

## **Navigating Puntland's Electoral Impasse:** An Analysis of Stakeholder Perspectives

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### **Key Policy Messages**

- 1.** The Federal Member State of Puntland is undergoing the most turbulent and uncertain time in its political history.
- 2.** The current political impasse, uncertainty and lack of compromise between the government of President Said Abdullahi Deni and the forum of the opposition raise the risk of unintended violent clashes particularly in the capital city, Garowe, and poses serious challenges for the stability, security and social and political development of the State.
- 3.** Urgent and inclusive dialogue among the key political stakeholders is necessary and must take place immediately.
- 4.** Both the government and the opposition need to play down the escalating violent rhetoric and establish a line of communication to remove any suspicion of intentions.
- 5.** The sides need to recognize each side's legitimate right of participation in the political process and negotiate in good faith.
- 6.** The sides need to pursue a consensus-based electoral model that could fulfil the demands of all sides such as:
  - a.** A model that respects the term limit, January 8th election date and peaceful transfer of power
  - b.** A model that widens the participation and representation of all the segments of the society and moves the democratization process forward
  - c.** A model that all stakeholders have a role and independent electoral and dispute resolution commissions are agreed.

## 1. Background

The archetypical stable autonomous Federal Member State of Puntland is undergoing the most turbulent and uncertain time in its political history. Since its foundation in 1998, the State has grappled with near political crisis at the end of every presidential tenure. The political wrangling over the term limits and electoral models between the incumbent president maneuvering to remain in power and the opposition candidates vying for the highest office of the State brings the State closer to crisis. Although the State has never transitioned to democratic system of elections, it succeeded in peaceful selection of members of the House of the People, holding presidential elections and transfer of power every five years on 8th of January in the last 15 years. This year election year 2023 has been different in many ways. The State has successfully conducted one person one vote local elections in 33 districts for the first time since it was founded. But the year has also seen the worst intra-state election-related conflict, political disagreement and polarization.

The current electoral conflict stems from unresolved issues that originated from the district council elections held on May 25, 2023, in 30 districts. Notably, three districts in Nugal, including the capital Garowe, experienced opposition boycotts leading to the non-participation of approximately 80,000 voters. This conflicts, compounded by amendments to constitutional articles, escalated into violent clashes in Garowe in June 2023. The resulting tensions have now permeated the ongoing parliamentary and presidential elections, given that the current president's term is scheduled to conclude on January 8, 2024.

The incumbent president and opposition groups find themselves in a deadlock, unable to reach a consensus on the electoral processes. The political landscape is marked by a clash of interests as both sides navigate the complexities of this electoral challenge. President Said Abdullahi Deni is attempting to achieve what no previous Puntland leader has accomplished: securing a second term in office. However, he encounters formidable opposition from a diverse group of politicians who despite their differences, share a common objective – preventing his re-election.

Opposition forum believe that the president's potential re-election hinges on a "one-sided election," marked by manipulation, and a lack of fairness and transparency, that will result in a predetermined outcome that fails to genuinely represent the will of Puntland's voters. The opposition forum cited the recently established Puntland Election Commission (PEC) as an example on how the president intends to undermine his term limit in office and manipulate the outcome of the election.

The president and his allies argue that the government has a mandate to complete the transition to democracy and that the State is ready for one person one vote elections. The cite the recent local elections as a proof of the concept and vow that there will be no return to the old, discredited, traditional elder's selection of 66 member House of the People and their subsequent election of the president.

On November 2, 2023, 28 Puntland traditional leaders gathered in Garowe and issued a statement insisting that the scheduled January 8, 2024, election should not be postponed (Puntland Mirror, 2023). They proposed a return to the traditional selection model of the 66 parliamentary members due to time limitations. Additionally, they urged the parliament to promptly release the election annex and appoint a committee for dispute resolution. This declaration coincided with the Council of Ministers' prior approval of the new Puntland election schedule, as announced by the Puntland Election Commission on November 24, 2023.

Despite the president's rejection of the elders' decision, asserting that the matter of elections falls within the purview of the Puntland Election Commission and not the elders' mandate, the opposition welcomed the traditional leaders' stance. They perceived it as the only viable solution to the current impasse, highlighting the depth of the political deadlock and the urgency for alternative approaches to move forward.

Tensions between the opposition and the president escalated when the opposition released a parallel electoral timetable on November 14, 2023, to implement the traditional elders' decision for the upcoming elections in Puntland (Garowe Online, 2023). This timetable differs from the one issued by the Puntland Electoral Commission (PEC). According to the opposition's timetable, Puntland will hold presidential elections on January 8. However, PEC's timetable shows the elections taking place on February 25, 2024.

