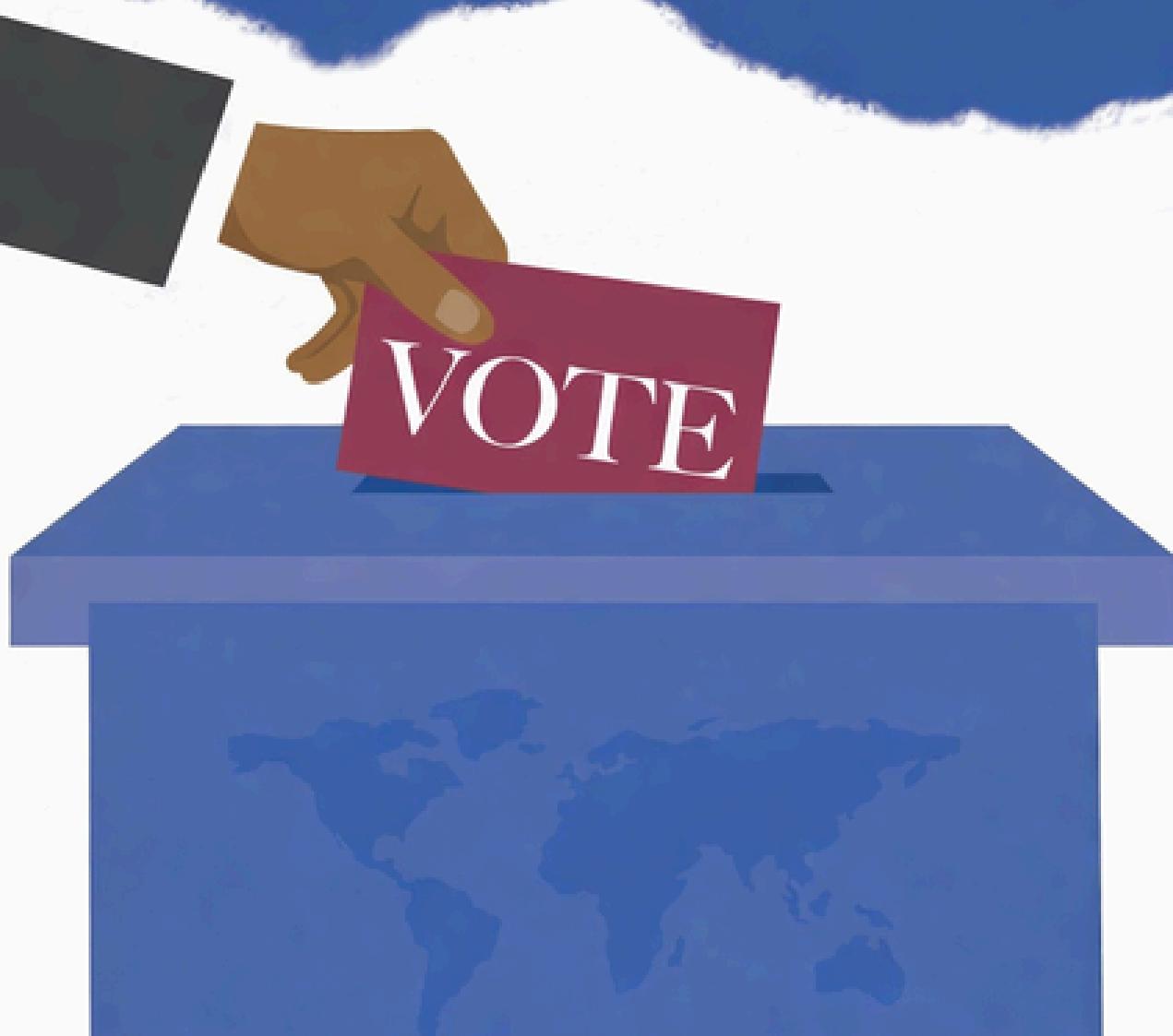


BEYOND THE BALLOT:

Addressing Post-Electoral Institutional Instability in
Puntland's First Elected Local Councils

Abdinur Jama



Contents

Key highlights of the study	3
Introduction	4
Overview of Puntland's Local Governance Democratization Journey	4
Objective of the study	5
Methodology	5
Root Causes of Local Council Instability	6
Legal Gaps	6
Political Parties and Council Instability	8
Governance Awareness of Local Councilors	9
Clan Dynamics and Local Council Instability	10
Personal Interests and Resources Incentives	10
Impact on Service Delivery	11
Existing Interventions and Their Gaps	12
MOIFAD's Response to Local Council Instability	12
Capacity-Building	12
Conclusion	12
Policy Recommendations	13

