

A NEGOTIATED DEMOCRACY: Factors that influenced Somaliland's 2017 election

April 19, 2018

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SOURCE: <https://www.theelephant.info/features/2018/04/19/a-negotiated-democracy-factors-that-influenced-somalilands-2017-election/>

On 13 November 2017, the people of Somaliland went to the polls to choose their fifth president since breaking away from Somalia in May 1991. Despite a delay of 28 months, international and local observers described the election as credible and peaceful. The fact that the election finally took place, and did so in a calm and orderly manner, was welcomed with a tangible sigh of relief, at home and internationally, and with pride on the part of Somalilanders.

A number of “firsts” added to this sense of achievement. Voters were registered using iris recognition technology to preclude double voting, making Somaliland an early pioneer in embracing biometric technology in elections. Unlike in the past, the incumbent was not a candidate, paving the way for a more robust campaign that featured, for the first time, a televised debate between the three presidential candidates, and the three vice-presidential candidates. It was also the most inclusive election, with all six regions taking part. The government made its largest financial contribution to an election, underlining how seriously Somaliland was taking its political future. For the first time, the government agreed to a code of conduct with the media to ensure balanced coverage by the state-owned media.

The advances in the 2017 electoral process took place against a background of widespread and profound frustration within Somaliland with a hybrid system of government that combines clan-based representation with Western political institutions. Over time, the merger became a fusion of weaknesses, incorporating neither the integrity and clarity of the traditional system nor the institutions and levers of accountability that underpin Western norms of governance. The multiple delays in holding the presidential elections also led to the gradual erosion of public trust in government institutions and to diminishing international goodwill. By November 2017, there was a convergence between domestic dissatisfaction and international pressure, making the election a defining moment in Somaliland’s political trajectory.

From remote villages to big towns, everyone from nomadic pastoralists across Somaliland to the elites in the capital, Hargeisa and in the large Diaspora communities, followed the election closely even if they did not vote. While they had different views of what they hoped for, there was a strong consensus that the political landscape needed an overhaul after seven years of the same administration.

Voters’ priorities

Desire for tangible improvements in their living standards dominated voters’ expectations. In our conversations with both urban and rural voters, the provision of water and enhancing the quality and coverage of educational and health services was repeatedly emphasised. The urgency of tackling crippling inflation, which has increased food prices and made poor people feel even more impoverished, was underlined across the board. Employment among youth and the development of road networks, electricity and other public utilities were also high on the list

of priorities for most people. Rural communities, reeling from the effects of a severe drought in which they lost most of their livestock, the main source of their livelihood, called for investment in agriculture.

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Voters in urban areas, particularly young people, view political favouritism as one of the major impediments to their employment prospects and the reason so many of them embark on the treacherous journey to Europe ((known as *tahrib*). Consequently, the role of government in creating a fair and equitable environment for employment, business opportunities, economic investments, the distribution of resources, access to government services and political appointments, mattered to all voters. Fighting corruption, making the legal system work for everyone, curbing the powers of the police and putting an end to the arrest and detention of journalists also carried weight with voters.

However, these priorities did not, for the most part, shape the decisions made when voters actually cast their ballots.

Official party programmes and campaigns

To guarantee the formation of political associations with cross-clan representations, the Constitution of 2001 imposed a limit of three political parties. In addition to Kulmiye, the party of the sitting President, two other parties, Waddani and the Justice and Welfare party (UCID), joined the contest in 2017. While Kulmiye and UCID were participating in a presidential election for the third time, Waddani, registered in 2012, was a newcomer to the political arena. The leader of UCID had sought the presidency in earlier elections, but Waddani and Kulmiye fielded new candidates.

All three political parties had written programmes, popularly referred to as manifestos. Those of the opposition – Waddani and UCID – were largely a response to what were described as the shortcomings of the ruling party. They pledged major changes across all sectors. The party in power, Kulmiye, spelt out what it saw as its achievements and promised continuity while making further improvements.

Economic and social issues, international recognition and good governance all featured prominently in the manifestos. With the use of social media and increased media coverage, more voters than ever had access to party manifestos. Some of the parties held presentation sessions across all six regions to give voters the chance to question senior officials about their stated plans.

The manifestos, however, were not intended for all voters, especially given the high levels of illiteracy, particularly outside the main towns. Target audiences were the slim minority of educated voters, mainly young people, seen as independent of clan interests and who might,

therefore, be swayed by a party's stance and ideology. But they constituted an insignificant proportion of voters, their impact further undermined by the fact that they are scattered.

Illiteracy, reinforced by a strong oral culture, meant that a large percentage of voters were influenced by what they heard at rallies and in private meetings and what they witnessed on television. An official for Waddani said his party put at 65% the voters "who are not interested in the programme." Their recruitment, he added, required using what he called traditional methods to get their support. This largely consisted of bringing party officials from their area "to show where their clan fits in the party hierarchy and probably in the next government", as well as discussions about the sharing of power and resources.

