



PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF SOMALIA'S 2020/21 ONE-PERSON-ONE-VOTE ELECTIONS

HALBEEG RESEARCH CENTRE

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Section A: Introduction

A. Background

This study was carried out in order to establish whether Somalis are ready for one-person, one-vote elections in 2020/21. The study's respondents were drawn from Mogadishu, Garowe, Kismayo, Jowhar, Baidoa and Dhusamareb. The years 2020 and 2021 have been described as a phenomenal period for Somalia's nascent democracy that will witness parliamentary and presidential elections. The country's National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC) described 2020 as "a pivotal year" for Somalia whose citizens have been denied the right to political participation for 50 years and are hoping for an election with universal voting [1].

Somalia is undergoing an incredible political, economic, socio-cultural and security transformation. These transformations in all societal spheres are moving the country towards peace, stability and democracy. More importantly, there has been political discourse and political process on one-person, one-vote elections in 2020/21 for the country to attain the badge of the democratic countries. The election is the people's voice: it is the only means by which the masses are represented and marginalization can be rooted out.

So far, many positive developments have been noted in the preparations for universal suffrage voting in 2020/21. In February 2020 Federal President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed "Farmaajo" signed an historic election bill into law that will give Somalis an opportunity to exercise their democratic rights for the first time in over 50 years by voting directly for political parties [2]. The NIEC announced in November 2019 its plan to begin registering millions of Somalis to participate in popular elections in March 2020 [3]. But implementation of the plan has been curtailed by the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the country.

However, some analysts have questioned the feasibility of holding nationwide polls despite the country's ongoing preparations and the support of the international community, and they have cited the following major impediments: COVID-19, insecurity caused by the continuing attacks launched by the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, and political frictions between Somalia's centre and periphery. These skeptics point to the recent closure of the NIEC's office in Puntland as an example of such simmering tensions [4]. The scant progress on constitutional reform has been cited as another obstacle facing universal suffrage polls in 2020/21 [5].

Nevertheless, opposition politicians and lobby groups like the Somali Atlantic Council want free and fair elections to take place regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic or any other hurdles [6]. But the recently enacted electoral law itself has some deficiencies such as its failure to designate geographic locations for the 275 constituencies of the federal parliament's House of the People, the vaguely worded procedures for electing the 54 members of the Upper House, and the absence of a timeline for the extension of the current parliament's term in the event of a delay in the holding of the 2020/21 elections.

A 17-member joint ad hoc parliamentary committee was appointed on 28 February 2020 to address these issues. Other key issues facing the panel include the designation of seats for each of the regional states, procedures for the election of members of the Upper House representing Somaliland, and gender issues like a

quota of seats reserved for women in the country's next parliament[7]. Preparations for the elections come at a difficult time of pandemic and humanitarian crises like flooding in some parts of the country, and the spread of the COVID-19 virus led the joint ad hoc committee to suspend its deliberations on 2 April 2020. The African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is reducing its number of troops even though it was tasked to oversee the country's election security preparations for the 2020/21 elections [8].

The COVID-19 pandemic may also affect the operations of AMISOM. Moreover, the federal government has been warned not to delay the parliamentary and presidential elections because it will create a political crisis in addition to the public health emergency that the country is currently facing [9].

The findings of this study will evaluate public perceptions of one-person, one-vote elections in 2020/21. It also puts forward a number of recommendations for the Federal Government of Somalia.

B. Objectives

The main objectives that guided this qualitative study were:

- To understand the opinions and perceptions of Somali citizens about one-person, one-vote elections in 2020/21.
- To identify whether the public is comfortable with the possible extension of terms for the current administration and federal parliament.
- To measure the people's understanding of the various types of elections and electoral procedures.
- To identify how different demographic groups, i.e. academics, civil society, the business community, university students and professionals, envision the 2020/21 elections.
- To gain a broader understanding of how the elections will take place in 2020/21.

C. Methodology

This study employed qualitative research methodology, and focus group discussions and document reviews were conducted for this study. The data was collected through six online focus group discussions that were held in Mogadishu, Garowe, Baidoa, Kismayo, Dhusamareb and Jowhar. The respondents represented a diversity of age groups, gender, marital status and levels of education.

The categories of the participants included professionals, civil society representatives, academics, university students, members of the business community, community leaders/clan elders, and youth. The purposive sampling method was used to recruit participants. The number of focus group discussion participants ranged from five to eight. A total of 40 respondents participated in the study. The discussion was conducted through the Google Meet video conferencing app. This study was implemented in four phases.

