

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment in 1998, Puntland State of Somalia has had a clear objective on its agenda: to transit from a clan-based system to a democratic multiparty system rooted in the one-person-one-vote (OPOV) principle. Despite the passage of over two decades, the journey towards fully institutionalized democracy, with an end to clan-centric governance, has seen both strides and setbacks.

The tenure of President Abdirahman Faroole (2009-2014) marked a renewed impetus in this direction. Although initiated later in his term and not brought to full fruition, notable progress was made, including the establishment of foundational legal frameworks and the creation of Puntland's first transitional electoral commission (TPEC I) in July 2011. Public support for democratic evolution was palpable in 2014, with a perception survey showing a 91% readiness among respondents to participate in voting (PDRC, 2014).

With President Said Abdullahi Deni's ascension to power in 2019 came a reaffirmed commitment to this democratic transition, evidenced by the formation of TPEC III. The Commission embarked on the ambitious task of conducting local council elections based on the OPOV system. The pilot elections in the districts of Eyl, Uffeyn, and Qardho were conceived as learning experiences. Despite attempts by political associations to delay the elections, civil society and TPEC stood firm, culminating in a milestone event on October 25, 2021, where tens of thousands of citizens, many voting for the first time, participated in the

electoral process, setting a precedent for OPOV across Somalia.

The path to this milestone was fraught with obstacles, but the successful conduct of pilot elections laid the groundwork for further implementation. After extensive preparations and overcoming periods of uncertainty and unrest, an additional 30 districts moved forward with local elections in May 2023.

This policy paper aims to share the lessons gleaned from Puntland's local government elections, informed by a comprehensive analysis of the electoral process by the Puntland Development Research Center (PDRC), as well as public election data, academic research, and stakeholder interviews. It aims to provide actionable policy recommendations for refining future electoral endeavors in Puntland and guiding other federal member states in Somalia as they embark on similar democratic ventures.

2. KEY LESSONS LEARNED

2.1 The importance of political will and early preparations:

The critical factor contributing to the success of the local government elections in Puntland was the demonstration of robust political will by the incumbent government, particularly president Said Abdullahi Deni. Upon assuming office in 2019, President Deni swiftly fulfilled his pledge to implement a multi-party system by establishing

the third Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC III) within a short period. Despite various challenges and interruptions, the government's commitment to the process was evident through its early preparations and initiatives for a fair and transparent elections in Puntland. The delay in the process, caused by Deni's campaigning for federal elections, led to skepticism regarding his intentions and fairness in the electoral process, triggering political instability and conflicts. Indeed, earlier president Deni was promoting free and fair elections in Puntland, while was handpicking members of the federal upper and Lower Houses to his favour. However, after his lost bid, the significance of political will and early preparations was demonstrated through the government's proactive steps in addressing potential challenges and insuring inclusive and peaceful electoral exercise in 33 districts.

Implication: Political will, exemplified through timely and comprehensive preparations, fosters public trust, enhances the credibility of the electoral process, and contributes to the legitimacy of elected officials.

Relevance: Recognizing the impact of political will on the democratic process is crucial for fostering stable governance and promoting public participation in decision-making.

2.2 Advantages of piloting new processes:

The early implementation of the election piloting process in Puntland was crucial in identifying key challenges and enhancing the overall effectiveness of subsequent elections. The pilot elections in three districts highlighted several critical issues including low voter turnout, vote spoilage, inconsistencies in polling stations capacities, and the potential disenfranchisement of political associations. These challenges prompted corrective measures, such as strategic timing adjustments, enhanced communication strategies, and improvements in ballot design. Additionally, the introduction of a modified closed-list model aimed to address the discontent of political associations. All in all, the pilot process

demonstrated the importance of balanced district selection, building trust among stakeholders, and maintaining political diversity in electoral representation.

Implication: The piloting process underscores the significance of a systematic approach to electoral planning, including early identification and resolution of potential challenges. The lessons learned highlight the need for tailored communication strategies, transparent ballot designs, and standardized polling station capacities to promote greater voter participation and fairness in electoral process. The piloting process also emphasized the importance of responsive electoral frameworks that consider feedback from stakeholders to promote political engagement and inclusivity.

Relevance: The relevance of the lessons learned from the election piloting process in Puntland extends to electoral practices in other regions, emphasizing the importance of strategic planning and adaptability in democratic transitions. The identified challenges and corrective measures offer valuable insights for governments, electoral commissions, and stakeholders involved in shaping electoral frameworks and promoting transparent and inclusive electoral practices. The relevance of these lessons lies in their potential to contribute to the enhancement of democratic processes and the establishment of fair and credible electoral systems in diverse socio-political contexts.

