



INITIAL PHASE OF PUNTLAND'S VOTER REGISTRATION PROCESS



INTRODUCTION

According to the Puntland voter registration law (2021), to hold credible and transparent elections, voters must be registered to vote in a process managed by the Transitional Puntland Election Commission (TPEC). The registration process is one of the most challenging phases in the election process, as it often involves numerous technical and administrative tasks that require resources and political will, which can lead to delays in the process. On 25th May 2022, TPEC released the schedule for the local elections, which included a list of proposed activities from May 2022 to February 2023. According to the plan, the registration of voters was initially scheduled for July and August 2022. The schedule also indicated the list of intended tasks including the election day initially planned for December 2022. However, the planned activities were delayed for several factors including, political tensions and the prolonged drought that affected most of Puntland regions. In late November, TPEC announced that voter registration will commence on 13th December, but the date was subsequently changed to 5th January 2023 following a request from political associations who wanted to prioritise political solutions to contentious issues around elections.

TPEC planned the voter registration to happen in three phases owing to limited financial and technical capacity. Each region was allocated 12 days of registration. Phase I registration was launched in three regions namely Bari, Karkaar and Gardafuu, all the three regions were formerly known as the Bari region before Puntland state split them into three regions. Bari region consists of 6 districts, but the registration was carried out in five districts, as Ufeyn was among the three districts that held early elections in 2021. Karkaar region is composed of six districts. Elections are set to take place in five as the administrative district of Qardho also held early elections in 2021. Gardafuu is the youngest region of Puntland and is situated in the far remote eastern coast of Somalia, the region consists of five districts.

The voter registration peacefully kicked off in Bossaso on the 5th of January 2023. The first phase of the registration covered more than 200 polling sites under 17 districts in 3 eastern regions. TPEC successfully dispatched 200 biometric photo registration kits and 670 voter registration staff (157 teams) including supervisors, operators, and interviewers and security personnel into more than 200 registration stations. TPEC gave the staff training on how to use the equipment.

On 6th January, hundreds of voters queued to register for the local elections, but there are few places that the registration

did not go as planned, this was the case of a majority of districts and Iskushuban district of Bari region. The reason for the delay was due to grievances that the local population had regarding the assignment of polling stations, as well as limited access due to heavy rains that cut off road access, and security reasons with Al Shabab suspected areas. However, the issues around the registration sites were sorted out, and the registration commenced on 13th January with the exception of Balidhidin district where the security operations were ongoing against Alshabab militants hiding in the mountain areas of the district. Although Al-Shabaab diminished in the last couple of years, the recent operations against the group were carried out to ensure the safety of the registration staff. As a result of the delays that occurred in some regions, TPEC was prompted to increase the time allocated for the registration and three additional days were added for all districts. The registration was finally concluded on 25th January in all registration centres except Balidhidin district which TPEC later announced the registration shall resume on 26th of January.

Phase II of the registration process was launched on the 25th of January and was set to include Sanaag, Haylan and Nugaal.

Following tensions in Garowe around registration, at the time of writing, VR has not been carried out in Garowe but has started in two other districts of Dangoroyo and Burtinle. There are therefore currently three regions and 2 Nugaal districts (Garowe and Godobjiiraan) in which registration is set to take place – Mudug, Sool and Ayn. These are potentially the most challenging areas in which registration could take place.

Generally, the first phase of the voter registration ended in a peaceful manner, thousands have registered in each district, with the exception of the clashes in Garowe on the 6th Feb. Although the actual number of registered voters is not yet confirmed that registered is quite unknown and the commission can withhold the information until all regions are completed, TPEC is expected to share the numbers once the voter registration process concludes. However, according to estimates the number will likely range between 120,000 to 130,000 in from phase I. There are few things that need to be considered:

The following brief outlines some key observations from the voter registration process so far, which can inform the next phases of the process, and some scenarios and options on the way forward.