Phase 1: Inception (January-February 2020). This phase involved initial preparations of the study. In this phase, a detailed concept note was developed. It entailed research methodology, deliverables, research activities and the timetable of the study.

Phase 2: Desk review (February-March 2020). In this phase, we reviewed literature on 2020/21 elections in Somalia. The literature reviewed included media reports, United Nations technical reports, policy briefs and research papers.

Phase 3: Data collection (March-April 2020). This phase involved six focus group discussions conducted online. The participants were from Mogadishu, Garowe, Kismayo, Jowhar, Baidoa and Dhusamareb. The categories of the participants included professionals, civil society representatives, academics, university students, members of the business community, community leaders/clan elders and youth.

Phase 4: Compilation of final report and editing (April-May 2020). This is the final phase of the research. The data was compiled and the report drafted. Finally, it was edited and released to the public.

Limitations of the study

The study hopes to contribute to and inform the government's policies as well as the international community on the 2020/21 nationwide elections. However, it is essential to highlight some of the limitations of the study:

- The study report is not intended to be an all-inclusive account of public perceptions about the 2020/21 elections in the country.
- Data collection coincided with the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) in the country, therefore making it impossible for the focus group discussions to be done in person.
- Another limitation is the subjective nature of the qualitative research. The data represents the opinion of each participant in a particular context. Therefore, the data must be interpreted prudently.

Section B: Key Findings

A. Participants' Demographic Information

A total of six focus group discussions were conducted over the course of three months (February, March and April 2020). The respondents included both males and females aged between 18 and 60 years. The table below summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents in each location.

Figure 1.0 Participants' demographic characteristics

Category		Number
Gender	Male	28
	Female	12
Age	18-24	7
	25-34	18
	35-44	12
	45-54	2
	55 or more	1
Educational background	Bachelor degree	24
	Master degree	13
	PhD	1
Marital Status	Married	31
	Single	9

The table above shows the distribution of the demographic characteristics of the participants. The table shows the majority of the participants were male and the rest are female. All of the participants were university graduates. A majority consisted of Bachelor's degree holders, some have Master's degrees, and three have PhD degrees. Considering the nature of this research, the study purposefully selected people who are well educated and can give impartial and informed discussion.

B. Election Prospects In 2020/21 In Somalia

The respondents were asked whether they thought universal suffrage elections will be held in the country in 2020/21, whether the conditions necessary for elections to take place exist in Somalia, and whether the next administration will be different from the current one when it comes to the general elections. The respondents overwhelmingly stated that the elections could not be held in 2020/21, citing the scarcity of necessary resources and technical constraints. They also added that it is impossible for the government to allocate its budget to elections when the country is facing a novel coronavirus pandemic.

They said the pandemic must be solved first. However, other respondents argued that elections must be held on time no matter what. These people said they are dissatisfied with the current administration, and therefore the election is the only way out. This view has also been expressed by some opposition leaders who want the country to hold the nationwide polls despite the ongoing pandemic crisis.

“It does not seem that elections could be held in 2020/2021 based on the current political and economic circumstance that government is confronting. In addition, the global COVID-19 pandemic that affects fiscal conditions of the country.”

– Academic, Mogadishu

“If the government is committed to hold elections, it can make it happen. They had enough time to do so as there will be no justification for an election postponement.”

- Businessman, Garowe

Some respondents declined to answer the question, saying that depends on the government’s commitment and the amount of pressure applied by Somalia’s international partners. They said the international community and Somalia’s political class are in favour of the elections taking place, but the current pandemic may complicate it.

“It is too early to tell the possibility of the elections in 2020, and no one can tell what top government officials have in mind. The international community and opposition politicians may change their mind any time, if this crisis of COVID-19 continues.”

- Youth (Male), Baidoa

Many respondents acknowledged that for the elections to take place, conditions like voter registration and education must be carried out. Constitutional reform and the security of the country were also noted as key conditions for elections to be held. They believe that Al-Shabaab is still in control of some parts of the rural areas, and this will make it impossible for elections to be held in those areas.

“There are very necessary steps that need to be taken prior to the elections. The country must be secured first.”

- Professional, Kismayo.

A few respondents are of the view that elections will be held according to the scheduled timeline. They highlighted that such an achievement will increase the public's trust of the current government, adding that political violence would also be avoided in this case.

“The current administration will earn people’s trust if it holds elections on time. Otherwise, people will hate it and violence may break out. I think the government should avoid such negligence for the sake of peace.”

- Professional, Dhusamareb.

Some respondents believe that the next administration, if elected through free and fair elections, will be better than the current administration. They asserted that nationwide polls would produce leaders who will steer the country towards good governance and provide leadership that everyone will be willing to follow.

