



Venue:
PDRC compound

Date:
15th July 2023

**Citizen's Forum:
Puntland Election
Commission (PEC) and The Public**

Introduction

Over the past three years, Puntland State has successfully conducted two local council elections in October 2021 and May 2023. However, obstacles, including election violence, compelled Puntland Election Commission (PEC) to postpone the elections of three districts, leaving the process unfinished. Since then, the biggest issue was the re-scheduling of the delayed elections of the remaining three districts of the Nugal Region. In June, 2024, the Puntland Election Commission (PEC) announced that the elections are scheduled to take place on 23rd July 2024. To refresh the memories of the public and to increase their awareness and information about the upcoming elections, PDRC organized a citizen's forum that brought together the public and the PEC on 15th July to discuss the election process and give updates to the public about the local elections of the remaining districts of Nugal region. The forum was part of the regular events organized by PDRC to raise public awareness and encourage involvement in governance and statebuilding.

The Main objectives of the forum were:

1. To raise the voter education awareness on the upcoming local elections
2. To give the public the answers to the questions that voters require to effectively participate in the election.
3. To share updates about the technical, financial and institutional preparations for the election.

The event began with a brief introduction by the facilitator, Mr. Abdiqafar, who welcomed the audience and introduced the program agenda. The facilitator informed how the event shall run throughout the planned period and the persons that shall have contributed to the event. The event was divided into two sessions. The first session featured a keynote speech by Mr. Ahmed Mohamud Omar, the acting chairman of the Puntland Election Commission. The second session included a panel discussion with the participation of the PEC acting Chairman and supported PEC technical experts.

Opening Remarks

The event was officially opened by the executive director of PDRC, Ali Farah Ali, who expressed gratitude to the participants for attending the forum. The director praised the leading example demonstrated by Puntland government and its people over the years by implementing the first local government elections. He hoped that the remaining districts in the Nugal region shall be completed peacefully because the public stands united behind the democratization process. The democratic elections shall facilitate the transition from the traditional selection of local council members to one person one vote elections he added. The elections also prove that this system can be replicated in other places of the country and is truly workable.

Remarks by the acting chairman of PEC



The acting chairman of PEC, Mr. Ahmed Mohamed Omar, was the keynote speaker of the event and provided general information about the local elections. Starting with the election body, he outlined the structures, legal framework and mandate of PEC. The Puntland Election Commission is headquartered in Garowe, with regional offices in all regions and districts of Puntland. The body consists of 14 members selected by the parliament, the president and eight political parties. Although two political parties have yet to appoint their commissioners, PEC has been working since it replaced the Transitional Puntland Election Commission (TPEC) last year. PEC has the mandate to conduct elections as per Article 114 of the Puntland Constitution, which tasks it with organizing all types of elections, registering political parties, and implementing election laws.

Mr. Ahmed Omar also provided general information about the planned local elections of the three districts of the Nugal region, where a total of 64,746 voters shall cast the vote on 23rd July. 50,866 in Garowe, 10,847 in Dangorayo and 3,033 in Godob-jiiraan. Voter cards were distributed in April 2023, but re-distribution was made in June 2023. A total of 431 candidates shall compete for the local elections in the three districts. The chairman also highlighted that more than 1,800 cards were re-printed for people who had lost their cards.

PEC has prepared all the technical and financial materials required for organizing the elections. More than 350 election workers will be dispatched to 80 polling stations, and over 100 transport workers will be hired logistically for the election delivery. Additionally, more than 160 observers from civil society organizations and 650 representatives will also be present at polling stations to observe the election process.

To ensure the smooth running of the election, PEC held meetings with key stakeholders, including political parties, civil society, the government, and international partners, to discuss the orderly conduct of the elections and prevent obstacles that might hinder free and fair elections to be conducted. Lastly, he concluded that PEC developed a district-specific plan for the distribution of voter cards, the dissemination of voter education messages and the announcement of the election results. Currently, PEC deployed operators to reorganize and supervise the polling stations and are supporting the ongoing campaign activities of the political parties.