2.3 Challenges faced by political associations in the context of a new multiparty system:

The introduction of a multiparty system in Puntland marks a noteworthy progression in the region's governance. Yet, these emerging political entities are encountering significant hurdles. Institutional and structural constraints hamper their outreach and viability, while financial sustainability remains a pressing concern. These obstacles could potentially disrupt the proper functioning of the political groups and decelerate Puntland's democratic advancement. The political associations' nascent infrastructure, limited civic

engagement, and economic challenges have slowed the political parties' establishment and hampered their capacity to promote inclusiveness, wield political clout, and maintain enduring operations. The early phase of Puntland's political parties signals a critical need for focused initiatives aimed at bolstering their institutional framework and advancing a more participatory and enduring democratic model

Implication: Addressing the challenges faced by political associations/parties is essential for fostering a more robust and inclusive multiparty system, which can contribute to the region's political stability, social cohesion, and effective governance. Overcoming the barriers related to institutional development, public outreach, and financial sustainability will be vital in consolidating the democratic gains and promoting a more participatory and transparent political environment in Puntland.

Relevance: The challenges confronting political associations in Puntland resonate across various post-conflict regions, shedding light on the intricate process of establishing and nurturing political entities in such complex environments. Puntland's experiences provide instructive lessons for other regions facing comparable predicaments, underscoring the critical need for robust institutional underpinnings, active public participation, and assured financial viability. The significance of these lessons lies in their capacity to inform policymakers, electoral bodies, and relevant stakeholders, guiding them towards fostering democratic practices and institutions that are both inclusive and resilient within diverse socio-political landscapes.

2.4 Importance of public engagement and local ownership:

The successful resolution of Puntland's electoral dispute benefitted significantly from local backing. Clan sub-committees dealt with community issues, and community events supported the democratic process. Puntland's citizens showed a remarkable commitment to democracy, crucial for peaceful elections in 33 districts across seven regions. Nevertheless, hurdles remain, especially in engaging the public and improving literacy,

crucial for representing nomadic and rural populations. The Puntland Development Research Center (PDRC), in concert with other civil society organizations within the Puntland Non-state Actors Association (PUNSAA), conducted widespread campaigns to educate on the electoral process, promoting the "one person, one vote" ethos. A variety of communication means, like print, multimedia, and interactive sessions, led to a 95.3% rate of correctly cast votes. Challenges did arise, such as the seizure and destruction of election materials in Burtinle by protesters. Yet, the swift replacement by the Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC) underscored the populace's firm resolve for democratic practices

Implication: The success of Puntland's democratic elections is a testament to the crucial role of public engagement and community stewardship. The eagerness of local communities, spurred by strategic awareness initiatives and the distribution of educational resources, has been instrumental in boosting civic consciousness and fostering inclusive engagement, notably among underrepresented and non-literate groups. This emphasis on grassroots efforts accentuates the value of cultivating trust and nurturing a sense of communal investment, which in turn solidifies the authenticity and integrity of the electoral mechanisms. Puntland's narrative is a reminder of the enduring impact of such community-led endeavors, highlighting the profound influence of a well-informed and proactive citizenry in advancing the ethos of democracy.

Relevance: The model of community engagement practiced in Puntland is emblematic, with implications that reach far beyond its borders, particularly enlightening for regions emerging from conflict. This paradigm demonstrates the importance of including all societal factions, especially those on the periphery such as rural and nomadic communities, through customized informational campaigns and teaching efforts. The Puntland Electoral Commission's adept handling of the Burtinle incident underscores a robust adaptability and the unwavering resolve of both the authorities and the public to overcome impediments, affirming the resilience essential for upholding democratic tenets.

2.5 Impact of changes in election model – inclusivity challenges:

In Puntland, the local council elections employ a proportional representation (PR) system, aligning seats with parties' vote shares. Despite its intent for equity, the system's complexity led to clan tensions and misrepresentation due to its closed list approach. This approach, which dictates the sequence of candidates' potential election, inadvertently hindered inclusive representation, especially for women and minorities. For women, specific challenges arose from the misapplication of gender balance rules, such as mandated candidate ratios and voter distribution, exacerbated by the rushed timeline between legislative changes and campaign initiation.

Furthermore, minority communities have struggled for fair representation, with the new interpretation of the electoral model potentially impacting their electoral success, despite previous inclusion efforts through guidelines like the 'Gender and Social Inclusive Guideline.'

