



Policy Paper:

Challenges and Priorities facing the Re-elected Puntland Government

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Abbreviations

	CSO	civil society organization
	FGS	Federal Government of Somalia
	LGE	local government elections
	OPOV	one person, one vote
	PCSC	Puntland Civil Service Commission
	PEC	Puntland Electoral Commission

1. Introduction and background

Having recently completed parliamentary and presidential elections in 33 districts, Puntland Federal Member State - finds itself at a critical juncture. Internal disputes, security concerns, the future of SSC-Khatumo, as well as relations with the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) all present challenges to the state-building agenda.

The recent elections saw armed clashes in Puntland's major cities, with unrest erupting over grievances at how the region's recent democratic and administrative transition has been managed. Added to this, the Las Anod conflict has increased the number of clan militias and their access to arms. Even so, the fact that the sitting administration was re-elected provides an opportunity for internal reconciliation and a reinvigoration of the stalled democratization process.

Against this complex backdrop of political and security challenges, this policy paper sets out the key priorities for the new Puntland government. In examining these challenges and opportunities, the paper provides actionable insights and recommendations aimed at guiding policy-making processes.

Methodology and structure of paper

The study that forms the basis of this paper employed a qualitative approach to collecting and analyzing data. A total of five focus group discussions and 20 key informant interviews were conducted, encompassing 50 individuals of varying backgrounds, including political party representatives and parliamentarians, legal and security specialists, political analysts, civil society organization (CSO) representatives, and academic professionals. The study further benefitted from a validation forum attended by more than 70 participants, including government ministers, leaders of political parties and CSOs, and independent thinkers, all of whom provided insightful recommendations.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 sets out the key governance priorities for Puntland, which fall into three broad categories: 1) separation of power and civil services; 2) resumption of the democratization process; and 3) Puntland–SSC relations. Each of these categories is broken down into the specific challenges faced following by recommendations for the Puntland administration on how these might be addressed. Section 3 then turns to matters of peace and security, with the main priorities falling into the areas of: 1) social reconciliation; and 2) security sector governance. Again, the relevant challenges and recommendations are spelled out. Finally, Section 4 offers some brief conclusions and reflections on the way forward.

2. Governance priorities

Puntland's newly re-elected government faces a series of governance challenges that require careful consideration and strategic planning. The key priorities in this regard can be categorized into four broad areas:

- 1) Separation of powers and civil service;
- 2) resumption of the democratization process; and
- 3) Puntland–SSC relations



Separation of power and civil services

A clear separation of powers among government institutions—each of which should in theory have distinct, independent functions—is fundamental to Somalia's chosen model of liberal democratic governance. In the case of the Puntland administration, however, the separations between the three branches have become blurred. Although the Puntland Civil Service Commission (PCSC), established in 2007, is the body responsible for the administration and development of Puntland's civil service, the state government does not appear to engage with the entity. According to

interviewees, civil service staffing is out of kilter with the functions and structures of government, with some institutions vastly overstaffed and others understaffed.

The government has also observed that Puntland's organizational structures are outdated, requiring restructuring in accordance with clearly spelled-out mandates and functions if they are to capably implement national development policies. Thus, if the civil service is to be improved, an appropriately updated legal framework—encompassing Puntland's civil service law—must be implemented.

Challenges

- **Separation of power:** Limited separation of power between the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government.
- **Clan influence on recruitment:** Puntland's political foundations are based on clan power-sharing, which in turn has influenced civil service recruitment. This poses difficulties when it comes to implementing reforms that do not take into consideration clan affiliations. Furthermore, clan-influenced recruitment has affected the professionalism and quality of the performance staff, who are less likely to be neutral and professional when engaging with politicians. As highlighted by interviewees, this issue requires a carefully managed attitudinal change.
- **Size and quality of civil service staffing:** Given that recruitment has historically been based on clan affiliation rather than merit, civil servants often lack the necessary qualifications. This has led to a bloated bureaucracy driven by patron-client relationships, with a significant portion of the government's budget expended on salaries.¹ In terms of staffing numbers, some institutions are grossly overstaffed, while others are understaffed.
- **Struggle to attract qualified staff:** The government struggles to attract skilled individuals due to the lower salaries it pays compared to non-governmental organizations and the private sector. Furthermore, the government often delays salary payments, particularly in the final year of its term, as it prepares for elections.