“Obviously free and fair elections will produce competent leaders. I hope to see the kind of leaders who will take us out of the problems we have. Many professionals like doctors, engineers, teachers and others will vie for the positions of members of parliament, and this will create a competitive political environment where the best will emerge.”

-Youth [Male], Mogadishu

However, others noted the elections would have an impact on leadership changes or governance of the country.

C. Public Perceptions Towards Government’s Period Extension

The study assessed the perceptions of people towards the current government’s possible extension of its term and whether such an extension is acceptable if it accommodates key stakeholders and paves the way for a general election, as well as the consequences of that term extension. A majority of the respondents favored a government term extension if the COVID-19 pandemic continues throughout this year. They recalled that article 53 of the recently enacted electoral law allows the government to postpone elections in case of a national emergency like the spread of the pandemic.

“Extension of term is necessary because the government is not fully prepared now. I think fighting the virus must be a priority for some time. We do not know when this pandemic will end. I believe the federal government must be given some time to decide. They [government] should also consult with political stakeholders on this move.”

- Professional, Jowhar

For other respondents, the deferment of elections will pave the way to autocracy and dictatorship. They believe that there is time to prepare for the elections, and the government only needs commitment. In addition to that, the extension will have negative implications as future administrations may also be tempted to extend their terms too.

“The government should commit to hold the elections and the extension is not an option as it is validation for dictatorship and the deliberate breach of the country’s constitution.”

- Civil society representative- Mogadishu

“The previous governments extended the terms and produced favorable results; I think we should see the bigger picture and collaborate with government to organize the general elections.”

- Professional, Mogadishu

Some respondents could not decide about the postponement of elections.

“I cannot foretell the implications of the elections postponement and how elections should be addressed.”

- Civil society representative, Jowhar

“People should be given their right to vote for the candidates of their choice and the government should be given time for the next general elections to happen.”

- Community leader, Kismayo

D. Public’s Knowledge Of General Election And Their Understanding Of Electoral Procedures

In this part, the respondents were asked about the election model that best suits Somalia, election procedures, the country’s previous elections, their plans to vote in 2020/21, and whether the country is on the right trajectory to be ready for the 2020/21 universal elections.

A majority of the participants argued that a one-person, one–vote election is the best thing that can happen for Somalia’s democratization process. They said the citizens will have the right for the first time to choose whoever they want. Their democratic rights will be respected. Young participants enthusiastically suggested that Somalia should move to a type of election in which the public can vote for the candidate of their choice.

“I want to be able to vote for the candidate that I believe is competent for the post, so that I can decide that he/she represents my political views.”

- Youth (Male) - Jowhar

“Somalia’s citizens should be given the privilege to vote for their leaders. This is more democratic and transparent.”

- Civil society representative, Kismayo

A significant number of the respondents said that they are well versed in election procedures. They have learnt the procedures through government-sponsored workshops, the media, or from family and friends.

“I did participate in the community workshops organized by the electoral committee and I receive trainings and manuals on elections procedures and the citizens’ rights.”

- Youth (Female), Dhusamareb

However, others noted they have no knowledge of election procedures. These Somalis said they had not been given voter education. They asserted that the government should carry out massive outreach and voter education campaigns.

“I do not know much about the electoral procedure and how it will be conducted. I did not attend any event or workshop that explains electoral procedure. I only heard politicians mentioning it and nothing else.”

- Academic, Baidoa

“The government and the electoral committee should take campaigns to educate the public about the electoral procedures. Moreover, the majority of the Somalis are young and never experienced general elections.”

- Businesswoman, Mogadishu

Many participants criticized past power-sharing models like the 4.5 clan-based system. They said that system is not based on meritocracy and democratic values; rather, it is based on clan hierarchies under which elders dictate to the masses who will lead them. They said this option is not viable for the country and should not be repeated. The new model must be implemented.

“The current system serves the interests of the few. It is a system where a minority elects the few to make decisions for them. Many people were left out of the system. 4.5 system is not a good system of power distribution and governance at all. The alternative is one-person, one-vote.”

- Women leader, Kismayo

“It is not a fair election when a group of people are given the chance to run for the top government positions and some people are not even allowed to run for it. General elections will end these malpractices.”

- Youth (Male), Baidoa

Many respondents answered affirmatively the question of whether they will turn up for the general election if it is held on the basis of one-person, one-vote. They added they dream of the day when Somalis will line up at polling stations to vote. They have shown their willingness to vote, but participants also said security conditions must be improved first.

“I would come out to vote in the next elections regardless of what will happen. It would be a nice experience to go to the poll station and cast the vote for the very first time.”