Key Highlights of the Study

- Historic Democratic Transition:** Puntland conducted one-person-one-vote local council elections for the first time in over two decades, marking a major shift from clan-based appointments toward citizen-driven democratic governance. As Puntland continues on this trajectory, sustaining these gains will require strengthening the institutional frameworks and administrative systems that support democratic governance beyond the electoral moment.
- Post-Election Governance Paradox:** Despite electoral success, several district councils experienced mayoral dismissals, leadership disputes, and institutional paralysis, indicating that democratic gains at the ballot box have not yet translated into governance stability or service delivery improvements. Creating standardized post-election stabilization mechanisms and clearer procedures for council functioning would help safeguard continuity and ensure that elected mandates are effectively implemented.
- Legal Ambiguities as a Structural Driver:** Contradictions between the Puntland Constitution and the Regional Administration and Local Government Law (Law No. 3/2023). Councils also lack formal procedures for managing no-confidence motions or resolving leadership conflicts this created uncertainty around mayoral elections, motions, and succession, fueling disputes within councils. Aligning these legal frameworks and clarifying procedures for mayoral selection, motion thresholds, and leadership succession would reduce contestation and provide a more predictable legal environment for local governance.
- Weak Institutionalization of Political Parties:** Political parties remain largely electoral platforms with limited ideological coherence, internal democracy, or post-election engagement with elected councilors, contributing to fragmentation and undisciplined council behavior. Enhancing party practices such as candidate vetting, coalition coordination, and continuous engagement with councilors would allow parties to evolve into functional political institutions capable of supporting democratic governance rather than merely competing in elections.
- Clan Dynamics as a Persistent Governance Force:** Clan identities continue to influence candidate support, leadership negotiations, and council decision-making, often overriding party structures and formal procedures in mayoral contests. Allowing traditional actors to contribute through structured mediation roles, while respecting institutional processes, may help align customary and formal governance systems and reduce political tension.
- Governance Awareness and Capacity Gaps:** Many local councilors and district officials lack adequate understanding of local government laws, accountability mechanisms, planning, and fiscal management, weakening oversight and fueling tensions with district executives. Providing foundational orientation and training on legal mandates, budgeting, planning, and oversight would strengthen the ability of councils and district administrations to execute their roles effectively.
- Institutional Weakness in Service Delivery:** District administrations specially the non-JPLG districts, face limited administrative systems, insufficient financial resources, weak accountability mechanisms, and underdeveloped organizational structures, constraining their ability to plan, collect revenue, or deliver basic services. Strengthening district-level administrative capacity, improving revenue systems, and introducing basic planning and reporting standards would enhance service delivery and support citizen confidence.
- Fragmented Interventions:** Existing responses, including MOIFAD facilitation, donor-funded training, and traditional mediation, have reduced immediate tensions but remain ad hoc, under-resourced, and insufficiently institutionalized for long-term governance stability. Greater coordination between the government, donors, and civil society would enhance coherence, reduce duplication, and build sustainable institutional capacity rather than short-term crisis response.

1. Introduction

Overview of Puntland's Local Governance Democratization Journey

Since its founding in 1998 as a response to the post-1991 state collapse, Puntland has played a pioneering role in Somalia's peacebuilding and state rebuilding. Initially guided by traditional elders (Isimo), who mediated both political and clan-based conflicts, Puntland gradually adopted institutional frameworks aimed at transitioning from clan-based selection to a more representative political system based on citizen participation[1].

Puntland reached a defining milestone in its democratic transition by conducting historic 'one-person, one-vote' local council elections in three phases between 2021 and 2024. Starting with pilot polls in Qardho, Eyl, and Ufeyn in 2021, the process expanded to 33 districts by July 2024. ^[2] These elections, overseen by the Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC), the State's independent Electoral Management Body (EMB), marked the first direct exercise in the region since 1969, successfully shifting away from the traditional 25-year-old indirect clan-based selection system in PL State. Key legal reforms and the introduction of political associations have since been hailed as critical steps toward a social contract between the state and citizens^[3].

This electoral milestone also fulfilled long-standing commitments articulated in the 1998 Puntland Charter and later the 2012 Constitution, which called for decentralization and the democratization of public authority through district-level governance [4].