One civil servant blamed constituents for letting politicians get away with making "blank statements about impossible deliverables which lack the how part." People, she said, never asked the parties for concrete solutions and preferred instead to listen to speeches about "heavenly rivers flowing through their neighbourhoods." At the same time, she acknowledged that voters know, from experience, that party programmes are not implemented after elections precisely because "parties are built on the foundation of clan interests and not ideologies."

Yusuf Osman Abdulle, a poet known as Shaacir, said it was unrealistic to expect the population in Somaliland to choose between political parties based on written documents. "Given the low literacy rate and the very poor quality of our educational system, you don't expect our society to be where they can choose parties based on what they are promising or what they have done in the past," he explained. "The thing everyone understands is: Who are the candidates? What clans do they belong to? What is the relationship between his clan and my clan?"

And that indeed was what mattered. The heartbeat, and heat, of the campaigns was not about policies.

Forging alliances

As happens with elections the world over, 2017 revealed the patronage system at work. In Somaliland, the politics of vote-seeking is directly tied to the clan-based social structure. Far more significant and decisive than the large public rallies held during the official 21-day campaign period were the numerous behind-the-scenes meetings between party leaders and traditional elders, politicians and businessmen, which had kicked off during the previous six months.

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As in previous elections, parties found it easier to maximise votes by securing the loyalty of clan elders who then become responsible for bringing the vast majority of their constituents on board. The campaigns that mattered were outsourced to elders, often from the same clan as the candidates, to meet with other clan leaders and build coalitions. Historical relationships between their respective clans and forging new relationships going into the future became the focus of discussions.

At the same time, party leaders also met with the elites of clans – elders, politicians and businessmen – to give clan-specific assurances in exchange for garnering political support,

including political posts and development projects. At times, these pledges were captured in written documents signed by the party leadership. Party officials from those clans were given centre stage to show how well they were represented in the party, photo opportunities which were then broadcast through the media.

An official involved in the youth wing of Kulmiye in Hargeisa was straightforward about the political calculations at play." A key winning strategy both for the ruling party and the main opposition party [Waddani]," he said, "was to bring in as many known figures as possible in the party from a certain clan. You can then expect more votes from that clan."

Saying it was too simplistic to argue that parties go out and seek votes from clans, he underlined the importance of "intermediaries" between the parties and the clans, or what others referred to as political brokers. These are men [always], close to both elders and the party leaders, who work hard to implement the elders' decisions. Parties, he commented, make either personal or group promises to them in exchange for influencing their clan or constituency. "When we talk about political parties spending millions of dollars in election campaigns, this is where the bulk of it goes to. And perhaps these elites distribute a fraction of that money to their followers."

A party official in Borama, the capital of Awdal region, contrasted his "official" responsibilities and his true mission. As a regional official, he was charged with overseeing different offices and addressing crowds. But what he defined as the more important task "took place behind the scenes and it was to mobilise voters from my sub-clan."

His counterpart in the small town of Salahley, 60 kilometres from Hargeisa, said elders had more powers over the community. He conceded that they, and not he as a party official, attracted the most votes. He attributed their hold over people to the fact that "everyone knows they will need the elder at some point."

In the small town of Abdaal, in Sahil region, a young Waddani supporter worked with other members of football teams to oppose the elders, most of whom were behind Kulmiye. He said people did not take the challenge of competing with elders for votes seriously and "they were right". Asked about politicians and elders who were not strong advocates of clan solidarity, an elder in the same town, Abdaal, was quick in dismissing their relevance. "There were very few of them and they had almost no influence over voters since they had defied the position of their clans," he said.

The task of the elders, supported by their politicians, is to persuade, or pressure, their clan members to fall in line with the party of their choice. The lure of public service jobs for the youth and commitments to develop the region are stressed. Financial contributions are made for ongoing activities in the area, such as the construction of roads, schools and clinics, and money and *khat* are liberally distributed to men during campaign periods. In rural areas, affected by the 2016/2017 drought, the distribution of water, food and non-food items made a crucial difference to the outcome.

The blend of the traditional clan structure with modern governance institutions is reflected in the fact that the clans of the three presidential candidates were the stable base of support for their parties. Success, therefore, depended on establishing as broad an array of partnerships as possible with other clans. This is demonstrated, for example, in the parties' choice of their vice-presidential candidates.

Practical considerations deepen the dependence of parties on the political clout of elders. Political parties do not have permanent offices at the district or regional levels, as became apparent when we visited a number of regions in February and March. They are, instead, concentrated at their headquarters in Hargeisa. Without grassroots branches, there is little to bring parties close to communities and foster a sense of belonging to, and ownership of, the parties. By the time senior officials visit the districts, usually close to elections, elders have already laid the groundwork.

