

The role of election observers in Somaliland

BY AYAN YUSUF

Key points

- The National Electoral Commission (NEC) is better prepared than in previous elections, and has produced a new voter register using iris scanning technology.
- Domestic and international observers have important, different and independent, but complementary mandates.
- International observers are non-partisan and operate under a principle of non-interference, and assess to what extent the elections meet international standards and complies to national electoral laws and regulations.
- Domestic observers are more numerous than their international counterparts, can access harder to reach polling stations and are allowed to constructively interfere in the process.
- Both international and domestic observers aim to improve the overall process of elections, through giving recommendations, and through policy dialogue and conversations.

Introduction

This report is a record of a Forum event held on 5 November, before the 13 November 2017 election day. Election day itself was largely peaceful, and the international observer mission reported only minor irregularities on election day, including vote buying and violation of secrecy during voting. However, inflammatory and divisive rhetoric, and allegations of rigging by the opposition, led to violent protests both before and after the elections. The incumbent Kulmiye party was declared victorious on 21 November, followed by the opposition's concession



The NEC meets with Chief Observer Michael Walls in October 2017.
Photo by NEC.

the following day. The event and its record focused on the international Election Observation Mission's (EOM) assessment of the National Electoral Commission's (NEC) preparations for the elections, the broader role observers play and the methods they employ to fulfil that role, in the lead up to the elections. The event was organized in collaboration with the international EOM and the University of Hargeisa's Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS).

International observation missions have been participating in Somaliland elections since its first presidential elections in 2003, adding credibility to the process and assessing whether the elections were free and fair. The November 2017 election EOM was composed of 60 people hailing from 27 countries.

Panelists

Dr Michael Walls, *Chief Observer, UCL EOM*

Susan Mwape, *Election Analyst, UCL EOM*

Ahmed Farag, *Legal Analyst, UCL EOM*

Conrad Heine, *Media Coordinator, UCL EOM*

Mohamed Ahmed, *Director, SONSAF*

Domestic observers

Mohamed Ahmed, Director of SONSAF, noted that domestic observers were deployed during the 2010 and 2012 elections. For this election, 620 domestic observers were trained. Lessons learned by domestic observers in past elections have been implemented. Civil society's engagement in election monitoring have pushed greater policy dialogue and conversations between stakeholders. These and other discussions and their resulting recommendations have resulted in a more reliable voter registration system in order to prevent fraud and instances of multiple voting.

Changes that have been implemented for the 2017 Presidential elections are biometric iris scanning for the registration of voters, an earlier start to preparations by the NEC and the introduction of a more sophisticated online reporting system, which gives a better overview of all polling stations. A data centre was fully operational on the day of the election.

Although Mohamed said that country-wide deployment, in both urban and rural areas, would be a challenge, he noted that the domestic observers team—selected based on a clear criteria of basic education, neutrality and gender balance—wanted the outside world to see a transparent, free and fair Somaliland election, which the NEC especially was better prepared to deliver.

International observers

Susan Mwape explained that one of the differences between international and domestic observers is that local observers can make recommendations on election day, whereas international observers do not interfere with the process, and only give a preliminary assessment after election day and recommendations once the process has concluded. EOM's primary tasks are:

- A pre-election assessment mission which assesses the preparedness of stakeholders, and takes into consideration the economic and security conditions.

Besides stakeholder engagement, the team meets with representatives from the different political parties, observe the campaigns and follows how the media covers the lead up to the elections. The EOM also assesses whether

stakeholders are adhering both to international standards but as well as national electoral laws and regulations.

- Long-term observation through the deployment of a small core team of long-term observers.
- Short-term observation around election day through the deployment of observers to a representative sample of polling stations.
- The core team remains in the host country for three days after the election and delivers a preliminary assessment of the elections.

Most international observers—including those deployed in Somaliland—adhere to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the Code of Conduct for International Election Observers. These principles cover observers' impartiality, as well as their ongoing cooperation and communication with authorities, at whose invitation they are observing the elections.

Ahmed Farag, described that EOM cannot deploy in the same large numbers that domestic observers can, and they rely on bringing an international cadre of observers. Observers are not assigned to specific polling stations. Instead, they try to visit as many polling stations as possible and fill out a standardized questionnaire for each polling station. The answers are reported back to the core team, who compile and compare the observations.

The international observers' preliminary statement, although prepared before the announcement of results, is not issued until several days after the election. A full report, including recommendations, is issued after the election results are announced.

The EOM assesses in future elections whether their past recommendations have been taken into account, since one of their core aims is to help improve the process over time.

The chief observer Michael Walls, commented that there is no one-size-fits-all election, and there is no template to apply to each country. Rather, they assess whether an election complies with the laws and regulations of the host country itself.

Comments from the audience

Two audience members asked whether previous recommendations had been implemented.

Michael Walls replied that all observer reports from 2005, 2010 and 2012 are publically available online so interested parties can review whether the recommendations have been implemented. Improvements to the voter registration system have been made following a longstanding recommendation, but the relevance of some recommendations decrease over time, and become less pertinent to the political context, and sometimes impractical to implement.

In response to a question from a representative from the Hargeisa Cultural Centre about the EOM's relationship with other international actors, Michael Walls said relations were very good. Although the EOM is funded by the UK government, he said, observers have been selected from 25 different countries. There is a strong relationship with the EU as well. The 2017 Presidential election will have the largest international delegation Somaliland has ever seen, which he said strengthens the mission.

An audience member from the University of Hargeisa asked how the EOMs select which polling stations to visit.

Ahmed Farag answered that the team is mobile and try to visit as many polling stations for as long as possible but realistically they will only cover a sample. Ideally there will be a combination of urban and rural districts visited, although rural polling stations are often very far from each other. Polling stations are selected randomly to observe the opening of polls, polling itself, the closing of polls and counting.

Audience members were also interested in the collaboration or relationship between the EOMs and domestic observers.

Michael Walls explained that they were independent of each other so that they can fulfil their respective mandates. Mohamed Ahmed stated that the domestic observers, who have greater numbers, also share information with international observers on their observations across the 1,620 polling stations.

Susan Mwape added that international observers are restricted to polling stations that are accessible by road, as well as by the security advice they are given.

Dr Adan Abokor from the Rift Valley Institute asked how observers were selected. The panel answered that, for domestic observers, the requirements were a basic education, being 25 or older, to be neutral and in possession of a Somaliland national identification card. International observers were recruited through an open advertisement. They received over 200 applications, which were shortlisted based on experience of Somaliland or election observation, and impartiality. A panel went through applications in order to recruit a team with the right balance between gender, nationalities and experience.

An audience member asked whether the EOMs had met with each of the presidential candidates. Michael Walls replied they had met with party representatives but would only meet the candidates at the elections' conclusion.



Credits

This report is based on the record of an event organized by the Rift Valley Forum, in collaboration with the International Election Observation mission to the 2017 Somaliland Presidential Election, and the Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS) at Hargeisa University. It was written by Ayan Yusuf.

The Rift Valley Institute works in eastern and central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

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