Recommendations

- **Ensure separation of powers:** Article 58 of Puntland's constitution stipulates that government branches should be separate, autonomous and independent. The new administration should ensure this doctrine is adhered to at all levels of government. Here, relevant measures include safeguarding judicial independence; putting in place greater parliamentary oversight mechanisms; and raising public awareness and engagement in order to garner support and ensure transparency.
- **Pursue merit-based recruitment:** Article 128 of Puntland's constitution emphasizes that civil servants should not be affiliated to political groups, with recruitment based strictly on qualifications and effectiveness. In reality, this article has not been consistently followed. As such, the government should prioritize empowering the PCSC, staffing it with talented, trustworthy commissioners who can then take over the role of civil servant employment through competitive examination.

¹ Mohamed A, Mohamed, 'Puntland civil service reform: challenges and opportunities', International Journal of Applied Researches 5/12 (2018).

- **Provide fair remuneration:** Enhancing civil service performance requires fair remuneration based on merit, work ethic and knowledge, rather than clan affiliation. Implementing a merit-based promotion system would motivate staff and improve performance. Additionally, retirement and pension policies for older staff members who are no longer effective in their roles would create space for promotions and new talent.
- **Downsize the civil service and focus on quality staffing:** Puntland's civil service is excessively large, which puts a strain on the state's resources. The government should therefore consider downsizing the workforce, with a focus on quality over quantity. This would not only improve efficiency, but optimize resources for better service delivery to the public. Alongside this, it would be beneficial to pursue job creation policies and the development of alternative employment opportunities.

Resumption of the democratization process

Puntland has embarked on a long-awaited democratization process, with citizens able to elect local councillors through one person, one vote (OPOV) elections. In May 2023, following a long and arduous process spanning some 25 years, Puntland held its first local government elections (LGE) in 33 districts. This electoral transition has, however, spotlighted political divisions.

With the election date looming, increasing numbers of militia members were mobilized by the opposition, leading to a number of clashes involving injury, death and the destruction of property. Militia members also stationed themselves in strategic areas within and outside Garowe to prevent election materials being transported to the regions. Meanwhile, citizens organized small-scale protests in Garowe calling for the elections to be halted until an agreement had been reached with opposition. These various events led to the elections being postponed in three districts, although they proceeded as planned in the remaining 30 districts.

Following this, the government proposed constitutional amendments aimed at improving the electoral process. Opposition to any amendment to Puntland's constitution—with critics citing the likelihood of Puntland's President said abdullahi Deni seeking a term extension—resulted in a day of armed clashes between opposition militias and government forces in Garowe. Nevertheless, the government went on to form the Puntland Electoral Commission (PEC), which was tasked with planning the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. In the face of two political parties (Horseed and Mideeye) refusing to nominate their PEC member, titled elders and other clan leaders calling for traditional clan-based state assembly elections, and the 8 January 2024 election deadline fast approaching, President said abdullahi Deni eventually took wise decision by announcing a return to the traditional clan-based selection system.

According to the CSO members interviewed, Said Deni's re-election to the Puntland presidency provides cause for optimism when it comes to a resumption of the democratization process. This is due not only to President said abdullahi Deni managing to take 33 districts to elections (30 districts in 2023 and 3 districts in 2021), but the fact that the former chairman of the transitional TPECIII has been elected chairman of Puntland's parliament, while the secretary of the KAAH political party has been elected vice president. These individuals were key stakeholders in the LGE and have gained further experience through their involvement in the process.

Given this backdrop, it is not unrealistic to hope that the president—who has previously championed democratization—will prioritize its completion in terms of an OPOV process for the state assembly (parliament and president) elections.

1) people's desire for a move away from the clan-based system was evident during the LGE;² 2) President Deni's re-election provides sufficient mandate to review and complete the OPOV process without the contention provoked by a term extension; and 3) there is now significant institutional readiness for future democratic processes.

