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DEVELOPMENT &  
RESEARCH CENTER



## Policy Paper



# **Puntland Democratization Process: Challenges and Opportunities for Resumption**

**August 2024**

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No	Acronyms	
1	PDRC –	Puntland Development and Research Center
2	PEC -	Puntland Electoral Commission
3	TPEC –	Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission
4	OPOV –	One Person One Vote
5	CSOs –	Civil Society Organizations

## Background

In 2021, Puntland made history as the first federal member state in Somalia to conduct direct elections based on universal suffrage in three districts: Eyl, Qardho and Ufeyn. In May 2023, local elections were subsequently held in 30 more districts, during this time, three districts of Nugal region (Garowe, Dangorayo and Godob-jjiraan) were delayed due to election violence which was later held in July of this year. The success of these local elections was marred, however, by a series of setbacks that strained the multiparty one-person-one-vote (OPOV) election process. Political disagreements, armed clashes and the later adoption of a clan-based selection model for the presidential elections in January 2024 underscore the challenges faced in conducting direct elections.

## Methodology

The study employs a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. This includes conducting three focus group discussions, each consisting of seven people, for a total of 21 participants. The study is also based on an additional 21 key informant interviews, with interviewees drawn from politicians, government officials, expert in governance, political parties, civil society organisations, the Puntland Bar Association, among others. In general, efforts were made to include a diverse range of study participants; notably, women, youth, elders and representatives from the private sector, university lecturers and academic researchers.

## Opposition to local government, state assembly and presidential elections

Opposition to the voter registration process was led by armed groups aligned with opposition politicians. They disrupted voter registration in the Nugaal region, causing a temporary delay, as a result of attacking locations where voter registration kits were stored. Despite this, the registration process eventually resumed and continued peacefully. As voting day approached, intermittent resistance—militia checkpoints in Garowe and the town outskirts in attempts to prevent the transportation of election materials to the voting districts, along with demonstrations for peace—emerged and led to the postponement of the election in three districts of the Nugaal region. Nugaal thus became the last region to register for elections, following successful registration processes in all other Puntland regions and mounting public pressure on opposition groups in Garowe. Tensions escalated further after the state assembly adopted significant amendments to the Puntland state constitution, extending beyond the election-related articles proposed by the executive branch.

The process surrounding the amendment of the state constitution in Puntland, alongside the timing and intention of these amendments, ignited violent confrontations. The repercussions extend well beyond electoral provisions to shape the overall trajectory of political governance in Puntland. Consequently, various political and elite factions have articulated differing viewpoints, reflecting a complex landscape of interests and perspectives. These groups encompass three primary categories: 1) traditional discontented groups, which oppose the democratic election process and advocate for a return to the traditional clan-based selection system, insisting on timely presidential elections under this framework; 2) opposition political associations, which contest the state constitutional amendments, objecting to the expansion of political parties and criticizing procedural deviations during the amendment process; and 3) a coalition of concerned citizens and elites, who resist the transition from a parliamentary to a presidential governance system and accuse the state government of effecting significant constitutional changes without comprehensive consultation.

In response to these developments, these various groups have employed diverse strategies. For example, some have resorted to legal challenges, lodging complaints with the constitutional court to seek redress through legal channels. Others such as political associations (Mideeye and Horseed) have opted for boycotts, abstaining from certification as political parties and boycotting the process, including the establishment of the Puntland Election Commission (PEC), to demonstrate their opposition to the constitutional amendment process. Anti-democracy forces have also intensified resistance through both violent and nonviolent means, resulting in the cancellation of elections in three districts in the Nugaal region: Garowe, Dangorayo and Godob-jiraan.

Despite ongoing dispute over the process, the government successfully implemented the majority of its 2023 election plans. This included voter registration in 34 districts, elections in 30 districts, expansion of political parties from 3 to 8 and the establishment of the PEC. The government also proceeded with planning for presidential and state assembly elections, with the latter slated for 25 February 2024,

shortly after the mandate of the president ended on 8 January 2024. This decision prompted allegations of intending to extend the term of the president in office, however, exacerbating anger and frustration among opposition politicians, who threatened to establish a parallel election process unless their demand for a clan-based presidential election on 8 January 2024 was met. This deadlock raised concerns about potential chaos in the absence of third-party intervention.

