficult to implement with tangible results, the quota question requires renewed parliamentary engagement, potentially

through constitutional amendment requiring reserved seats in a transitional period, but it seems critical to implement the latter option due to reasonable factors.

However, reconciling tradition and democracy is crucial. Somaliland's hybrid governance system—combining modern democratic institutions with traditional clan structures—requires deliberate management. Clan elders play legitimate roles in conflict resolution and social cohesion, but should not dominate candidate selection in a multiparty democracy. Therefore, political parties must gradually assume the candidate endorsement function, with elders transitioning to oversight roles, ensuring clan interests are considered without controlling outcomes. This evolution requires patient dialogue and institutional capacity building rather than abrupt confrontation with customary authority.

Conclusion

Somaliland's 2021 and 2024 joint elections represent a significant milestone in Somaliland's decades of democratic journey. By financing over 75% of costs, maintaining government non-interference throughout the process, and successfully conducting combined elections for the first time, Somaliland demonstrated institutional capacity that challenges narratives about democratic impossibility in post-conflict, non-recognized contexts.

However, the elections also revealed persistent challenges requiring urgent attention. Legal frameworks remain incomplete, requiring pre-election amendments that signal underlying weaknesses. The NEC lacks permanent professional staffing, compromising institutional memory and technical quality. Also, women and minorities remain systematically excluded from elected office, with clan structures and patriarchal attitudes barring qualified candidates regardless of individual merit. Moreover, political parties function as clan vehicles rather than programmatic platforms, with

internal democracy absent and elder control pervasive.

The path forward requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders—government, political parties, NEC, civil society, and citizens. Institutionalizing the electoral body, completing electoral legal frameworks, ensuring sustainable domestic financing, democratizing political parties, addressing women’s exclusion, and thoughtfully reconciling tradition with democratic principles constitute the core agenda. Success in these areas would not only safeguard Somaliland’s remarkable democratic achievements but also provide lessons for fragile states across Africa and beyond about the possibilities of homegrown democratic consolidation.

Somaliland’s democracy, born from the ashes of war and built through indigenous reconciliation without international recognition, remains one of Africa’s most inspiring yet underappreciated stories. The 2021 and 2024 elections advanced this story, but the final chapters remain unwritten—awaiting the collective action of Somaliland’s citizens and leaders to realize the democratic promise their unique state embodies.

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About the Paper

This paper examines Somaliland's historic 2021 and 2024 joint parliamentary, local councils, presidential, and political parties' elections, marking the seventh and eighth democratic elections in Somaliland's three-decade journey of homegrown state-building. The 2021 and 2024 elections represent a significant departure from previous electoral cycles in several critical respects. For the first time, Somaliland combined parliamentary and local council elections, presidential and political parties' authorizations into a single process, demonstrating institutional maturity and administrative capacity. More importantly, the Government of Somaliland financed over 75% of election costs—a decisive step toward decolonizing the electoral system and reducing donor dependency that had previously rendered the country vulnerable to external pressures and contributed to election postponements. This briefing unpacks the multifaceted dimensions of the 2021 and 2024 elections: the government's commitment to non-interference in the election process during the election and immediately after voting, including tallying and announcement of the results, the legal and technical gaps within the electoral framework, and the persistent marginalization of women and minorities, to name a few. It also situates Somaliland's electoral experience within broader African democratization debates, challenging narratives that post-conflict societies cannot sustain democratic practices. The paper offers recommendations for strengthening Somaliland's electoral institutions, addressing underrepresentation of women and minorities, institutionalizing political parties, and ensuring the sustainability of locally owned electoral processes.

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