The transition to this system has illuminated the intricacies of adopting a PR model, particularly the closed list method. Political groups' difficulties in grasping the PR system call for extensive education and support to enable a smoother changeover. The lack of effective gender balance enforcement highlights the necessity for robust implementation strategies and monitoring to ensure substantive participation of women and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Implication: Puntland's experience is instructive for post-conflict democracies, emphasizing the imperative for inclusive electoral frameworks to unite fragmented societies and prevent deepening divides. A transparent and equitable election process is paramount for nurturing societal trust and fostering enduring peace and development.

Relevance: The process also underlines the value of electoral literacy, underscoring the need for all involved—political bodies, candidates, and the electorate—to fully understand the system to prevent misinterpretations and encourage active,

impactful participation. Timely and efficacious application of electoral mandates, with particular attention to disadvantaged groups, is critical for their significant involvement in the democratic process and in shaping a more inclusive, resilient post-conflict democracy.

2.6 Importance of strong institutions and upholding the rule of law

The successful transition to democracy – at all levels – in Puntland is contingent upon strong state capacity and the rule of law. It highlights that a key requirement for democratization is a state's ability to monopolize the legitimate use of force, thereby ensuring the conduct of free and fair elections. However, the recurrent challenges posed by armed groups during the local elections in Puntland, notably in obstructing the transportation of voter registration materials and seizing election materials as well as halting elections in three districts, underscore the ongoing threats to state authority and the fragility of the democratic process.

Furthermore, the significance of institutional capacity within the state is highlighted, particularly in the effective implementation of policies such as the demarcation of district boundaries, which significantly influenced the participation of various clans in the electoral process. The analysis also emphasizes the crucial role of upholding the rule of law, emphasizing that the absence of a functional constitutional court in Puntland has hindered the resolution of key election-related disputes. The failure of the enforcement agencies to implement rules in a manner that fosters public trust has contributed to the perception of the local elections as being heavily influenced by security forces, undermining the legitimacy of the electoral process.

Implication: The implication is profound, underscoring the complex interplay between state capacity, the rule of law, and the successful establishment of democratic processes. The persistent challenges posed by armed groups not only signify the precarious security situation but also the potential vulnerability of democratic institutions in the face of such threats. The lack of a functional supreme and constitutional court,

and the perceived instrumental use of security forces during the electoral process further erode public trust in the fairness and impartiality of the government, threatening the legitimacy of the democratic transition. These challenges emphasize the urgent need for robust institutional reforms, focused not only on enhancing state capacity but also on fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, essential for ensuring the sustainability and credibility of democratic practices in Puntland.

Relevance: The case of Puntland serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the essential need for a comprehensive approach to state-building that prioritizes not only the consolidation of state authority but also the effective implementation of the rule of law. By emphasizing the importance of functional institutional frameworks, the establishment of transparent and accountable governance structures and the cultivation of public trust. This should serve policy makers and practitioners seeking to foster resilient and sustainable democratic systems in post-conflict settings.

2.7 Puntland challenges at state-assembly democratization

The transition to democracy in Puntland illuminates the nuanced interplay of political, clan, and societal forces shaping the region's governance. The successful local elections, facilitated by clan elders' engagement and the manageable scale of political competition, contrast with the complexities that surfaced at the state level, where expansion of the electoral process was met with strife and setbacks.

Particularly in the parliamentary elections, the strategic distribution of power and representation emerges as a critical concern. The entrenchment of seats based on regional and clan affiliations, alongside anxiety over potential shifts in power balance, presents significant hurdles to democratization. Concerns that the parliamentary elections might be exploited to prolong the presidential tenure add layers of complexity, underlining the urgency for transparent and accountable governance.

Further, the sensitive matter of power rotation among sub-clans from varied regions highlights the delicate balance required in the political restructuring, as entrenched interests and long-standing traditions converge with democratic ambitions. This intricate political tapestry calls for a considered strategy to reconcile the array of interests and historical precedents with the goal of achieving a robust and participatory democratic system in Puntland.

Implication: The implications of the challenges faced in the expansion of the democratization process in Puntland underscore the need for comprehensive strategies to address the concerns of multiple stakeholders such as opposition, political parties, elders, and citizens. Government alone does not have the authority to proceed with state assembly elections through one person one vote without a collaborative approach. Understanding the complexities associated with power dynamics, traditional customs, and potential misuse of elections is crucial for designing effective mechanisms that promote inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. By addressing the underlying fears and interests of various actors, policymakers can work on greater trust and cooperation, thereby facilitating a smoother transition to democratic reforms at the state level.