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The difficulties parties face in raising their own funds currently makes it nearly impossible for them to keep their distance from elders. The three parties are closely associated with their founders and/or individuals who occupy key positions. Consequently, they become dependent on businessmen and contributions from their clans, including households. One observer commented: “If they campaigned purely on policies, they will not generate funds.”

The political influence of clan elders

An academic in Hargeisa described the election as “a clan project run by elders, politicians and the economic class.” Despite its many encouraging aspects, the last election was seen as inimical to Somaliland’s future as a democracy. No election has been so openly clan-based and so visibly steered by elders.

The campaigns featured inflammatory speeches, ugly rhetoric and defamation of individuals and clans – messages that were spread by the traditional media and extensive use of social media. Since clans were the deciding factor, the messages were designed so as to attract a specific clan and unite some against others. Since clans tend to reside in the same localities, even in the same neighbourhoods in towns, it was easier to hone messages and target particular groups.

Having co-opted clan elders as their principal vote-gatherers, party leaders gave them unfettered power to guide voters. Elders did not mince their words or moderate their actions, threatening reprisals against those who did not toe the line. Several party offices for both Waddani and Kulmiye were attacked and vehicles stoned.

The fact that all three candidates came from the largest clan family in Somaliland, the Isaaq, amplified inter-clan dynamics, pushing people into further sub-sub-clan classifications. Small villages and towns, populated by the same clans or sub-clans, were divided into the smallest possible units, sometimes reaching household levels. A Kulmiye organiser in Salahley spoke of several sub-clan assemblies with each setting up meeting places for their party.

The media – print, television and websites – and especially the privately-owned outlets, contributed to the charged political atmosphere in countless ways, through selective reporting, fake news and endless reportage of elders and politicians insulting each other. The huge number of events hosted by parties, whereby people speaking in the name of a certain clan had deserted another party to join theirs, were given extensive exposure by virtually all news outlets. One TV network, in an effort to paint Waddani as a pro-Somalia party that planned to

impose federalism on Somaliland, showed a false photo of the Waddani leader meeting with the current President of Somalia who was at the time a candidate for that office.

The toxic nature of these campaigns inevitably created a pernicious political environment that threatened Somaliland's most treasured asset – a long reign of peace.

The moment of truth

Unfortunately, and to the detriment of Somaliland, the near exclusive emphasis on clan considerations, channelled through the media, social media and clan gatherings, swayed many voters, including the youth. Discussions with those who voted show they had, for the most part, positive expectations of candidates from their clan or the candidate supported by their clan, and voted to express support for the clan's position. They also paint an entirely negative picture of the opposing candidates from other clans, out of fear and/or animosity. A young university student in Hargeisa spoke of her mindset when she voted: "I was influenced by what I saw as a threat that can personally affect me should the candidates from other clans win the election. It was a battle between clans."

Underlining the extent to which voting along clan lines is inextricably linked with perceptions of self-interest and fairness, she added: "You have better chances of getting employed if the President or a Minister is from your clan. I know it is not a healthy feeling, but it is just a reality."

Angry about what he saw as the political marginalisation of his clan, a young and educated employee of an NGO said resolving social and economic problems did not figure in his calculations. His sole aim was to see his candidate triumph even though he considered the other two candidates "way better on most issues."

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Some voters, while admitting they voted in line with their clan, believe this was in the broader interests of Somaliland. A man living in the small town of Dilla in Awdal region argued that voting in step with his clan "was for the good of Somaliland so as to prevent two clans establishing dominance."

Amal said that politicians only come to her village of Tuli in Awdal during elections and she expects nothing in return. Nevertheless, she found herself vulnerable when politicians descended on Tuli in 2017 and "labelled us as sub-clan X and sub-clan Y." Amal, along with her neighbours, succumbed to the messages that intensified as 13 November, the date of the election, approached. Speaking in late February, she said a united community had been torn apart and people no longer communicated as easily as in the past.

Bucking the trend

Not everyone, of course, bowed to the wishes of their elders and local politicians. Some voters made independent choices. But many of those who stood their ground, particularly women who

were expected to vote as decreed by their menfolk, said they paid a heavy price for their position.

Many of those who did not vote, despite the insistence of close relatives relaying messages from elders, said they based their decision on what they regarded as the absence of realistic and feasible programmes by the parties. A staff member of a human rights group in Hargeisa said he failed to find “timelines or convincing details of exactly how they would carry out their commitments.” A long-term civil servant in Hargeisa said she had seen ministers come and go over the years without any attention paid to election manifestoes. So why, she asked, “should I spend my energy for nothing?”

Khadar, a driver in Dilla, said his income had doubled, and his life had become easier and safer since a tarmac road was built by the previous administration connecting Dilla, Borama and Hargeisa. When it came to the elections, the construction of this road, he said, and not the opinion of his elders, determined which party he voted for.