Challenges

- **Controversies over the legal framework for elections:** Contradictions in the legal framework, particularly after the July 2023 constitutional amendment, must be thoroughly reviewed and addressed.³
- **Low public awareness regarding electoral processes:** Despite high demand for democratization and political reforms in Puntland, there remains a significant gap in public understanding of the electoral processes and their implications. This lack of awareness was particularly evident during the recent LGE, with many citizens unaware of the roles played by different political offices or the significance of their votes. The challenge lies in bridging this knowledge gap with the aim of ensuring informed, empowered citizen participation in future electoral processes.
- **Political fragmentation post-LGE:** The Puntland LGE exacerbated deep-seated divisions among political factions, particularly in key regions such as

Bossaso and Garowe. This fragmentation has not only hindered effective governance but threatens to escalate into prolonged political stalemate and potential conflict. It has also led to the emergence of armed groups bent on challenging the government's monopoly over the use of force. While this presents a significant challenge to the new Puntland administration, the fragmentation that emerged after the LGE appears to have lessened somewhat in the wake of the presidential elections.

- **Individualized political parties:** The exclusivity of political parties, where only a few groups and/or individuals monopolize decision-making, has deterred participation, resulting in parties becoming personality- rather than principled. This may undermine the democratization process, including the call for more inclusive political structures.
- **Impact of federal elections:** Somalia's ongoing federal election process—specifically the (s) election of parliamentarians for the lower and upper house—threatens to divert the attention of Puntland's government and political elite away from the regional-level democratization process.

² See perceptions surveys, see: <https://pdrcsomalia.org/Publications/survey-of-public-perceptions-report-on-local-government-elections-in-puntland/> and <https://pdrcsomalia.org/Publications/puntland-local-council-elections-and-the-role-of-the-political-associations/>.

³ For more information on the amendment, see: <https://pdrcsomalia.org/Publications/puntland-constitutional-amendment-analysis-of-changes-effects-and-prospects-of-application/>.

Recommendations

- **Conduct a thorough legal review:** The new Puntland administration should establish a task force or commission to conduct a comprehensive review of the contradictions, ambiguities and gaps apparent in the current legal framework of election laws and constitutional amendments. In doing so, the task force should hold consultations with legal experts, political parties, CSOs and other relevant stakeholders, thereby gathering a diverse array of perspectives and recommendations.
- **Launch civic education campaigns:** Authorities should implement a robust civic education campaign aimed at educating the public about electoral processes, the roles of elected officials and the importance of voting. Such a campaign should aim to reach as wide an audience as possible by utilizing a variety of communication tools, including radio broadcasts, community meetings and informational materials. Civic and voter education should also be included in school curricula.
- **Complete local elections in the remaining districts:** Reviving the LGE process in those districts yet to conduct elections—starting with the three in Nugaal region where elections were postponed—would help reinvigorate public interest. It is also worth noting that the three districts where early elections took place—Qardho, Eyl and Ufeyn—are due for fresh elections soon. Preparations for and the synchronization of local council elections also require due attention.
- **Facilitate dialogue and reconciliation:** Forums and dialogues among political and non-political groups should be put in place to address grievances, promote understanding and foster reconciliation. To ensure buy-in, all relevant stakeholders—including CSOs; titled elders and other clan leaders; religious leaders; and opposition politicians—need to be included in talks concerning revisions to the constitution or legal amendments.
- **Ensure fair representation, inclusivity and continuity:** The eight political parties should have a mandate of ten years instead of five years, thereby allowing them to participate in two election cycles. Moreover, the democratization process should ensure representation and inclusivity across all its stages—from the formation of political parties to the management and outcome of elections.
- **Balance electoral priorities:** The new Puntland administration must ensure it places due emphasis on state democratization and governance reforms, striking an appropriate balance between engaging in federal election processes and addressing local governance and electoral needs.

Puntland–SSC relations

The emergence of SSC-Khatumo State presents a challenge to Puntland's established governance framework. SSC elders have declared a unilateral withdrawal from Puntland governance structures and the establishment of an independent state to administer the SSC regions. This move has sparked a constitutional debate regarding elections and territorial integrity.

Challenges

- **1. Unilateral withdrawal:** The SSC elders' unilateral withdrawal has provoked questions about the legitimacy of their actions. This is due to their joining Puntland was done through a rigorous dialogue and agreements, and any withdrawal should be done through similar platform. Their withdrawal had implications for Puntland's territorial integrity, according to the constitution Dhulbahante inhabited regions as part of Puntland territory and power-sharing mechanisms were based on that.
- **Constitutional implications:** The establishment of SSC-Khatumo as an independent state will require revision of Puntland's territories in Somalia's constitution and all other relevant legal frameworks. The power-sharing mechanisms used will also have to be changed, with some clans present in Puntland potentially gaining more than others from the SSC split.
- **Withdrawal vs political presence:** Despite the SSC elders reiterating their unilateral withdrawal, SSC membership and representation in Puntland did not change in the recent 2024 elections.