Moreover, through support from programs such as the Joint Programme on Local Governance (JPLG), Puntland strengthened municipal finance systems, built the capacities of local councils, and developed legal frameworks to enable service delivery and local autonomy [5].

Despite these promising developments, the post-local council election in Puntland has encountered notable setbacks. An emerging issue of concern has been the rapid change in mayoral leadership across several districts, where some mayors resigned, and others were replaced by their councils soon after the local council elections. Nearly eight districts, including Bosaso, Galkayo, Carmo, Ceelaayo, Bargal, Dangorayo, Saaxo, and Harfo, experienced mayoral removals, with the Ministry of Interior, Federal Affairs, and Democratization (MOIFAD) subsequently facilitating the reconstitution of most of these councils. Emerging reports indicate that similar tensions are now arising in other districts as well.

Preliminary insights suggested that the drivers of this instability are multifaceted. They include inter-party conflicts, clan-based grievances, dissatisfaction with mayoral election procedures, ambiguities within the legal framework, and allegations of financial inducements. In practice, councils intended to foster accountable and development-oriented governance have, in some cases, been transformed into arenas of political contestation and elite bargaining.

[1] Heritage Institute (2022). *Puntland's Local Elections: An Electoral Experiment and a Test of Democratization*, pp. 4–6.

[2] Puntland Development and Research Center (2022). *District Elected Councils: Achievements and Perspectives*, p. 6.

[3] Interpeace (2015). *Puntland's Political Transformation: Taking the First Steps Toward Democratic Elections*, p. 10.

[4] Heritage Institute (2022), pp. 6–7; Puntland Constitution (2012), Article 18.1

[5] UN-Habitat & JPLG (2020). *Building Local Governance in Somalia: JPLG Brochure*, pp. 2–5.

3. Methodology

Such instability has had profound implications for local governance. It has disrupted service delivery, undermined public confidence, and weakened the institutional continuity essential for translating electoral legitimacy into effective governance. The resulting uncertainty also poses the risk of diminishing citizen engagement in future electoral processes, thereby reversing recent advances in political accountability and inclusive representation.

The study addresses a central paradox in Puntland's governance trajectory: the extent to which democratic progress achieved through the ballot box is being challenged by post-election institutional fragility and political volatility. By examining the phenomenon of mayoral dismissals and broader council instability, the research provides critical insights for MOIFAD, political parties, development partners, and civil society actors working to consolidate democratic governance in the region.

2. Objectives of the Study

- To explore the main drivers behind the dismissal of elected mayors in Puntland's local councils.
- To identify political, legal, institutional, and social factors contributing to post-election instability.
- To examine the consequences of this instability on service delivery, public confidence, and the legitimacy of governance.
- To provide actionable policy and institutional recommendations to stabilize councils and protect democratic mandates.

The study was conducted between August and October 2025 and employed a qualitative research design to examine the political, legal, institutional, and social factors driving mayoral dismissals and council instability in Puntland. Data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIs) across four purposively selected districts, Bosaso, Gardo, Dangorayo, and Garowe, chosen to capture urban, semi-urban, and administrative contexts, including both affected and unaffected districts. In total, eight FGDs were conducted, each comprising seven participants, for a total of 56 participants. These FGDs included local councilors, political party members, legal experts, civil society representatives, and youth and women leaders, and explored perceptions of elections, drivers of mayoral dismissals, and the impact of instability on governance and service delivery.

A further fifteen KIs were undertaken with officials from MOIFAD, legal experts, political party representatives, academics, CSOs, traditional elders, business associations, and local council members, yielding confidential and in-depth insights into governance dynamics, legal gaps, and institutional challenges contributing to instability.

In addition to the primary data collection, the study undertook a desk review of key legal and policy documents, including Puntland Law No. 3 on the Establishment of Local Governments and the Puntland Constitution, as well as previous studies, reports, and evaluations produced by MOIFAD, PDRC, and development partners. This triangulation of field data and documentary evidence enabled a comprehensive assessment of the governance and institutional frameworks shaping local council stability in Puntland.

Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that participants possessed direct knowledge or experience of local governance dynamics, while considerations of gender, age, clan affiliation, and political alignment were used to support balanced representation. Data were analyzed thematically and guided by the research questions, with findings triangulated across FGDs, KIIs, and desk review materials to enhance validity.

Ethical protocols were observed throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality were maintained, and politically sensitive insights are presented in aggregate form to protect individuals, given the contextual sensitivities of local governance in Puntland.