While the ongoing security and political impasse raised fears of potential violence and necessitated the suspension of election efforts, Puntland managed to conduct its state assembly and presidential elections on schedule, and in a participatory and peaceful manner. This was in part due to involvements and pressure from traditional elders, business community and civil society for the sides come to agreement.

The involvement of opposition politicians in the electoral process addressed and partially resolved concerns over election and political stalemates, as well as the threat of violence. Challenges persist, however. This was the case before the elections and still remains so after the elections, which underscores the ongoing complexities of the broader democratization process in Puntland.

Following the Puntland presidential election and the re-election of the incumbent president, Said Abdullahi Deni, in January 2024, there was renewed optimism among the wider public in the three districts that were unable to conduct elections in 2023, and among political party members and civil society organisations. During the inauguration of the newly re-elected state government, the administration shared its five-year agenda, which includes the finalization of district elections and pushes for state assembly and presidential elections through OPOV. This renewed optimism is also due to the continuity of the Deni administration and the opportunity this represents to resolve the issues that had hindered the process before the election. This includes but is not limited to reaching out to the opposition to appoint them to his cabinet. This renewed enthusiasm follows a temporary suspension of the process in December 2023 on account of circumstantial factors; namely, limited time to complete state assembly and presidential elections, incomplete electoral laws and the violent clashes.

Against this backdrop, this policy paper reviews the political and legal challenges that led to the suspension of democratic elections in December 2023. The objective of this policy paper is to present recommendations to the new administration geared toward facilitating an informed and expedited resumption of the election process. A comprehensive contextual analysis examines and clarifies the complexities of this process in order to deepen understanding of the current challenges and opportunities. Building on this foundation, this policy paper prioritizes and develops recommendations for the immediate attention and consideration of the new Puntland administration. These insights can play a pivotal role in guiding the swift and informed resumption of the democratization process by providing pertinent information and analysis.

## Challenges to the Puntland OPOV electoral process

The election process in Puntland has encountered significant challenges stemming from unresolved issues during the local elections, compounded by new obstacles emerging in their aftermath. These challenges have created a complex landscape for progress towards multiparty elections through OPOV in the state. This policy briefing discusses seven key challenges: limited experience, legal challenges, political fragmentation, proliferation of arms, limited knowledge of direct elections, institutionally weak political parties, and financial support and sustainability.

### Limited experience

The state administration that assumed office in January 2019 initiated local government elections during its inaugural year, aiming to fulfill democratic aspirations in Puntland. Due to the novelty of democracy in Puntland and the lack of prior experience, understanding and technical expertise, however, the process encountered obstacles. This resulted in delays that prevented the completion of all planned election cycles over the term of the administration.

Limited public awareness and institutional capacity also impeded progress, as the populace and key institutions lacked the understanding and capability required for effective implementation. Moreover, incomplete election cycles during the five-year term of the administration disrupted the continuity and integrity of the democratic process, raising concerns about its legitimacy.

Issues with representation such as unbalanced clan representation in political parties and the absence of prominent political figures from the process exacerbated the situation, leading to rejection of the election process. Resistance to change also looms large. This is fueled by fear of transitioning from the traditional (clan-based) Puntland governance system, which is compounded by politically and regionally motivated opposition particularly opposition from Nugal region, which was waiting the rotation of the presidency term as previously practiced. Collectively, these challenges hinder the path toward a fully functional and inclusive election system in Puntland.

## Legal challenges

Between 2019 and 2023, Puntland underwent a significant transformation, transitioning from a clan-based system to a multiparty democracy. As practical experiences unfolded during elections, a host of challenges emerged, necessitating careful resolution to ensure further progress. Critics voiced concerns about various constitutional provisions and election models, particularly the restriction of the number of political parties to three and the closed-list model. Both provisions have been deemed unconstitutional and undemocratic by a range of stakeholders, including political associations, non-party politicians, scholars and civil society groups. Moreover, the absence of procedural guidance in Law No 7 of 2003, which establishes local (regional and district) government elections, led to delays both in announcing the official results and conducting mayoral elections for elected district councils, highlighting the need for clearer guidance and transparent timelines. In particular, conflicts arose over the voter registration provisions, which confined voters to designated polling stations, contrary to the flexibility allowed in the previous local government election law.