Recommendations

- **Select a joint committee:** Forming a selected committee to study different viewpoints and present options will help decision-makers make informed decisions. Such a committee could also facilitate negotiations by maintaining a focus on reconciliation and peacebuilding.
- **Engage with the SSC's political and traditional leadership:** The Puntland government must

engage in meaningful dialogue with SSC's leaders if it is to reach an amical decision regarding SSC-Khatumo's separation from or integration into Puntland. Depending on the outcome of negotiations, this could lead either to a renewed 'greater' Puntland or a mutually accepted separation involving shared roles and responsibilities in areas such as defense and economy, with phased processes put in place for devolving powers, transferring assets and adjusting administrative boundaries.

3. Peace and security priorities

Social reconciliation

While a flaring of political divisions during elections is not unusual, the state assembly elections planned for January 2024 proved particularly contentious due to: 1) the uncertainty over the presidential and parliamentary election model; 2) the contested LGE; and 3) proposed amendments to some laws and the constitution.

Historically, traditional elders have served as the pillars of Puntland's governance, offering mediation and resolution during times of political dispute. Since 2014, however, divisions between elders have deepened due to political disagreements on who should be appointed to clan positions. These divisions were further heightened in November 2023 when some of the titled elders met to officially oppose President Deni's OPOV state assembly elections, while others chose to abstain rather than participate.

In the lead-up to the elections, politicians and CSOs advocated for a grand reconciliation conference that would engage all stakeholders and seek political solutions to the emerging deadlock. Moreover, some voices within the political sphere emphasized the need for substantive discussions on Puntland's future trajectory that went beyond mere political dialogue. Before any initiative was taken by CSOs or the Puntland government, however, elections via the traditional selection method were announced. This reduced the mounting tension, allowing Puntland's presidential elections—which saw the incumbent re-elected—to pass peacefully.

Despite the outstanding challenges confronting the new administration, it should be noted that some commendable measures have already been undertaken, such as the president's attempts to reach out to community leaders and the constituting of a relatively inclusive government.



Challenges

- **Political discontent:** The aftermath of the 2022 federal elections and subsequent local elections have deepened political divisions within Puntland. Some opposition politicians and parties, as well as regional communities and traditional elders voiced that they have been systemically excluded from decision-making through meetings and media engagement. They have also protested the direction Puntland's political system is taking.
- **Internal and cross-border security concerns:** The violent clashes that ensued after the LGE and constitutional amendments have not been addressed, nor have the citizens whose property was destroyed in the Bossaso and Garowe

conflicts been given compensation. Moreover, intercommunal conflicts both inside Puntland and across its borders (with Somaliland and Galmudug) increased during 2023.⁴ This lingering unrest undermines efforts aimed at social reconciliation and peaceful coexistence.

- **Erosion of traditional elders' conflict resolution mechanisms:** Traditionally, Puntland has relied on the wisdom and authority of its traditional elders to resolve disputes and maintain social cohesion. The politicization of clan appointments and divisions among elders have, however, weakened their role as impartial mediators. This has left a void in traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, further exacerbating tensions.

Recommendations

- **Establish a social reconciliation commission:** The Puntland government should create an independent commission tasked with facilitating dialogue, mediation and reconciliation efforts among political factions. Any such commission must have broad representation from different sectors of society, and ensure buy-in from communities through the holding of a grand reconciliation conference involving all relevant stakeholders, including political leaders, traditional elders, civil society and youth representatives.
- **Commit to following up:** The Puntland authorities should commit to enforcing the solutions and agreements brought forward by the social reconciliation commission.
- **Promote civic education on peace:** Proactive civic

education would help nurture a culture of peace, coexistence, tolerance and acceptance within and between communities. The government should also introduce civic education along these lines to the school curricula.