4. Root Causes of Local Council Instability

The study reveals that the instability of Puntland's elected local councils stems from a complex interplay of legal, political, institutional, and social factors. At its core, the challenge lies in the gap between electoral success and institutional readiness. While Puntland has achieved a major democratic milestone through one-person-one-vote elections, the structures and systems required to sustain this progress remain largely underdeveloped. Weak legal coherence, fragile political party systems, limited governance awareness among councilors, and persistent clan influence have all combined to weaken council stability.

4.1 Legal Gaps

Following early local elections, seven political associations issued a 13-point joint communique on November 29, 2022, outlining essential reforms for the upcoming statewide voter registration. By the 30-district elections in May 2023, only two key recommendations had been implemented: (1) TPEC's March 2023 adoption of a hybrid electoral system, where associations nominated candidates in specific zones despite using a closed-list ballot, and (2) the establishment of the Constitutional Court in April 2023. Following the May elections, the constitution

was amended in July 2023 to remove the three-party limit, allowing all eight (8) associations to qualify as parties. Additionally, an August 2023 amendment to the Local Government Law (notably Article 9) mandated that any association or coalition securing a district majority has the exclusive right to form the local administration without external interference.

Amendments to the Local Government (Law No.3) significantly impacted electoral outcomes. Specifically, the mandate of MOIFAD to inaugurate elected councils was delayed by protracted alliance-building negotiations between political associations. This resulted in the late seating of many district councils, with some councilors yet to be fully established in their roles, hindering initial planning and operations. Furthermore, the transfer of power to elect district leadership directly to political parties effectively stripped council members of their ability to elect mayors and deputies from among themselves. While intended to strengthen party discipline, councilors perceive this shift as a significant erosion of their local council.

Members argue that the parties unilaterally decide who becomes the mayor and deputy mayor through a coalition. This has led local councils to begin their work while they are already divided over the method of electing their leadership. MOIFAD has faced challenges from local councils during the formation of these councils. During our data collection for this study, one point of consensus among all respondents was that this provision was the primary cause of recurring disputes within Puntland's local councils, which in many cases resulted in the dismissal or resignation of district mayors. One council member even described the process of selecting a mayor under this system as similar to the old practice, when the president used to appoint mayors and deputy mayors by decree.

During the FGDs, the council argues that they are not satisfied with being led by an individual whom they have not elected, nor has shared a leadership vision and program of action with the council before assuming office.

Several council members interviewed emphasized that district mayors who are not elected directly by the council tend to disregard their advice and oversight role. Both key informants and council members agree that if the mayor and deputy mayor were elected by the council itself, many of the recurring conflicts in local councils could be avoided. A positive example can be drawn from the first three districts that elected their own leadership, where no major conflicts have since emerged, nor have their mayors resigned or been dismissed.

According to the Puntland Constitution, Article 124, Paragraph 1 stipulates that “*the members of the District Council, in their first meeting, shall elect a chairperson and a vice chairperson.*” This demonstrates a clear inconsistency with Law No. 3, creating a contradiction against the law. Legal experts interviewed for this study emphasized the need to harmonize the Puntland Constitution with the Local Government Law to restore legal clarity and legitimacy.

Moreover, Article 29, Paragraph 4 of the Law No. 3 states that “*Candidates for mayor and deputy mayor shall be nominated by their respective political parties, and no independent candidate may stand without nomination from their party.*” Respondents noted that political parties have exploited this provision by unilaterally nominating candidates without conducting internal contests or consulting their elected council members. In many cases, parties also decide among themselves which district leadership positions to cede or retain, bypassing the authority of local councils.

In October 2023, MOIFAD issued procedures for the seating and swearing-in of local councils, requiring that two-thirds (2/3) of council members be present to validate the mayoral election process.

The intent was to minimize controversy and ensure transparency. However, Law No. 3 does not stipulate that the council must be seated before the announcement of the mayor and deputy mayor, whether through majority party nomination or coalition arrangements.

As a result, some mayors and deputy mayors have already assumed office prior to appearing before the council, undermining their perceived legitimacy. This has triggered motions from council members seeking to test their authority, often resulting in the resignation or dismissal of mayors.