In an effort to ease rising tensions, President Said Abdullahi Deni, on November 17, 2023, addressed a gathering during his visit to Ano-Yaskax village in the Nugal region (Garowe Online, 2023). He expressed a willingness to enter into discussions with opposition politicians to address the ongoing election dispute. However, he made it clear that there is a condition for these talks: the electoral process must strictly adhere to the principle of "one person, one vote," a stance endorsed by his government. While the opposition has welcomed the president's call for dialogue, they have stipulated a prerequisite of involving an impartial third party. They emphasized that the electoral process should be collectively agreed upon by all parties involved and must proceed as scheduled on January 8, 2024.

Alarmed by the continued mobilization of forces by the government and some opposition groups, International Partners and Puntland Non-State Actors (PUNSAA) have been calling for de-escalation of tension and engaging in negotiations to reach a consensus-based electoral model. On November 21, 2023, International partners called on all parties to remain calm and exercise restraint, resolving their disputes through peaceful means, after expressing concerns about the risk of higher tensions, including the ongoing mobilization of forces (UNSOM, 2023). PUNSAA issued a statement urging all parties to negotiate and reach a consensus-based electoral model.

In this context, this report provides a thorough analysis of the positions and perspectives of key political stakeholders, including the ruling party and its coalition parties, opposition forum, traditional elders, and civil society organizations. Amidst a heated election context, divergent views and approaches are explored, emphasizing the need for inclusive dialogue to address the impasse and ensure a peaceful and credible electoral process.

## II. Analysis of Perspectives of Political Stakeholders towards KAAH-Led Coalition and Their Election Perspective

The KAAH-led coalition, which includes political parties such as Shaqaalaha, RUNCAD, SINCAD, IFIYE, and MUSTAQBAL, strongly opposes the traditional elders' selected 66 model. They view it as outdated, exclusionary, and incompatible with the principles of a modern state. The coalition argues that sticking to this traditional election model, even after 25 years since Puntland's establishment, would hinder the region's progress towards achieving good governance. They believe that the only way to escape political decay and move the process forward is to complete the transition to a one person one vote system.

The coalition claims that the controversial constitutional amendments were a response to the demands of nine political associations. In a communique released on November 30, 2022, these associations outlined 13 issues that needed to be addressed before elections could take place (Hiiraan Online, 2022). One of the crucial matters was the need for constitutional reform, specifically regarding Article 46. This article stated that the three political associations with the highest number of votes would become the three permanent parties in the state for a period of ten years. The political associations argued that allowing three parties to dominate the state's politics was unwise and undemocratic.

However, some key political parties within the coalition, including SINCAD, IFIYE, and MUSTAQBAL, initially opposed any form of term extension and certain unilateral constitutional amendments, particularly the shift from a parliamentary to a presidential governance system. They expressed concerns about the president's insistence on the presidential system, interpreting it as a sign of his intention to manipulate what they saw as insincere presidential elections with predetermined outcomes favoring KAAH. After extensive negotiations between the president and these three parties, their concerns were addressed.

In a recent joint press conference by the coalition and the PEC, these three parties changed their stance. They now align themselves with KAAH and other political actors who support the presidential system and its electoral model. According to SINCAD founder, Mohamoud Khalif Hassan, also known as Jabiyeh, any deviation from this course would be detrimental to the democratization process in Puntland. The coalition's position highlights their commitment to holding elections according to the PEC schedule, regardless of opposition from other coalition groups.

Advantages	Disadvantages
<p>The controversial constitutional amendments provide legal backing for the model.</p>	<p>Opposition contests the legality of the constitutional amendments.</p>
<p>There is broader citizen participation in the election of the president, vice president, and legislators.</p>	<p>The model faces strong opposition from armed and non-armed opposition groups, which can lead to armed confrontations and exclusion of certain regions.</p>
<p>There is an election timetable available for the model election.</p>	<p>The opposition forum boycotted it and do not recognize the new timetable. They insist on the 8th January presidential election day. They argue that there is a constitutional stipulation of holding elections at the end of 5 years which coincide with 8th of January 2024.</p>
<p>The model could be based on the experience of the district council elections which took place in five regions.</p>	<p>The election of the members of the House of People will be more complex than the local district elections for two reasons:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. There are constituents with significant representation in the House of the People where elections cannot take place.</li> <li>2. There are new political developments in the State which needs to consider and need more time to reach settlement.</li> </ol>
<p>Based on the previous one person one vote local district elections, presidential and parliamentary elections can be conducted peacefully across the State.</p>	<p>In the previous district council elections, opposition from armed forces loyal to local politicians thwarted the process in three districts in Nugal region, including Garowe. As a result, there is a significant possibility of disruptions to the upcoming presidential elections in specific regions.</p>