- **Pursue community-based peacebuilding initiatives:** Supporting and funding grassroots peacebuilding initiatives led by local communities—including peace committees, conflict-resolution workshops and dialogue sessions—would help in fostering grassroots-level understanding and reconciliation.
- **Introduce and support early warning/response systems to conflicts:** The government should, with the support of local and international partners, assume responsibility for introducing and maintaining effective conflict response/early warning systems.

⁴The total number of conflicts recorded in Puntland during 2022 was 129 (ACLEd, 2022). By contrast, in 2023, ACLEd counted 279—an increase of 116.27%. Of these conflicts, 94 took place in the SSC cross-border region with Somaliland, while 106 took place in the Mudug cross-border region with Galmudug. This means cross-border conflicts accounted for 71.68% of the 2023 conflicts recorded in Puntland.

Security sector governance

Puntland's security forces—which the state authorities maintain separately from the Somali National Army—currently face a number of looming security threats. These include, among other potential crises: 1) the SSC conflict, where unresolved disputes with Somaliland over Sool, Sanaag and Ayn have led to arms proliferation and the mobilization of uncontrolled militias; 2) the presence of extremist groups such as Islamic State and al-Shabaab activities in the mountainous areas of Bari and Sanaag regions, alongside the possibility of fleeing al-Shabaab members (from ongoing offensives in Galmudug) entering Puntland from the south; and 3) the existence of parallel security forces, such as the Puntland Security Force and Puntland Maritime Police Force, which operate without a legal basis.⁵

Challenges

- **Organized crime:** This encompasses crimes conducted by al-Shabaab/Islamic State, pirates and human trafficking groups.
- **Fragmentation and divided loyalties:** The existence of diverse groups within Puntland's security entities, often organized along clan affiliations, has led to fragmentation and poses challenges to centralized control. Loyalties to individual commanders sometimes outweigh allegiance to the state authorities.
- **Roadblocks:** Instances of illegal roadblocks have emerged during political disputes or when security personnel have faced delays receiving their salaries. These hinder civilian movement and commerce.
- **Alcohol and drug abuse:** The rise of drug cartels, alongside reported alcohol and drug abuse within security ranks, has contributed to a rise in crime and a general sense of insecurity, particularly in major urban areas.
- **Proliferation of arms:** Puntland continues to grapple with unchecked small arms proliferation among its populace. This situation is exacerbated by ongoing clan conflicts and cross-border tensions.

⁵Peter Albrecht, 'The interplay of interventions and hybridization in Puntland's security sector', *Cooperation and Conflict* 58/2 (2018): 11.

Recommendations

- **Establish a legal framework defining roles and responsibilities within Puntland's security apparatus:** The Puntland government needs to draft legislation/regulations that clearly set out the mandates, reporting structures and oversight mechanisms governing the various elements of Puntland's security apparatus. For instance, the military could be structured into an east command, a central command and a southern command.
- **Provide training and capacity-building:** Security personnel should undergo regular training programmes on professionalism, ethics and conflict resolution. This will not only enhance their skills when it comes to handling diverse situations, but foster a sense of shared purpose. Towards this end, the government should put in place a comprehensive training roadmap and curricula.
- **Enforce zero-tolerance policies:** Zero-tolerance policies against alcohol and drug abuse within the security forces—involving regular testing and disciplinary measures for violators—should be strictly adhered to.
- **Pursue awareness and rehabilitation programmes:** Education programmes on the dangers of substance abuse should be coupled with rehabilitation and counselling services for security personnel struggling with addiction issues.
- **Build border security cooperation:** If the government is to address cross-border arms trafficking, it must enhance cooperation with Puntland's neighbouring regions and countries, while strengthening the region's own border security measures.
- **Put in place disarmament, demobilization and reintegration initiatives:** Clan militias should be integrated into government security structures, with incentives provided for the voluntary surrender of weapons.

4. Conclusion

Puntland's current governance, peace and reconciliation priorities reveal a landscape of challenges that demand strategic thinking, coherent planning and concerted efforts on the part of the newly elected state government. Each of the areas of governance and peace and security explored in this paper present both challenges and opportunities.

Through confronting these multifaceted challenges and implementing the recommended strategies, the Puntland administration can pave the way for a more stable, prosperous and inclusive future for its citizens. As such, the government must make every effort to prioritize the highlighted areas, engage stakeholders, and work towards sustainable progress in the domains of governance, peace and reconciliation; economy and infrastructure; and social services.

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