Another critical gap is the absence of provisions outlining the procedure for filling the office when a mayor or deputy mayor resigns or is removed from office. In practice, some districts have conducted open elections, while others have allowed the majority party to simply reappoint a replacement. For example, in Galkayo, when the sitting mayor resigned, the Kaah Party, which held the majority, reappointed another member of the same party as mayor. This did not resolve the council’s grievances and led to a renewed motion against the mayor in the very first council session. It is therefore recommended to strengthen legal frameworks and electoral policies to clearly outline procedures for succession following resignation or dismissal.

Article 32, Paragraph 2 currently allows one-third (1/3) of the council to initiate a motion against the mayor or deputy mayor. Stakeholders interviewed pointed out that this threshold is too low, making it easy for councils to consistently entertain motions and destabilize leadership. The overwhelming majority of respondents suggested raising the threshold to at least one-half (½) of the council members. Such an amendment would reduce frivolous motions and ease the pressure placed on mayors and their deputies, thereby strengthening stability and continuity of governance at the district level. Furthermore, the law lacks clarity on the process of introducing motions against district leadership. As respondents highlighted, motions are often raised without a formal accountability session, and in some cases, without the council even being in active session. Consequently, some mayors face motions that are not grounded in structured oversight. The persistence of contradictions in the law and procedural gaps has weakened the authority of councils, destabilized district leadership, and may undermine public trust in local governance. To address this, Puntland should prioritize harmonizing Law No. 3 with the Constitution, particularly regarding the election of mayors and deputy mayors.

Amendments should clarify succession procedures, strengthen thresholds for motions of no confidence, and introduce safeguards to ensure accountability sessions precede any motion. Clear, consistent, and enforceable rules would reduce disputes, limit premature dismissals or resignations, and enhance the legitimacy and stability of local councils.

4.2 Political Parties and Council Instability

Despite Puntland's long struggle to establish a multiparty political system, the region eventually succeeded in institutionalizing eight political parties through the local council elections. However, respondents interviewed for this study stressed that the anticipated consolidation of party power has not materialized. As a result, political parties remain relatively weak and have not exerted the level of influence expected in Puntland's political landscape.

During the initial vetting phase, political associations met strict requirements under the Political Associations and Parties Law to qualify for contesting the local council elections. These included maintaining functional offices in six of Puntland's nine regions, registering 300 electors per region, and holding a congress to elect leadership and approve the central committee. While associations showed significant energy in those early formation days and during the campaign, they struggled with structural weaknesses once certified. Most offices only remained active during the vetting period, and parties lacked clear ideological visions or policy programs.

These challenges were exacerbated by a lack of sustainable funding, low membership conviction, and a reluctance among Puntland's political elite to fully embrace the system, leading to a perception that parties are dominated by a few individuals with centralized decision-making.

Some of the local council members interviewed, for their part, reported that they did not join parties out of ideological principles but rather as a means to secure their seats. This perception weakened the role of parties in shaping policy direction at the local council level.

As stated in the joint press release issued by the political parties on 29 November 2022, Article 2 recommended reforming the closed-list electoral system for local council elections and transitioning to an open-list model. With respect to this, the second phase of the local council elections, covering 33 districts, the Transitional Puntland Electoral Commission (TPEC), now the PEC, introduced a procedural adjustment. Political associations were allowed to pre-assign candidates to specific polling stations, meaning that votes cast for a party in a particular polling station would be allocated to the designated candidate. Although by law, votes belong to the political party, this adjustment shifted the burden of mobilization from parties to individual candidates. While parties cited financial and logistical constraints, individual candidates invested heavily in registration and campaigning, mobilizing their own communities to demonstrate electoral strength on behalf of the parties.

Consequently, many candidates viewed their votes as a personal mandate rather than a party achievement. This sense of autonomy meant councilors felt less obligated to follow party directives. Respondents noted that this dynamic fostered a belief that councilors were directly accountable only to their specific communities, effectively weakening party discipline.

The study also found that candidate selection within parties was primarily based on the ability to mobilize votes rather than merit, competence, or commitment to party values. This often resulted in individuals with a limited understanding of governance or political ideology securing positions, with some treating council membership primarily as a means to secure a livelihood. As one respondent explained, this approach contributed to the frequent disputes between councils and district mayors.

Conflicts over district leadership often escalated when political parties formed coalitions to secure mayoral positions without consulting their council members. In some districts, leadership was awarded to parties with minimal electoral support through such arrangements, leaving other councilors sidelined and dissatisfied. This exclusion fueled recurrent tensions, with motions of no confidence frequently raised against mayors during council sessions.