Maimuna in Dilla held out against intense pressure, including being labelled a traitor. Elders, her own children and her in-laws failed to convince her when she refused to support one of the opposition parties. Her customers boycotted her business but she would not budge. Calling her position “odd and 100% personal because women’s choices are strongly affected by their husbands and male community elders”, she cited an aversion to change as the reason she went with the ruling party. Describing 2017 as “a very divisive election”, she said “it ruined relationships between individuals and families.”

In Salahley, Rahma had initially agreed with her elders to back Waddani. But when the head of UCID announced the Quran would guide the actions of his party, she switched to UCID and refused to back down despite entreaties from her local elders.

Regardless of internal divisions, voters in Somaliland see elections as an important step towards the prospects of international recognition.

Aspirations for international recognition

Asked about the most vital issue at stake in November 2017, Mustafa Awad, who follows Somaliland’s political fortunes closely, did not hesitate to say it was “the same as every other election since the 2001 referendum – international recognition.” The pursuit of Somaliland’s recognition by the international community is of course intensely political, not only domestically, but also in the region and internationally. It is also a practical issue, in terms of greater diplomatic and commercial ties with the outside world, acceptance of Somaliland passports to ease the current nightmare of travel and an increase in foreign aid.

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The feeling of being a voiceless and invisible people, of not belonging to the community of nations, has left a deeply felt psychological wound. Commitment to the electoral process, and consolidating Somaliland’s position as a democratic oasis in a region not known for free, fair

and peaceful elections, is regarded as “the gateway to this much-coveted recognition” in the words of Mustafa.

The aftermath

It is imperative for Somaliland to reflect collectively over the recent elections, particularly because elections for both parliamentary and local government councils will be held in less than a year. To move forward and capitalise on its achievements, every society needs self-analysis in order to correct mistakes, assess weaknesses and improve on its successes.

Some of the key challenges mentioned by voters, and those who abstained, include healing the rifts created or magnified by the elections. The extent to which relationships between clans, between communities living in close proximity and even within families were disrupted, entrenching old divides and creating new political and social fault lines, is uppermost in the minds of most people. The consequences of the unparalleled level of discord are still felt across Somaliland, especially because the animosity was intimate, between people who know each other and interact on a daily basis.

Other issues of common concern include how to hold the new government accountable from a non-political perspective and as ordinary citizens and the absence of opportunities for remaining politically engaged outside the existing parties. Dissatisfaction with the role and performance of parliamentarians and local councils, the absence of sufficient platforms for political debate and discussion and a host of problems related to the mechanics of voting were also mentioned repeatedly.

The transition of elders from politically neutral peacemakers to powerful politicians is an acute and widely shared source of disquiet. The pivotal role of elders in enabling Somaliland to overcome the internal conflicts of the 1990s, precisely because of their detachment from political squabbles and their prioritisation of peace above all else, has been well-documented. The loss of this neutrality has worrying implications for the resolution of future conflicts and for democratisation.

Safia, a civil servant, wants to see elders confined to their traditional role, and banned from speaking on behalf of voters, in the hope that people will then organise themselves into groupings of their choice. The difficulty of coaxing people to demand public action over a common cause, such as poor roads or the absence of water, underlines for many the dangerous and debilitating encroachment of clan politics in everyday life.

Focusing on the larger public interest, however, requires room for manoeuvre, which parties in Somaliland currently do not have, given their dependence on their clan constituencies. Cutting ties with elders and prominent clan figures risks loss of support and creates resistance, a prospect no politician with an eye on the next election is likely to welcome.

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Unless voters can hold a government to account, it is impossible to compel a new administration to deliver on its election commitments. The space for accountability in Somaliland is already limited. This is further constrained by the low level of rights awareness among both the public and government officials, and by the nature of a system where most people voted out of clan allegiance. Successive governments have promoted a perception of demands for accountability as an opposition-fuelled process, leading to controversy and pitting pro-government and anti-government supporters against each other, often along clan lines. This situation will persist as long as politics is trapped in its current form.

The irony, as pointed out by Khaled Ismail Abdi, who works with media groups, is that people who voted for change then wait for the government to solve all their problems, imposing an unrealistic burden on an administration with few resources. When the hoped-for changes fail to materialise, there are few avenues, outside of the clan, to seek redress. Addressing the government, as an expression of civic responsibility and a right, is not seen as an option.

Two decades is a very short period, particularly in the wake of war and conflict, to institutionalise the norms of a full-fledged democracy. In that time, Somaliland has indeed made strides that can be built upon to strengthen its political infrastructure and, for the sake of future generations, move away from being a clan-based polity. This requires an engaged citizenry to encourage the emergence of political leaders and parties independent of clan identity and committed to reinforcing Somaliland's nascent democratic institutions.

Note: *Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article.*

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