An August 2023 amendment to Law No 7 further complicates matters, as it permits political parties or coalitions of political parties to select mayors and deputy mayors based on a simple majority of seats, with neither the presence of council members nor their votes required. This led to disagreements and delays in both district council elections and seating processes. Discrepancies between the amended local government law and the Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC) closed-list procedure regarding the replacement of vacant council seats have sparked yet more disagreements and diverse interpretations. The eligibility of reserve candidates based on party position, district, polling station lists or votes has intensified tensions, with controversial clan-based replacement attempts worsening the situation.

There are additional legal challenges related to the controversial amendments to the state constitution—the amendments that change the state political system from a parliamentary to a presidential one, among other things. The fate of some of the amended constitutional articles is still unclear nearly a year after the then state assembly passed them. The ramifications of these articles have not been addressed in a political or legal sense; nor have they been settled between the opposing sides—especially between the government and opposition political parties. Given that a range of politicians, academicians and citizens have expressed their disapproval of these amendments, the potential for more legal challenges remains.

In the end, these legal challenges underscore the complexities inherent in the Puntland electoral process. They emphasise the need for comprehensive reforms to address existing legal ambiguities, ensure electoral fairness and uphold democratic principles.

## Political fragmentation

The fragmentation among politicians and other stakeholders is a critical factor in the stagnation of the election process. Some opposition politicians, political parties and traditional elders indicate that they are systematically excluded from participating in decision-making. They accuse the incumbent president of disregarding the traditional Puntland political and constitutional fabric by his unilateral management of key political processes such as democratic elections, constitutional amendments and indirect elections. Despite both peaceful and violent attempts to challenge this approach, these groups have been unable to prevent President Deni from completing these tasks on his own terms. They have also faced electoral defeats. In part, this is because the election obstruction strategy of the opposition was seen as counterproductive and insensitive. In particular, the use of violence, which led to displacement and death in Garowe, diminished both the reputation of and public support for the opposition across all Puntland regions but especially in the Nugaal region, their only stronghold. In contrast, the state executive has managed to hold elections and avoid direct confrontation, thereby growing public support for the government.

Although most opposition groups put up candidates to contest the incumbent president in the presidential election race, they accepted President Deni's re-election victory on 8 January 2024. Nonetheless, some losing opposition politicians and candidates, along with their regional constituents, still hold grudges. Consequently, they refuse to cooperate with the new administration in the post-election resumption of establishing fully democratic and representative electoral processes. These opposition groups include the leaders of two registered political parties (of Mideeye and Horseed political associations) who initially boycotted the election process, have taken their parties' certificates, nominated their PEC members, and participated in the election of the three districts in Nugaal.

This lack of cooperation from dissatisfied political opposition and traditional leaders poses a challenge to both the current administration and future iterations. The calls for inclusivity in decision-making about the elections that came from the political opposition and other political parties were largely ignored, thus the process remained vulnerable to disruptions. During the local elections, opposition from politicians ultimately forced the government back to the clan-based system. While these politicians have accepted the outcome of the 8 January 2024 Puntland presidential indirect elections, their resistant stance on democratic election process may remain unchanged. Therefore, the new state administration should adopt an inclusive and accommodating approach to policy.

### Proliferation of arms

The proliferation of arms and armed militias presents a potential hurdle to any election process. Puntland is no exception. During the local government elections in 2023, armed groups blocked roads to hinder the transportation of election materials to polling centres. In 2013, elections were canceled after armed militias set fire to election materials in two districts. This sparked a deadly clash between government and opposition forces, resulting in several fatalities, including top security officials. Study participants highlight the challenges of conducting elections in a region where the public is armed. The historical lack of capacity of Puntland to restrain clan militia and its security forces that respond to their respective clan political or individual opposition politicians' interest during both the 2013 and 2023 elections underscores this concern.

### Limited knowledge about direct elections

For effective public participation in elections, citizens need informed choices regarding political party agendas, the electoral system and the overall benefits of democracy. Despite the desire of the populace to transition from the clan system and their enthusiasm for electing representatives, as articulated in a public opinion survey on the Puntland local government elections, significant efforts are needed to educate the public about the essence of democracy, including direct (OPOV) elections. Limited awareness is partly attributed to low levels of political culture among the population, which has not experienced democratic elections for more than 60 years. This factor often leads to misinformation and a willingness to compromise democracy for stability when faced with difficulties. Capacity improvements in the aspects of operational conduct of political associations is crucial. These areas include policy formulation, fundraising, communication, presence and outreach. Fostering inclusivity and agenda-based programming, could help raise the political literacy and awareness of citizens. This was seen in the difference between the early elections (Eyl, Uffeyn, and Qardho) and the 30 districts elections of May 25, 2023, where the number of voter turnout was higher and spoiled votes lower. There is also a clear need for specially designed educational and awareness campaigns on the principles, plans, and practices of democracy and democratic elections in Puntland. The second phase of local government elections (in 2023) points to the benefits of such approaches. That is, consequent to political associations more actively engaging potential voters, changing their logos and issuing direct calls to vote, these efforts not only increased voter turnout but also reduced voting mistakes due to illiteracy and the inability to recognize the various political associations on the ballot paper.