Respondents also emphasized that the relationship between parties and their councilors weakened immediately after the elections. As one council member stated, *“The last time I had engagement with my party was during the campaign period. After the election ended, the parties simply disappeared.”* Without mechanisms to manage or support their members, parties quickly lost influence, leaving councilors to act independently. This lack of accountability and cohesion even led members of the same party to adopt opposing positions in leadership contests, further destabilizing local councils.

The weakness of political parties has become a major source of council instability in Puntland. To address this, parties must be strengthened as functional democratic institutions, not just electoral platforms. This requires reforms that enforce transparent candidate selection, develop sustainable financing mechanisms, and create continuous engagement between parties and their elected councilors. Coalition-building for mayoral elections should be transparent, inclusive, and procedurally clear to prevent disputes and exclusion. By addressing these structural gaps, Puntland can reduce council fragmentation, reinforce accountability, and build a more stable and credible multiparty system that supports long-term democratization.

4.3 Governance Awareness of Local Councilors

Since local councils were elected through a one-person, one-vote system, councilors perceive themselves as enjoying greater legitimacy than their predecessors, who were traditionally selected by clan elders. Key informants interviewed for this study observed that although citizens technically voted for political parties, the morale and sense of ownership among council members is considerably high. They appear to view themselves as legitimate representatives of their communities. Likewise, citizens hold heightened expectations that these new councils will deliver greater accountability, authentic representation, and stronger advocacy of their needs. This has placed additional pressure on councilors,

who in turn demand more rigorous accountability from district mayors, sometimes in ways that stretch beyond the procedures outlined in the local government law. At the same time, councilors noted that since they do not directly elect the district leadership or negotiate their programs, mayors appointed by majority parties or coalitions often sideline council oversight and recommendations. One councilor explained, *“I am part of the standing committee of my district, yet the mayor does not present to us the activities that require our approval, nor does he listen to our advice. As for the full council, he ignores it completely. This is why councilors often protest against the district leadership, seeking someone willing to listen to their input.”*

Both council members and key informants further agreed that the councils' understanding of local government laws, accountability mechanisms, conflict resolution, and district planning remains limited. This undermines effective oversight and often results in tensions with the executive. As one female councilor remarked, *“It seems that the new councils were left without the rules, policies, and district-level plans needed to guide us. We were not given the training necessary to strengthen our accountability role. Given that our awareness and experience were already limited, it is unlikely that we can deliver the level of change people expect from us.”* Respondents also noted that councilors often misinterpret regulations, placing undue pressure on the executive branch. While there have been some initiatives to provide training, they remain insufficient compared to the scale of capacity-building required.

The councilors also pointed out the absence of a structured dispute resolution mechanism between councils and mayors. Currently, the only available outcomes when tensions arise are either the dismissal of the mayor through a motion of no confidence or the mayor's resignation when he feels unable to withstand political pressure. This institutional gap perpetuates instability and highlights the need for formal mechanisms of mediation and conflict resolution within local governance structures.

The findings underscore the urgent need to strengthen the capacity and governance awareness of local councils. This requires comprehensive training on local government laws, accountability tools, and conflict resolution procedures, combined with clear legal frameworks to guide council–mayor relations. Establishing structured mediation mechanisms would help manage disputes constructively, reducing the reliance on dismissals and resignations as the only options. By investing in council capacity and institutional checks, Puntland can improve the stability of its local governance system and ensure councils fulfill their mandate as credible representatives of citizens.

4.4 Clan Dynamics and Local Council Instability

The introduction of a multiparty system in Puntland was intended to shift away from the clan-based power-sharing model that had historically shaped local councils. Under the previous arrangement, traditional elders played a decisive role in allocating seats among clans. The move toward direct elections was widely celebrated as a milestone, designed to limit the dominance of clan authority and encourage issue-based politics.

However, findings from this study demonstrate that traditional elders continue to exert significant influence at the local level. Elders actively lobbied political parties to nominate candidates from their clans, and, in many cases, members of the subclans provided financial and organizational support to ensure electoral success. As one respondent observed, *“Elders were knocking on the doors of political parties to persuade them to include their clan’s candidates on the lists.”*

This dynamic underscores how clan structures continue to shape outcomes, even in a system designed to prioritize citizen choice.

Following elections, clan influence often re-emerged during mayoral contests, where council members aligned more closely with their clans than with their political parties. In several districts, this delayed the formation of district leadership and revived the same clan-based formulas that once dominated power-sharing.