KEY OBSERVATIONS OF PHASE 1 OF THE VOTER REGISTRATION PROCESS

Security remained stable during the registration process. There were concerns around whether voter registration would start peacefully in Bossaso, or armed groups based in Bossaso (including PSF forces) will disrupt the registration process. In anticipation, the government deployed a huge number of its forces and battle wagons in Bossaso to counter any possible armed attacks to the voter registration exercise and ensure its control of the state. Opposition politicians, including 2024 presidential candidates warned that the voter registration will increase polarisation and violence in Bossaso, where government forces fought against the US-trained Puntland Security Forces (PSF) in December 2021. However, these tensions did not escalate when voter registration came to pass.

The desire of the people to register is clear: during the registration, thousands of people lined up to register, these people were from all segments of the community including women, mothers, traditional elders, young people, people with disabilities the disable and aged. All of them had the desire and willingness to stand long hours to exercise their right of participating the elections. There was a general desire and willingness displayed by the public to register to vote and participate in the local elections; this desire was evident across all three regions as people queued for long hours to register.

TPEC demonstrated its technical capacity to deliver a voter registration process: The technical, human resource and logistical capacity of TPEC to reach and cover the planed 200 hundred registration sites under the 3 regions (17 districts), including the most hard-to-reach and insecure areas with presence of ISIS and Al Shabab was another worrying factor that could hinder the smooth registration of voters in all the target areas.

Clan-based mobilisation has been very effective in increasing registration: The other contributing factor is the clans who were either un-represented or underrepresented in the current clan-based local councillors and Puntland parliamentarians are now mobilising their members to register and vote to ensure that they may later secure an adequate number of councillors and MPs. In general claaans who believed that they did not have adequate representation in political and decision-making perceived the 1P1V process as an opportunity for equitable power and resource sharing in Puntland regions. As such, this demonstrated the need to continuouslyengage with traditional leaders as part of preparations for voter registration campaigns.

The political violence in **Las' nod has not disrupted the wider process, but will no hinder scope for registration Sool:** Another possible factor that could have jeopardised voter registration was the recent violent civil uprising in Las'anod. Opposition politicians used it as a tactic to divert attention from the voter registration process. Politicians called for the President Deni to focus on the prevailing situation in Las'anod and postpone the voter registration.

Demonstrations were organised and conducted in the major towns of Puntland, where protesters called on the Puntland government to capture and liberate the Sool region including Las' anod. Opposition politicians mentioned several times that elections cannot take place while Las'anod is under attack of Somaliland. This did not disrupt the first phase of the process, but following tensions emerging in Garowe, and an escalation of conflict in Sool, it is now feeding into a pause in the voter registration process.

Counter-Registration campaigns have negatively affected turn-out: Opposition politicians including presidential candidates held press conferences and community gatherings widely spreading messages calling for citizens not to register, suggesting that the registration is part of a wider campaign for presidential term extension. This has negatively affected the registration process as many citizens were torn between these conflicting views of the process. As such, this demonstrated the need to continuously engage with traditional leaders as part of preparations for voter registration campaigns.

There has been Inadequate voter Awareness and Sensitization alongside registration: There was very limited voter awareness and sensitization, target citizens have never registered themselves as voters and they did not know why to register themselves and the way it impacts the functionality of their society. CSO' s were very ill-prepared as they did not know which districts the registration process would start. Furthermore as it came at end of year, there were limited funds to ensure maximum reach in the three regions. Although attempts were made to increase people's awareness of the upcoming voter registration, there continue to be widespread misconceptions about the local elections, that can affect the numbers registered.

Migrating pastoralists were not reached by voter registrations: Many of the pastoral communities of Iskushuban, Qandala, and Alula moved from their residences and migrated to very inaccessible mountainous areas due to recent rains, which made access to these areas and communities challenging. There are also thousands of pastoralists from other regions of Puntland who have migrated to the Bari region and were not willing to register in Bari regions.