### Institutionally weak political parties

Nascent political parties continue to face challenges that impact the overall electoral process. These challenges include a lack of institutionalization and limited outreach. Study participants also point out the issue of party patronage, whereby parties become the property of individuals. Former senior party members note that the mandates of all political party leaders expired in 2022, yet elections were not held as stipulated by party laws. This has resulted in internal disputes and divisions in the political parties,

leading prominent politicians to leave and subsequently oppose the electoral process. Another potential obstacle may emerge as a result of including other political parties in the government, even opposition parties. Many parties have formed close ties with the incumbent administration, which is evident in the appointment of party leaders to ministerial positions serving the current administration of Deni's cabinet.

Unresolved disputes within and between (some) political parties and the government also suggest serious structural and institutional deficiencies in both party and election-related governance. The frequency and intensity of pertinent disputes point to limitations in the capacity of existing institutions and legal frameworks to arbitrate and resolve disputes both within political parties and between them and the government. This includes the PEC and the constitutional court, which are tasked with resolving such conflicts. Despite several cases and arbitration requests submitted by politicians and political associations, the mandated institutions and infrastructures have failed to respond to and resolve disputes. This raises questions about their institutional capacity, independence and reliability.

Structural and electoral deficiencies stemming from previous legal and political obstacles remain unresolved. A draft parliamentary election law put forward by the council of ministers for state assembly approval did not go through after a group of women protesters gathered and blockaded the parliament building for several nights due to fear of escalation of armed conflicts between the government and the opposition forces which could cause a massive casualties and displacement. This action prevented state assembly members from entering the building due to fears of potential violence between the opposition and the government should state assembly members pass the new controversial law.

During a policy dialogue held with election stakeholders at the end of 2023, civil society representatives and political party members indicate that the decision to pause the election process amidst a prolonged political and electoral stalemate and revert to clan-based elections for the state legislature and presidency would initially alleviate tensions. They go on to point out that in the end, however, this would affect the long-term viability of the election process and its prospects for revival, thus hindering the emergence of an inclusive and conducive electoral environment. Political history in Puntland supports this: In 2013, President Abdirahman Farole halted democratic elections and instead returned to the clan-based selection of state assembly members and the president, which resulted in a ten-year delay in the resumption of the democratic election process.

## Financial support and sustainability

Direct election processes in Somalia present significant obstacles, given the novelty of the concept and the lack of state institutions with requisite competencies, capacities, and checks and balances. This renders the electoral process both costly and politically sensitive. The Puntland elections has relied heavily on financial and diplomatic assistance from the international community and donors. While this is a crucial lifeline, this approach remains inherently unsustainable. The dynamics of donor assistance and policies towards democratization in Puntland are influenced by both internal and external factors, as exemplified by the political and financial challenges encountered during the 2023 elections. The financial challenges were partially fuelled by the dispute between leadership in Garowe and Mogadishu, which adversely affected security, electoral integrity and funding. The recent deadlock between the federal government and Puntland further compounds these issues.

The prospect of a reduction in traditional donor support, primarily from European countries, adds to the uncertainty. Economic, political and security challenges in Europe may prompt traditional donors to prioritize their own domestic issues, potentially leading to a decrease in financial support for Somali democratization efforts and redirecting aid away from democratization endeavors in Puntland. This emphasises the fragility of external financial support mechanisms. It simultaneously highlights the pressing need for sustainable solutions to ensure the continuation and success of democratic elections in Puntland.

The Puntland elections is further complicated by the ambitions of its state leaders at the federal level. As argued by Martha and Smaker, Puntland leaders use the state as a ladder to reach the top leadership of FGs. This causes the funds that could have used for local state building to be channeled for the competition as happened in 2023. This was evident in 2023, when President Deni's bid for the national presidency stagnated the entire state electoral process, as the president and his administration focused their efforts on the federal-level campaign. While analysts acknowledge the impossibility of holding elections in 2022 due to a severe drought,



In conclusion, addressing these multifaceted challenges requires concerted effort from all stakeholders. This includes the government, the PEC, political party leaders, non-party politicians, traditional elders, civil society organisations, academics, analysts and think tanks, and the general public. Only through inclusive consultation, institutional reforms and sustained dialogue can Puntland achieve meaningful progress towards democratization and stability.