Councilors were reported to prioritize subclan interests over party positions when making decisions, even on routine governance issues. A councilor from Bosaso noted that local councilors had not yet managed to establish village committees because of persistent clan rivalries within the council.

Subclan competition was also evident in districts where mayors resigned or were dismissed shortly after assuming office. In these cases, mayoral elections were largely driven by clan alignments rather than party coalitions or policy programs. The role of political parties was minimal, with subclan influence taking precedence in determining outcomes. This pattern highlights how clan dynamics not only destabilize council cohesion but also directly contribute to leadership turnover at the district level.

The persistence of subclan influence demonstrates that democratization in Puntland cannot be sustained by electoral reforms alone. Strengthening the authority of political parties, while simultaneously creating inclusive mechanisms that engage traditional elders constructively, is critical. Policies should focus on clarifying the legal framework to limit undue clan interference in council decisions, building the capacity of local councils to operate on issue-based politics rather than clan-based agendas, and ensuring that mayoral elections follow transparent and party-driven procedures. At the same time, dialogue platforms between elders, parties, and communities could help channel clan interests into constructive participation, reducing the risk of leadership resignations and dismissals driven by clan rivalries.

4.5 Personal Interests and Resources Incentives

Insights from the FGDs and KIIs indicate that during the election of district leadership, some council members place considerable emphasis on advancing their own personal interests. This dynamic often fuels resistance to leadership structures established through majority rule or coalition arrangements, as such frameworks are perceived to restrict individual bargaining opportunities.

Moreover, most local councilors are not financially independent, which increases the likelihood that personal interests shape council decision-making. A district staff member explained that both development and humanitarian projects at the district level frequently encounter pressure from council members seeking material or political gains. When these demands are not met, some councilors use accountability mechanisms as instruments of leverage, often escalating disputes into motions of no confidence against the mayor.

Participants also highlighted that, in districts where mayors had resigned or been dismissed, subsequent elections were held through secret ballots. While the intention was to promote fairness, these procedures were described as creating space for corruption and vote buying. One informant noted, *"In low-income districts, large sums of money circulated during the mayoral elections, with votes openly traded. In larger districts, the amounts were even higher. This has encouraged council members to organize motions against mayors as a means to generate income during transitional periods."*

These findings underscore the significance of financial and personal incentives in shaping local political behavior, with substantial implications for the stability of governance. If left unaddressed, such practices risk institutionalizing corruption, undermining accountability, and weakening citizen trust in local councils. To mitigate these challenges, it is crucial to introduce stronger oversight and transparency in council processes, such as implementing a show of hands during voting for district leadership.

5. Impact on Service Delivery

Effective service delivery at the district level depends on inclusive planning, transparent implementation, and accountability grounded in legal frameworks. One of the core expectations of democratization and the establishment of elected local councils in Puntland was that these principles would be upheld.

The study's findings indicated that when cooperation exists between councils and mayors, accountability improves, leading to more substantial revenue collection and more reliable service delivery.

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In such cases, the absence of internal disputes allows councils to focus on their oversight role, thereby reinforcing citizen confidence in local governance. On the other hand, they indicated that when persistent conflict exists between councils and mayors, service delivery is negatively affected. Revenues decline, project implementation slows, and overall service provision deteriorates. The study also found that significant time and resources are often spent managing motions of no confidence or political tensions, rather than advancing development priorities. One respondent noted, *"Sometimes district funds are used to neutralize motions against the mayor, which undermines effective and productive service delivery."*

Frequent changes in district leadership further exacerbate these challenges. Each time a new mayor takes office, new priorities and restructuring measures are introduced, disrupting ongoing initiatives. In many cases, this is accompanied by the replacement of the district secretary and senior staff, creating additional delays as new teams adjust to their roles. Moreover, the absence of a formal accountability framework for initiating motions has created a climate of uncertainty.

According to one informant, *"When a mayor begins work, he already senses that a motion is on the way. This discourages him from pursuing long-term plans and sometimes encourages corruption."*

These findings demonstrate that political instability within local councils directly undermines service delivery, weakens revenue generation, and erodes citizen trust in governance. If unresolved, recurring motions and leadership turnovers risk institutionalizing inefficiency and corruption at the district level. To mitigate these risks, it is essential to establish clear and transparent procedures governing motions of no confidence, ensuring they are grounded in performance-based accountability rather than personal or political disputes. Strengthening institutional continuity by protecting key administrative staff from frequent turnover would also stabilize service delivery. Finally, capacity-building for both mayors and councilors, focusing on collaborative governance, fiscal management, and accountability, would help reduce unnecessary conflict and enable district governments to prioritize service delivery as their core mandate.