## Opposition Forum and Their Election Perspective

The opposition forum including political parties and numerous prominent independent political leaders and candidates, have chosen to boycott the elections. Among the notable political parties in this coalition, MIDEEYE stands out as the second-largest opposition party following KAAH, as indicated by the district council election results. The HORSEED political party is another significant member of this alliance, deciding to abstain from the district council elections due to several issues. These concerns include a lack of confidence in the neutrality of the election process, perceived government interference throughout the electoral proceedings, and insufficient judicial oversight.

MIDEEYE justified its decision to boycott the process, despite initially participating in the district council elections, on multiple grounds. One major issue was the government's unilateral amendment of the constitution, which involved increasing the number of political parties from 3 to 5 and changing the parliamentary system to a presidential one (Mideeye, 2023). This change was viewed as an attempt to tailor the entire electoral process to favor the incumbent president.

These two parties have joined forces with various opposition politicians and presidential candidates, including former ministers and ousted parliamentary members, who oppose the electoral process due to concerns about its fairness. They describe it as "pangs of democracy" or the risk of descending into anarchy.

They consistently emphasize several barriers to conducting presidential and primary elections within the limited timeframe remaining for the current administration. Parliament's term ends in December 2023, and the president's term concludes on January 8, 2024. The obstacles include the absence of an independent judicial oversight body, the lack of an impartial electoral commission, and a condensed timeline that poses significant challenges in executing essential election-related tasks. These tasks include enacting relevant laws, securing funding for the election process, reopening voter registration, conducting voter education and awareness campaigns, and determining the allocation of parliamentary members across regions and districts.

From the coalition's perspective, while the idea of organizing an election appears feasible in theory, the practical challenge lies in establishing an electoral process that secures unanimous agreement among all candidates. This consensus is deemed crucial for conferring legitimacy upon the eventual winner, ensuring that they possess a credible and widely accepted mandate.

With the previous challenges in place, the coalition proposes the continuation of the previous traditional model as an alternative solution – electing a new leader through the traditional (66) system, while the elected government must resume the democratization process.

The proposed option by these groups has both advantages and disadvantages as elaborated in Table 1 below:

Advantages	Disadvantages
Since the inception of Puntland, the peaceful transfer of power model has been in place.	This model was first agreed as a temporary measure to establish the State. It was never intended as a viable electoral model for the State.
The existing model was a social agreement between the regions / communities and is representative.	The existing model limited citizens' participation in the election of their leaders.
This model is simple and less controversial when compared to other models.	The president and his allies continue to reject the model.
It has the potential to prevent the State from descending into armed conflict, because it is the only viable option for holding elections within the remaining term of the current administration.	The model is vulnerable to contestation if the sitting president and the candidates disagree over the vetting process of the 66 parliamentary candidates.
It is the only viable model that does not require an extension.	A consensus agreement between the incumbent president and the opposition regarding the model is needed, and this may not materialize before January 8th, 2024.

## Traditional Elders and Their Perspective on Elections

Historically, traditional elders in Puntland have played a vital role in the state-building process and the resolution of communal clan conflicts. This perception is rooted in their effective mediation and resolution of conflicts within the Puntland community, coupled with their enduring legitimacy and the trust they have garnered over time. The Puntland government, established in 1998, continues to depend on traditional elders.

This reliance is evident in the occurrence of five presidential elections in 1998, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2014, and 2019. In these elections, sixty-six (66) parliamentary members, chosen by the traditional elders, elected the president, vice president, and speaker of the parliament. Notably, all these elections were marked by a peaceful transfer of power and the uninterrupted continuity of state functions.

In response to the current election deadlock, some traditional elders proposed reverting to the old selection method for the new parliament in a press release issued after two weeks of meetings in Garowe in November 2023 (Puntland Mirror, 2023). The statement cited the limited time left in Said Abdullahi Deni's government tenure as a reality that makes it impractical to implement a one-person-one-vote system for the January 8, 2024, elections. The elders suggested holding timely elections and pausing the democratization process, which should be resumed by the next government.