Disputes over the demarcation of districts have delayed the process: When Puntland was established, the state consisted of 20 districts but now there are 50 districts, and these districts have no official demarcated boundaries. In November, TPEC released the polling station causing strong opposition from some districts which argued that their villages were wrongly added to other districts. This was partly responsible for the delay of the registration in Gardafuu and Bari regions.

The timing of the registration: The voter registration coincided with the last year of the government. In normal circumstances, the last year of the administration's term is usually focused on presidential campaigns. Subsequently many presidential candidates declared their willingness to stand for the elections in 2024. The campaigns of these candidates adversely affected the smooth running of the registration process. Many of them have already started castigating the process portraying it as a project by resident Deni to extend his tenure.

The allocation of 15 days to each phase of the voter registration process is not sufficient: TPEC initially scheduled the voter registration to continue for 45 days. Each phase was allocated 15 days. However, the experience from the Bari region shows that the registration cannot start in all districts as was intended and the time allocated is not sufficient; the first phase took almost 20 days. The delay in one district impacts the overall schedule of the elections.

Conflict resolution before the registration is paramount: TPEC postponed the registration in several villages because of the unresolved issues between the community and TPEC. In Gardafuu region for instance the registration started seven days after it was officially launched in other regions, this shows that the government and TPEC should prioritise resolving conflicts before kicking off in the second phase.

The absence of political associations impacted the success of voter registration: During the early local elections of 2021, political associations played a critical role in bringing out their supporters to register. However, in the first phase this was not the case, two political associations boycotted the whole election process while other associations had minimal impact on the registration of voters. As we have mentioned, eight political associations requested the government to fulfil 13 conditions before the voter registration, later the government and the associations reached an agreement in which three political association was not satisfied. The limited role of PAs can be attributed to their lack of capacity to operate in all regions.

Overall voter registration turnout was low: Although, the voter turn out in phase one is yet to be confirmed, estimates have put the number roughly between 120,000 to 130,000 voters. This is below the expected voter turnout even though there was no census in Puntland to determine the actual number of voters. The low turnout of voters was due to many factors including the scepticism by many voters, the short time of the registration, inability of thousands of labour force to stand long hours in the registration queue, and the political climate. However, the chairman of TPEC told reporters at the closing date of the first phase that the people registered were above TPEC expectations.

Tensions in Garowe demonstrate the importance of political dialogue to manage conflict around the process:

Recent tensions in Garowe highlight around voter registration show the lack of support for the process amongst some stakeholders. It will be essential going forward to engage them in dialogue to avoid such tensions going forward. Likely this will need to address the outstanding issue of the state assembly elections if it is to be successful.

WAY FORWARD

The voter registration process has been largely successful up until this point, but is likely to face some significant challenges before its conclusion. Given the conflict in Lascanood, it is difficult to envisage voter registration taking place in Sool or Ayn in the short-term, without contributing to escalating tensions. In Nugaal, it will be essential to engage in sufficient political outreach in advance of commencing registration to avoid a return to tensions. Such an approach is likely also valuable in Mudug to avoid similar dynamics. More broadly, this brief concludes with two key recommendations.

Political dialogue between elections stakeholders: The major obstacle undermining voter registration is the political orientation of different actors including the political association who have split on endorsing the registration process. There are also politicians who are cynical on the issue, the biggest stumbling block now is the insistence of politicians that the president declares his latent intention about the election. Political dialogue would remove the mistrust that shadowed the election process, it would also build the confidence of the voters who are still hesitant to go to the registration centres.

Targeted awareness campaigns: In addition to hurdles associated with this election, the public awareness is very low. In the past, few civil society organisations have conducted awareness in certain areas but is very little compared with low awareness level coupled with high voter illiteracy in Puntland as evidenced by the early elections. A thorough door to door public awareness on voter registration is needed to be carried out by all stakeholders including the government, political associations, and civil society organisations.