6. Existing Interventions and Their Gaps

6.1 MOIFAD's Response to Local Council Instability

MOIFAD plays a central facilitation and reconciliation role in responding to disputes and instability within Puntland's local councils. When political tensions arise, MOIFAD typically acts as a mediator, bringing together conflicting council factions, traditional elders, and district leadership to reach consensus. However, the ministry's engagement remains largely ad hoc, often driven by political urgency rather than guided by an established legal framework or standardized procedures.

Furthermore, participants emphasized that there is no clear and legally defined mechanism governing the resolution of disputes between mayors and local councils. While MOIFAD often assumes a facilitation and reconciliation role, its interventions are largely informal and dependent on political discretion rather than an explicit legal mandate. This institutional ambiguity limits the consistency and legitimacy of responses to council-level conflicts. Addressing this gap requires a clearly articulated legal framework that delineates the respective roles of MOIFAD, the formal judiciary, and, where applicable, the constitutional court in handling disputes related to local council leadership, motions, and oversight. Clarifying these mandates would strengthen rule-based governance, ensure procedural fairness, and enhance transparency and accountability, even in politically sensitive cases or where executive authorities are affiliated with ruling parties.

6.2 Capacity-Building

Efforts by MOIFAD and civil society organizations have provided valuable training and technical support to local councils; however, these initiatives remain limited in scope and geographic coverage.

Most interventions have focused on a few selected districts, leaving many newly established districts without adequate foundational support. Donor funds are also limited, and there is no dedicated budget within the Puntland Government for building the capacity of local governments.

As a result, capacity-building programs are often short-term, small-scale, and dependent on external funding. These limitations have prevented comprehensive institutional strengthening. Beyond local councilors, district administrations themselves require institutional capacity-building, including the establishment of administrative systems, policies, and facilities to enable effective service delivery and accountability. Newly emerging districts, in particular, face serious challenges in performing basic governance functions such as planning, budgeting, revenue collection, and service provision. Without targeted foundational support, these councils risk falling short of public expectations for transparency and responsiveness.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Puntland's transition to one-person-one-vote at the local level, long regarded as a hard-to-reach institutional milestone, has been achieved but remains fragile. Political parties primarily function as electoral vehicles rather than political institutions; clan logics continue to mediate representation and bargaining; legal provisions are often contradictory or incomplete; and newly elected councils frequently lack the procedural literacy and organizational capacity necessary for effective oversight.

These interacting deficits have led to recurrent leadership contests, dismissals, and resignations, with measurable consequences for service delivery, revenue management, and citizen confidence. In short, electoral legitimacy has outpaced the institutional frameworks and capabilities needed to sustain it. The study recommends the following:

7.2 Policy Recommendations

1- Government

- Harmonize Law No. 3 with the Puntland Constitution to eliminate contradictions around mayoral elections, succession, and motions of no confidence.
- Institutionalize a clear mediation and facilitation mandate for MOIFAD, enabling it to manage local council disputes through structured legal and procedural frameworks.
- Establish a sustainable local governance capacity-building program that supports councils and district administrations with systems, policies, and practical training, especially for new districts.
- Establish a dedicated public budget line to support the core institutional functions of registered political parties beyond election periods, linked to clear accountability and compliance requirements.
- Allocate sustained funding for civic education programs to build citizen understanding of democratic processes, local governance roles, and accountability mechanisms.
- Strengthen transparency by issuing model bylaws, performance reporting templates, and public disclosure guidelines for all district councils.

2- Political Parties

- Strengthen internal democracy by adopting transparent candidate vetting, internal elections, and issue-based political platforms that move beyond clan mobilization.
- Maintain regular post-election engagement with elected councilors to promote party cohesion, collective accountability, and adherence to party principles.
- Develop coalition frameworks before mayoral elections, ensuring consultation with council members and reducing power struggles that lead to instability.

3-Civil Society Organizations & Academia

- Expand governance and leadership training for councilors and district officials, focusing on practical areas such as fiscal management, legal compliance, and systems and policy development.
- Facilitate citizen engagement through community dialogues, local accountability forums, and publication of council scorecards to strengthen transparency and trust.
- Support policy research and advocacy to inform evidence-based reforms and harmonize local governance laws.

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December 2025