The elders' decision was welcomed by the opposition forum, suggesting that returning to the traditional model of 66 is the only viable solution due to the urgency of holding elections within the limited time frame (Garowe Online, 2023). They also point to the significant level of distrust among the government, including the PEC, and opposition leaders. They view the decision of the elders as an essential measure to prevent political tensions from escalating to the dangerous point of armed conflict. The opposition dismisses concerns about divisions among the traditional elders, noting the absence of opposing statements from those elders who were not present at the conference in Garowe. They interpret this silence as a sign of support for the proposal.

However, President Deni dismissed the elders' statement, asserting the ability of the PEC to hold the elections as per its set schedule (Mustaqbal Media, 2023). The president's position is anchored in the belief that elders no longer have a significant role in Puntland's political landscape, especially since the adoption of the multi-party system.

He insists that the responsibility for determining and negotiating a viable solution for conducting elections falls upon the Puntland Electoral Commission (PEC) and the political parties. In this view, the elders' decision is an attempt to undermine the entire democratization process by reinforcing their influence and control over political power.

Pro-government commentators view the traditional elders as divided and argue that the decision of some of them does not necessarily reflect consensus. They refer to a previous similar incident in 2001 when traditional elders split into two opposing groups, one supporting the extension of the late President Abdullahi Yusuf's term and the other opposing it. This division among the elders contributed to an armed conflict that only reached a resolution when the armed opposition and Yusuf's camp independently negotiated a peace agreement, sidelining the elders in the process.

### **Civil Society Members and Their Perspective on The Election**

Civil society members play an important role in ensuring the legitimacy of elections by promoting transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. They act as watchdogs, helping to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process and ensure that elections are conducted fairly and in accordance with established rules and regulations.



Several civil society organizations (CSOs) have accused the government of making unilateral and hasty amendments to electoral laws that are contested by opposition groups. They argue that the time constraint, absence of an independent and competent electoral commission, and independent judiciary put the entire Puntland electoral process at high risk. These factors indicate the potential consequences of proceeding with a contentious presidential election that could lead to winner-takes-all tactics. In this sense, they have warned both the government and the opposition against using a growing trend of aggressive posturing, violent strategies, and tests of power that can only escalate tensions.

All CSO members are deeply concerned about the amendments to more than 11 articles in the 2012 constitution without prior consultation with the public and political stakeholders. They believe that this undermines the transparency and credibility of the entire electoral process. The original proposal for the constitutional amendment, as approved by the Puntland cabinet, focused on amending article 46 of the constitution to increase the number of political parties from three to nine. However, all the other additional amendments were made to fit the interests of the president and the speaker of the parliament.

In response to these challenges, CSOs stress that a consensus-based political agreement should determine whether the elections will follow the traditional system of selecting 66 members of parliament or if alternative electoral models will be considered and agreed upon. Mediation efforts by a group of traditional elders from Sool, Sanaag, and Cayn (SSC) administration to engage the opposition forum and the Puntland president have not had an impact on the electoral deadlock.

Women and youth groups organized a peace march in Garowe, calling for the de-escalation of the conflict that has led to the intimidation of civilians and the closure of schools in the city. On November 22 and 23, women peace activists, led by women's groups from SSC, held a sit-in outside the Puntland parliament, urging legislators not to pass a contentious election bill to prevent potential violence in Garowe.

While the appeals from women and youth resulted in the postponement of the bill's approval on November 23, 2023, the speaker of the parliament disbanded the special committee tasked with reviewing the bill following their recommendation to postpone its approval in order to de-escalate the security tension. This action appears to align with the president's agenda to pass the bill, regardless of the potential repercussions.

The CSOs' call for an inclusive dialogue aligns with recent appeals from the international community, including meetings with the government, PEC, and the opposition forum. Prominent figures such as UN Special Envoy to Somalia Catriona Liang, Britain's Ambassador to Somalia Mike Nithavrianakis, and Sweden's Ambassador Joachim Waern have collectively urged for a peaceful resolution to the escalating electoral deadlock in Puntland. This diplomatic intervention by the international community carries substantial weight in the current context of Puntland's political landscape, which is marked by deep-seated disagreements involving President Deni, opposition factions, and clan leaders. It underscores the international community's keen interest in a peaceful, democratic resolution to the electoral disputes in Puntland, which aligns with the aspirations of the Somali people for stability and effective governance.