Penal discussion

As usual, the remarks of the keynote speaker are followed by a panel discussion to provide the audience with the opportunity to reflect on the topic and ask for clarification on the issues that need further deliberations. The panelist was the acting chairman of PEC Mr. Ahmed Omar and was moderated by Amina Abdulkadir, a senior researcher at PDRC. During the panel discussion, Mr. Ahmed stressed the readiness of PEC to ensure the integrity of the elections.

Lessons learned from the past election and anticipated challenges

The moderator asked the chairman the first question about the anticipated challenges and how PEC would resolve them based on the lessons learned. Amina asked, 'As TPEC managed 33 districts, this is the first time such local elections have been held in Puntland or Somalia for 50 plus years. Could you please share the challenges you have faced and how you are addressing them?'

The chairman highlighted several challenges and lessons learned from the previous local elections. Some of these challenges include the long queues leading to congestion and overcrowding in certain areas and lower voter education. PEC has taken steps to address the obstacles. To reduce the long queues, PEC has estimated the number of voters that can vote in each polling station within the available time. It became an event where 1,000 votes could satisfactorily be cast in one polling station, thus, the commission set the threshold of 1,000 voters for each polling site. This move necessitates an increasing number of election staff.



Regarding voter literacy, PEC strived to ensure that ballot papers have clear party symbols, making it easier for illiterate voters to identify and select their preferred party. This technique was tested during the elections of the thirty districts. We have also conducted extensive voter education campaigns to help address this challenge. Overall, the chairman stressed that PEC learned from the previous elections and has implemented measures to address the identified issues. He concluded that they are committed to ensuring a smooth and successful local election process in Puntland.

After the opening questions of the moderator, the opportunity was given to the audience to give the committee advice, share their concern and ask questions about the election. Audiences asked questions related to the independence of the commission, closed list system, women representation, the Concern of IDP group, the role of civil society.

Independence of the commission

The chairman was asked about the extent to which the public can trust the independence of PEC, since their former chairman was appointed a minister in the current cabinet and when that position will be filled? Commissioner Abdisalan Bashir outlined that Maintaining the independence and integrity of PEC is crucial for the credibility of the electoral process. PEC is established as an independent body under the Puntland Constitution, with a mandate to conduct all types of elections.

He acknowledged that the ministerial nomination of the chairman may raise some concerns, but PEC has measures in place to ensure its impartiality and functionality. First, it is a collective body, with members representing various stakeholders, including political parties, the parliament and the executive. This collective decision-making process helps to maintain the committee's independence and balance.

Furthermore, PEC's operations and decision-making are guided by the Puntland Constitution and election laws, which provide a clear framework for its conduct. PEC also regularly engages with and reports to the Puntland Parliament, ensuring transparency and oversight.

The commissioner pointed out that it is important to note that the former PEC chairman's role as minister does not automatically compromise the committee's independence. PEC is committed to upholding the integrity of the electoral process and ensuring that the elections are conducted in a fair, transparent, and impartial manner in accordance with the relevant laws and regulations. Regarding filling the vacant chairperson position, he justified that it is

the decision of the commission to postpone it until the remaining political parties appoint all commissioners because the commission is a neutral body representing different stakeholders.

Election integrity

The commission was asked several questions related to the election integrity such as the possibility of potential vote-buying because the majority of the voters are poor people, the misrepresentation of the closed list system. The PEC Legal Adviser Abdinuur Mohamed said the electoral commission acknowledges the complex social, political, and economic realities that can impact voter participation and representation. We are committed to upholding the principles of fairness, inclusivity, and adherence to electoral laws and procedures.

Regarding the use of closed lists, the commission is working to ensure that all parties comply with legal requirements for women's representation and other marginalized groups. While out-of-country voting can present logistical challenges, we are taking steps to facilitate the participation of all eligible citizens, regardless of their place of residence. We take allegations of vote-buying and corruption very seriously and have established mechanisms for citizens to report any irregularities. The commission will investigate such claims thoroughly and take appropriate action in accordance with the law.

Overall, our goal is to create an electoral environment that empowers all citizens to freely exercise their democratic rights. We welcome input and collaboration from political parties, civil society organizations, and the general public as we work to strengthen the integrity of the electoral process.