### Lack of clear administrative district and regional demarcation

The lack of clear administrative district and regional demarcation in Puntland has posed significant challenges to the implementation of multiparty One Person One Vote (OPOV) elections. This issue stems from the fact that boundaries between districts and regions remain undefined or contested, leading to disputes over jurisdiction and representation. These ambiguities have made it difficult to establish clear electoral constituencies, a crucial component for fair and transparent elections.

Before the 30 districts elections held on 25 May 2023, the Ministry of Interior undertook some efforts to address these demarcation issues. However, the process was incomplete, with several disputes between districts remaining unresolved. This partial and unofficial demarcation created confusion among voters and candidates alike, as there was no definitive framework to guide the electoral process.

The impact of these unresolved demarcation issues on the OPOV elections is profound. Without clear boundaries, it becomes challenging to ensure equal representation, as some districts might be overrepresented or underrepresented based on population size and geographic considerations. Furthermore, the lack of official demarcation opens the door for electoral disputes, as candidates and political parties may contest the legitimacy of the voting process in areas where boundaries are unclear.

This situation underscores the need for Puntland to prioritize the official and transparent demarcation of its districts and regions to support the successful implementation of OPOV elections in the future.

### Opportunities

Amidst the challenges confronting electoral efforts, several promising opportunities have emerged, signaling a potential path forward for the state. With a notably improved political climate following President Deni's re-election in January 2024, accompanied by a general acceptance of his leadership, Puntland is at a pivotal moment of relative stability. Public disapproval of the clan-based political system and President Deni's final term in office combine to create avenues for reorientation towards a more inclusive and democratic framework.

Five opportunities bear mention: the improved political climate, continuity and experience with President Deni, public disapproval of clan-based system and the constitutionally mandated term limits.

**Improved political climate:** Since the state presidential election on 8 January 2024, there has been a notable decrease in political tensions. President Deni's re-election victory has garnered general acceptance and support among the populace. Currently, there are no armed opposition and the relative peace and stability that this creates could be conducive to the continuation of election processes in the future. The president has also taken steps to accommodate some opposition politicians in his new cabinet. Agreements have also been reached with armed groups in the Nugaal region, paving the way for their re-integration into the formal security architecture of the state. These developments create an opportunity for the government to proceed with the paused three district elections within Nugaal region.

**Completed local elections:** The conclusion of the local elections in the remaining districts of Nugal region (Garowe, Dangorayo and Godob-jiiraan) on 23 July marked the end of the most important chapter of the local elections. This election does not only signal the end of the first phase of the process but also reinvigorated the hope of the resumption of the whole democratization process which many people regarded dead, due to many factors including the dismissal of the democratic elections and subsequent return of clan selection model in December 2024. Although the elections of the remaining districts were one of the top priority issues of the current government, its timing was uncertain. On 2 of June, PEC released the schedule of elections after they held extensive consultations with political parties.

The three districts had 64,746 registered voters. However, 37,032 casted votes in 80 polling stations, nearly 58% voter turnout. A total of 431 candidates vied for 81 seats (33 for Garowe, 27 for Dangorayo and 21 for Godob-jiiraan), where 23% of the candidates were female. However, only 10 women won seats. The local elections do not only prove the unhindered desire of the people to elect their representatives but also the capacity of PEC to organize elections swiftly and within a short period. The election body announced the elections less than 45 days before the election date. The short time might have contributed the lower voter turnout, but overall, the election outcomes was successful.

**Continuity and experience with President Deni:** President Deni's re-election offers continuity and experience in navigating the significant political, social and post-election challenges facing Puntland. Having previously served as president, Deni is familiar with both the leadership landscape and the current situation in Puntland. Importantly, Puntland has a complete and fully operational election infrastructure, as well as a solid track record of experience in conducting elections. These factors make it easier for the government to swiftly resume its electoral efforts.