Relevance: The exploration of the challenges and dynamics in Puntland's democratic transition holds significant relevance in the broader context of transitional democracies worldwide. It highlights the complexities involved in balancing traditional power structures and democratic reforms, emphasizing the necessity of fostering inclusive governance systems that accommodate diverse societal interests. The case study underscores the importance of transparent and accountable political processes. Furthermore, the emphasis on potential obstacles, such as the fear of political manipulation and concerns over the continuity of power, serves as a valuable lesson for other transitional democracies grappling with similar issues. By delving into the intricacies of the democratic transition process, this policy paper provides crucial insights for policymakers

and stakeholders seeking to navigate the delicate balance between traditional and modern democratic governance in post-conflicts or transitional settings.

3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the insights of Puntland's local government elections, the following policy suggestions are offered to bolster the democratization journey. These are designed to reinforce democratic processes within Puntland and to inform other federal member states in Somalia as they navigate electoral reforms

1. Enhancing Political Commitment and Early Planning:

- ✓ Foster unwavering dedication from political leaders to democratic ideals, ensuring the establishment of transparent institutions and electoral systems in advance of elections.
- ✓ Chart a detailed democratization strategy, underpinning the necessity of an incumbent government's firm resolve and timely groundwork for forthcoming polls.
- ✓ Empower electoral bodies with the necessary resources to conduct elections that are transparent and inclusive.

2. Trialling New Electoral Models:

- ✓ Pilot novel electoral methods in selected locales to gauge their practicality and address any issues that might surface.
- ✓ Cultivate synergies between electoral bodies, political entities, and civil society for a holistic grasp of the electoral mechanics.
- ✓ Customize communication to overcome literacy barriers, refine ballot design for voter clarity, and ensure fair resource and voter allocation at polls.

3. Strengthening Political Associations:

- ✓ Promote internal democracy within parties via open leadership selection.
- ✓ Enhance partnerships between parties and civil society to champion outreach and mirror Puntland's diverse populace.
- ✓ Establish robust funding avenues for political groups to maintain their independence and effectiveness.

4. Empowering Communities and Educating Voters:

- ✓ Launch comprehensive voter education targeting specific community needs to bolster literacy, access to information, and ballot clarity.
- ✓ Initiate widespread community empowerment programs using varied media to encourage active civic involvement.
- ✓ Tailor educational initiatives for nomadic and rural communities, underlining the value of informed voting and democratic tenets.

5. Fostering Inclusiveness and Diversity in Elections:

- ✓ Advocate for fair participation of underrepresented groups through policies that support their active engagement in democracy.
- ✓ Allow stakeholders ample time to understand and integrate electoral reforms, back female and minority candidates, and fortify IDP and minority participation in governance.

6. Creating Adaptive Electoral Frameworks:

- ✓ Intensify security to counteract militant threats, build law enforcement capacities, and support transparent boundary-setting to build clan and community trust.

- ✓ Enhance the constitutional court's efficiency for electoral grievances, impartial rule enforcement, and transparent security measures to foster public trust.

7. Confronting State-Level Democratization Hurdles:

- ✓ Undertake extensive dialogues to address power-sharing concerns, assure transparent parliamentary elections, and ensure balanced clan and regional representation.
- ✓ Develop safeguards against the exploitation of elections for individual gain, assure process transparency, and guarantee fair power transitions.
- ✓ Commit to inclusive and transparent dialogues to overcome opposition to state-level democratic change.
- ✓ Maintain traditional governance aspects while encouraging diverse stakeholder cooperation for a seamless transition to democracy.

4. CONCLUSION

Puntland's journey towards democratization and political evolution has been marked by the move to a multiparty system, evidencing the formation of a dynamic political landscape. Yet, this evolution is not without its hurdles, including systemic challenges, outreach limitations, and fiscal constraints.

Efforts to promote public engagement and local stewardship have been pivotal, with the local council elections underscoring the value of grassroots involvement. However, the representational adequacy of women and minorities remains a concern.

The shift to a proportional representation (PR) model was a strategic move to foster inclusivity, but its rollout faced difficulties, especially in ensuring gender parity and minority representation.

Establishing resilient democratic institutions and the rule of law also encountered hurdles, with the presence of armed groups jeopardizing the electoral process's integrity.

As democratization extends its reach, it encounters resistance from key actors, reflecting the intricate web of interests inherent in governance transitions. Addressing these challenges calls for a fortification of institutional frameworks to solidify rule of law, security, and electoral integrity.

To build a truly representative democracy, deliberate actions must be taken to increase the political influence of marginalized communities. Empowering these groups, ensuring gender balance, and upholding citizens' rights are fundamental for a stable and enduring democratic system.

Additionally, accommodating the diverse concerns of politicians, elders, and minority groups is vital for democratization to take hold at all government tiers. Constructive dialogue, transparent practices, and robust conflict resolution mechanisms are essential to steer through the complexities and secure a smooth transition towards comprehensive democracy in Puntland.