### III. The Implications of Election Deadlock

Puntland, once renowned for its seamless handover of power every five years, fostering relative stability, security, and development, now finds itself entangled in a political deadlock. This situation has arisen due to the incumbent president's endeavors to conduct contentious democratic elections, posing a threat to the progress achieved over the last 25 years in the state. The repercussions of this political impasse, if not addressed before January 8, 2023, include:

- **Political Instability and Tensions:** The ongoing election deadlock has created a political environment suggesting a potential for heightened volatility. The opposition's boycotts and parallel electoral timetables have intensified tensions, raising the risk of armed confrontations, similar to the one that occurred in June 2023 in Garowe, resulting in casualties, injuries, and the displacement of numerous civilians. The mobilization of forces by both the government and some opposition groups raises concerns about the potential escalation of armed conflict in Garowe and Bossaso.
- **Challenges to Democracy:** The past armed conflict in Garowe during these years, coupled with the current escalating tensions that risk evolving into an armed confrontation between the government and the opposition factions, has the potential to breed instability and insecurity in Puntland. Consequently, this may have long-term implications on the psyche of the Puntland public, who are likely to foster a perception that the quest for democracy could result in turmoil and insecurity within the state.
- **Impacts on Governance and Development:** The prolonged election deadlock presents a threat to both governance and development, obstructing advancements and derailing the state's trajectory towards good governance. A significant challenge has emerged with the non-payment of civil servants' salaries. In a recent interview, the Puntland Minister of Finance Mohamed Dhabancad acknowledged that the salary disruptions stem from the government reallocating funds towards election financing (Hanoolaato, 2023). However, government critics argue that the salary payment disruptions result from diverting funds towards militarization. The ambiguity surrounding the electoral process may also discourage investments and development initiatives in the state.
- **Impacts on the Fight Against Terrorist Groups:** The government's mobilization of forces against opposition forces in major urban centers, like Garowe, may weaken its ability to combat violent extremist organizations in Bari and Sanag's mountainous regions. Notably, some opposition forces, originally part of Puntland forces, have splintered due to the political impasse. For instance, Commander Jim'ale leads opposition forces in Garowe, consisting of a unit of Darawish forces called "Danab". Additionally, the Puntland Special Forces (PSF), commanded by Mohmoud Osman, represent another elite force trained by the United States for counterterrorism. In this view, a prolonged political impasse may lead to the disintegration of armed forces, thereby negatively impacting overall security and counter-terrorism efforts in the state.

## IV. Going Forward

The current political impasse in Puntland, arising from contentious democratic elections, poses severe risks to the stability, security, and development that the region has strived to achieve over the past 25 years. The inability of the incumbent president and opposition forum to reach a consensus on electoral processes has resulted in heightened tensions and the potential for armed confrontations, as witnessed in Garowe in June 2023.

The uncertainty and lack of compromise raise the risk of unintended violent clashes particularly in the capital city, Garowe, where some of the opposition groups amassed armed militias. Lack of communication between the two sides exacerbates this pervasive uncertainty and creates an atmosphere of distrust where one side can misinterpret the other side's intentions and respond with force and violence.

There is so much at stake at the moment that all the sides need to:

- play down the escalating violent rhetoric and establish a line of communication to remove any suspicion of intentions.
  - given the gravity of the situation, agree that urgent and inclusive dialogue among the key political stakeholders is necessary and must take place immediately.
  - recognize each side's legitimate right of participation in the political process and negotiate in good faith
- accept that the dialogue should involve the ruling party, opposition parties, independent political leaders and candidates, traditional elders, women, religious leaders and civil society organizations.
  - accept that they must compromise to reach an agreement and prioritize the needs of the people of Puntland, who are currently suffering from poverty, inflation, communal clan fighting, resource scarcity, terrorism, and climate change impact.
  - to be mindful that in order to navigate the current impasse and ensure a peaceful and credible electoral process in Puntland, it is essential that both the government and the opposition forum move away from the zero-sum game of either the old model or one person one vote. Both parties need to pursue a consensus-based electoral model that could fulfil the demands of all sides such as
    - a. A model that respects the term limit, January 8th election date and peaceful transfer of power
    - b. A model that widens the participation and representation of all the segments of the society and moves the democratization process forward
    - c. A model that all stakeholders have a role and independent electoral and dispute resolution commissions are agreed

- accept if compromise on a consensus-based election model that can garner the support of all the sides cannot be reached, the return of the traditional election model complemented by a commitment to principles of transparency, fairness, and inclusivity, is the most viable and peaceful method of resolving this election impasse.

Furthermore, we need to consider the followings;

- The involvement of international partners and non-state actors is important to de-escalate the dispute and bring government and the opposing parties to the negotiations table.
- The opposition's suggestion of involving an impartial third party in the dialogue should be considered to facilitate this process and contribute to a resolution that prevents further escalation of tensions and promotes stability in the region.

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