**Public disapproval of clan-based selection system:** the Puntland populace has grown weary of the clan-based political system that has been in place since 1998. There is a clear desire among citizens for a peaceful transition to a multiparty democratic system. Despite occasional setbacks, such as the return to the clan-based system in 2013 and during the 2024 presidential and state assembly elections, public support for democratic elections remains strong. This presents an opportunity for the new government to garner support for a more definitive move away from clan-based selection of local district councils and members of the state parliament towards elected members. Though this contributes to certain clans and their traditional and political leaders fear of losing their clan—based earned quotas, the OPOV election system does not reject clan altogether as parties and candidates mobilize the clans they need.

**Constitutionally mandated term limits:** The constitutional term limit for the state president serves as an opportunity to enhance trust in the electoral process. Article 79 of the Puntland constitution stipulates that the president and vice president can be elected for two five-year terms only (for a total of ten years in office). With President Deni re-elected for his second and final term, suspicions of attempts to hold onto power are likely to diminish, as he is ineligible to run for another term, though there has not been a statement issued by the president.

## Recommendations

The following five recommendations capitalize on the current opportunities to steer Puntland towards a successful democratization process. First and foremost, the government must exhibit unwavering political will and commitment to the process, translating promises into tangible actions. This should be complemented by a comprehensive roadmap for inclusive elections, engaging a wide range of diverse stakeholders. Legal reforms, consultations with the public, completion of all local elections, and reforms within political parties and the Puntland Election Commission (PEC) which is now transiting from TPEC to PEC and needs all its laws and internal documents to be reviewed.

**Show clear political will and commitment:** The newly elected Puntland state administration should affirm its commitment to democratic election reforms, with emphasis on the importance of inclusion of all stakeholders and transparency of the process to Puntland citizens. To demonstrate this commitment effectively, the government should actively engage in consultations and dialogues with a diverse range of stakeholders, including political parties (especially the opposition), civil society, academics and other experts, the private sector, marginalized constituencies and so on.

**Strengthen public awareness and political literacy:** The government, alongside the PEC and relevant civil society organisations, should strengthen civic education, with a focus on developing and improving the political literacy of citizens. This can help citizens to actively participate in elections, especially in OPOV election cycles. Such efforts should target diverse audiences through multiple channels such as mass media and educational forums from an early stage.

**Finalise the district administrative and regional demarcation:** It is crucial to prioritize the finalization and official release of district and regional boundaries. This can be achieved through a transparent, inclusive process that involves all key stakeholders, including local communities, political leaders, and relevant government agencies. Ensuring broad-based participation will help mitigate disputes and foster a sense of ownership and legitimacy in the electoral process.

Additionally, it is recommended that Puntland establish an independent boundary commission tasked with overseeing the demarcation process and resolving any ongoing disputes between districts. This commission should work closely with the Ministry of Interior and other relevant authorities to ensure that the demarcation aligns with Puntland's legal and constitutional frameworks. By institutionalizing this process, Puntland can lay the groundwork for more credible and equitable OPOV elections in the future.

**Undertake legal reform:** The government should initiate the establishment of an independent committee of experts to undertake a thorough examination and evaluation of the amended state constitutional articles, the current Local Government Act (Law No 7) and the Election Commission law. This review primarily aims to propose legal and political solutions and clarifications to ongoing controversies and disputes. The government should foster dialogue about the findings of this review process with and among the political parties to mitigate the political fragmentation that resulted from the constitutional amendments (and other related actions) during its first term in office.

**Focus on financial support and sustainability:** Over the short and medium term, it is necessary to strengthen collaboration with the international community to facilitate the ongoing availability of funding to continue the OPOV election process in Puntland. Over the long term, however, the sustainability plans include allocating a robust Puntland government budget for elections, gradually reducing dependency on donor funding. Parallel to this, the political parties should strive to secure their own sustainable funding sources, including grassroots membership contributions, while enhancing institutional capacities.

**Unite the timing of the local elections:** The local elections were conducted in three phases, each phase presented unique challenges, opportunities and lessons that aided the amelioration of the next phase. The first phase was conducted on 21 October 2021 where three districts participated, the second phase was on 25 May 2023, this phase was supposed to cover all remaining districts. However, three districts in Nugal region were delayed, leading the third phase covering the delayed districts to be held on 23 July. The biggest problem now lies the combination of all local elections because the tenure of councilors shall expire at different times, for instance, only two years are remaining from the term of the phase one elected council, while the second and the third phases have four and five years remaining respectively. There is a need for the election commission to unite all local elections after consultations with political stakeholders.

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