- Academic, Mogadishu

“The poll stations might be targeted or people threatened and that consequently will prevent some people from going to vote. Some people are very cautious and will not risk their lives for elections.”

- Professional, Garowe

A significant number of the respondents reported that they are not sure where the country is heading. The ambiguity towards the election is attributed to a lack of information available to the general populace, who are not involved in government decision-making. COVID-19 has also altered the perceptions of the people towards the government's intentions in preparing for elections in 2020/21.

“The direction in which the country is heading is hard to tell. The government information is not publicly available, they [government] tell flawless stories of their doings, and the opposition disapproves it.”

- Civil society representative, Mogadishu

‘I cannot understand the direction that the country is heading in, but nothing better has been done in many spheres including domestic policies as well as international relations. It also seems the antagonism between the government and the member states increased.’

- Community leader, Garowe

Some respondents, however, are optimistic that the country is heading in the right direction.

“The country is heading in the right direction and the government accomplished historical milestones. They did a respectable job in fighting corruption and improving public financial management.”

- Professional, Baidoa

Section C: Conclusions and Recommendations

A. Summary of findings

The purpose of this study was to find out public perceptions of the 2020/21 elections in Somalia. The study used qualitative techniques to collect and analyze the data. Descriptive research was used to gain a snapshot of these perceptions towards the upcoming elections in Somalia. Participants living in six major cities in Somalia contributed to this study.

This study found that most Somalis do not believe that elections are going to be held in the forthcoming year. They also believe that elite-based and indirect elections are not fair and democratic since they do not represent the will of the majority. People in Somalia perceive that a failure to hold elections will diminish public trust and perhaps make violence inevitable. Most participants expressed the view that an extension of the current government's term in office is inevitable because a universal suffrage election cannot be organized within the short timeframe established by law.

Many people also argued that a transition to universal suffrage elections may need more time, and COVID-19 pandemic is a major stumbling block for the holding of a one-person, one-vote balloting in the country. This study also found that people do not have a clear understanding of the electoral model that Somalia has chosen, but they did demonstrate a firm willingness to turn out at polling centres to vote for their future leaders. This study found there is an information gap as people have no idea about the direction in which the country is moving, and many participants feel that only the ruling elites and their supporters decide on the election model, the timing of the election, and who should run for elected office.

Somalis are worried that subsequent governments will not be any different if they emerge from election models of the past. People pointed out that the election model which best suits Somalia is a one-person, one-vote system where multiple parties can vie for the offices at stake. According to the study's findings, a general election model increases accountability and improves the government's functionality throughout Somalia. The Somali public believes that the government's term in office should be extended if the government uses that additional time to accommodate all political stakeholders and prepares the country for general elections in which people will participate in the decision-making process that affects their civic lives.

B. Recommendations

Based on the key findings of this study, the following are the specific recommendations:

1. The Federal Government should communicate to the public soon whether the general elections scheduled for 2020 and early 2021 will take place or be postponed. The COVID-19 pandemic has created uncertainty and fears that the elections might be affected. Communicating in a timely manner during the ongoing crisis will create a good image for the government.
2. The NIEC should launch nationwide public education and voter registration campaigns as soon as the pandemic is brought under control. The voter education effort is crucial to enable voters to make informed decisions about the leaders whom they want to represent them. Without voter education, it will be hard to gauge whether the electoral process is genuine or a sham.
3. The Federal Government and the NIEC should reach out to Somalia's political stakeholders, i.e. opposition parties, civil society, women's groups, and the international community for opening a dialogue on how best to conduct the 2020/21 elections. Credible elections will not be possible unless the federal government and regional states have reconciled. The political elites must shun their personal interests in favor of promoting the rebuilding and development of Somalia.
4. The Federal Government of Somalia should also put in place the necessary security measures and personnel to protect polling stations and voters. Many electoral delegates have been killed by Al-Shabaab militants since the indirect election of the current federal parliament was concluded in December 2016. And since AMISOM will be reducing its troop strength in Somalia in the coming months, greater responsibility for achieving this goal shall lie with Somalia's own security forces.
5. Deficiencies in the recently enacted electoral law like the absence of clear geographic demarcation of parliamentary constituencies and the vaguely worded procedures for electing members of the Upper House including those from Somaliland must be addressed before a one-person, one-vote election can take place.
6. The participation of women in politics must be ensured. Their representation in Somalia's next federal parliament should be safeguarded through the re-introduction of female quotas in both houses of the national legislature. The level of female representation arising from the next elections will provide a revealing harbinger of the prospects for achieving true democracy in Somalia.

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