Representation of Women

Women's representation in the local government has been a major concern during the local elections in May 2023. Women groups complained about violating the women's quota, which was introduced by the TPEC during the early local election in 2021. The commission was asked how they can address the obstacle of allocating women seats in areas with lower voters or unwinnable positions which was widespread during the 2023 elections. The chairman of the commission Mr Ahmed Omar, said the electoral commission takes the issue of women's representation very seriously. They acknowledge that historical and structural inequalities can lead to imbalances in the distribution of seats. However, our priority is to uphold the legal requirements for women's representation, which mandate that every three seats must include at least one woman.

To address this, the commission reviewed and updated the voter registration lists to ensure accurate population data. They also work closely with political parties to ensure that they comply with the quota requirements when submitting their candidate lists. In cases where the initial seat allocation may not have been equitable, we are adjusting to rectify the situation and ensure fair representation. The commission is also committed to ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the electoral process to identify and address any emerging challenges. We encourage citizens and stakeholders to raise any concerns they have so that we can work together to strengthen the integrity and inclusivity of the elections.

IDP participation in the election

IDPs, like other citizens, have the right to participate in the local election, according to Puntland laws and policies. During the previous elections, IDPs had won seats in several districts where they did not have representation before. However, there have been alarming concerns that the election can pose challenges to the IDPs; this is because IDPs have a large voter population, which can make changes to the results in favor of some political parties. The commission was asked several questions pertaining to the situation of IDPs particularly the committee's plan to address these concerns and ensure the safety and participation of displaced voters?

The chairman of PEC responded to this question by stressing that the commission takes the concerns of displaced persons very seriously. We have received the complaints submitted and are investigating the reported threats. Our priority is to ensure the safety and security of all citizens, regardless of their displacement status, so that they can freely exercise their right to vote. The commission is working closely with relevant authorities and civil society organizations to develop and implement measures to protect displaced voters. This includes enhancing security at polling stations in areas with high concentrations of displaced persons, as well as establishing clear reporting and response mechanisms for any incidents of intimidation or violence.

Furthermore, the commission is committed to ongoing engagement and communication with displaced communities to understand their specific needs and concerns. They will continue to adapt our processes and procedures to ensure that displaced persons can participate in the electoral process without fear or undue barriers. He encouraged all citizens, including displaced persons, to report any incidents or concerns directly to the electoral commission. We are dedicated to upholding the principles of democratic participation and will take all necessary actions to safeguard the rights and well-

being of all voters. Strengthening election monitoring and observation is crucial for ensuring transparency, accountability, and integrity in electoral processes.

Minority participation

The issue of Minority clans has received attention during the local election of the 30 districts in 2023. Minority groups had representation in more than 17 districts prior to the democratic elections. However, in 2023, they won only two seats. Minority groups pinned the failure on the political parties whom they blamed to have rejected their candidates. One of the audiences asked the chairman about the commission's plan to ensure that minority clans get seats and whether the commission had discussed this issue with the political parties. The chairman of the commission, Mr Omar, stressed that since the elections are democratic and Puntland wants to transition from the clan system, the commission does not see any justification to reserve some seats for specific clans.

The participation of civil servants

The electoral laws of Puntland clearly bar civil servants from participating in election campaigns. However, there were rumors that some senior civil servants were campaigning for political parties. The commission was asked about their stance on civil servants' participation in the local election and the measures they have taken to penalize those who breach the rules. The chairman said that the commission is yet to confirm incidents where civil servants are reported to have participated in the election campaigns. The commission released orders warning civil servants not to mingle with political parties. The chairman concluded that any civil servant who violates rules shall be held accountable.

Conclusion and recommendations

Apart from the questions asked to the chairman, audiences have also made recommendations for the commission to ensure the integrity of the election. The following are some of the recommendations:

- To expanding and enhancing voter education campaigns is crucial for promoting civic engagement and ensuring informed participation in elections.
- To strengthening election monitoring and observation is crucial for ensuring transparency, accountability, and integrity in electoral processes.
- Fulfilling inclusive and peaceful electoral campaigns is essential for promoting democracy, ensuring fair competition, and upholding the rights of all citizens to participate in the political process.

In Summary, the citizen's forum for PEC and the public brought to the fore many issues that were underrated but could have serious ramifications on the success of the elections. The participants clearly articulated the obstacles to the free and fair elections. The event concluded peacefully.

