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Somaliland Elections Disrupt al-Shabaab's Regional Expansion; Terrorism Monitor Volume: 19 Issue: 12

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On May 31, the independent, but unrecognized, Republic of Somaliland held parliamentary and local district elections. These internationally observed elections, which saw a high turnout of 1.1 million registered voters in Somaliland, were peaceful and transparent ([Africa News](#), May 31). [1] The election stood in marked contrast to the violence and corruption that continue to plague Somalia, where al-Shabaab continues to gain ground ([Africa News](#), May 26).

Somaliland's own parliamentary elections—last held in 2005—were delayed due to drought and disagreements over procedural questions. However, the country has elected three presidents since 2003 and held multiple municipal elections. The May 31 vote marks the further maturation of Somaliland's democracy and the institutions that undergird it. The recent elections, which featured biometric ID for all voters, saw the defeat of Somaliland's ruling party, Kulmiye, in favor of a coalition of the country's two major opposition parties ([The Standard](#), May 18; [Somaliland Sun](#), June 12). Just as with previous presidential elections, this shift in power has been accompanied by a smooth transition within relevant governing bodies.

A combination of broad public participation in democratic elections and transparency are Somaliland's best tools for building and safeguarding its institutions and its citizens ([East African Business Week](#), April 20). In turn, it is this same public support that helps Somaliland defend itself against the serious threat posed by al-Shabaab.

Predictability and Citizen-Sourced Intelligence

Al-Shabaab is steadily gaining ground in Somalia and in parts of the semi-autonomous region of Puntland, Somaliland's southern neighbor. In Somalia, al-Shabaab's ability to penetrate and attack even the most hardened targets points to the group's ever-increasing capabilities and territorial range ([Garoweonline](#), June 15). In the past three months, al-Shabaab has increased the tempo of its operations across a wide swath of Somalia, most notably in Lower Shabelle and along Somalia's border with Kenya ([Garoweonline](#), June 13; [The Star](#), May 20). However, al-Shabaab's network of informants and operatives extends across Somalia, Puntland, Somaliland, and Kenya. It is al-Shabaab's intelligence wing, the Amniyat, which makes it such a formidable enemy.

The sophistication of the Amniyat has increased markedly in the last five years. Despite periodic martial and political setbacks to the larger al-Shabaab organization, the Amniyat has enhanced its capabilities and its human network. The leadership of al-Shabaab recognizes that the Amniyat and the intelligence it generates is fundamental to the group's long-term goal of cementing its influence in—and control of—large parts of Somalia. Consequently, the Amniyat is staffed with the most capable recruits and its budget is prioritized. Al-Shabaab's ability to target hardened military and government facilities with suicide bombers and armed operatives would not exist if it were not for the Amniyat. [2]

The Amniyat is also tasked with assessing and penetrating vulnerable communities and exacerbating clan and inter-clan rivalries. Stopping al-Shabaab-directed influence operations is critical for preventing the organization from establishing new footholds. To this end, the government of Somaliland relies on community-driven intelligence. Clan elders, local officials, and concerned citizens report suspicious activities and new arrivals to either local police or, in some cases, directly to Somaliland's National Intelligence Service (NIS). The willingness of locals to cooperate with the government stems from the predictability of the government's response and, ultimately, trust in the government.

Ironically, in Somalia, al-Shabaab also relies on predictability and trust to build influence and sustain its control of territory. In comparison with the government of Somalia, al-Shabaab's officials and form of government—even as harsh as it is—are often reliable and more predictable. For example, checkpoints run by al-Shabaab follow standardized protocols with respect to the 'taxes' they collect from merchants and herdsmen ([The Standard](#), November 22, 2020) [3]. If an al-Shabaab fighter harasses and steals money from travelers, the punishment is often death. At government- or militia-run checkpoints, demands for money and permission to pass are arbitrary and often

predatory. Areas controlled by al-Shabaab have little crime and are generally peaceful. This is not to deny the brutality of the organization. However, al-Shabaab often does a better job governing and providing security than the Somali government and allied militias and, as a result, secures the support of many locals. [4]

The government of Somaliland and its military, police, and intelligence service understand that they must out-govern al-Shabaab and ensure that they are viewed as being more reliable and more predictable than those of the terrorist group. It is this predictability and trust that enables Somaliland's understaffed and under-resourced police and military to effectively combat al-Shabaab and other militant groups. In contrast with Somalia, which has received tens of billions of dollars in aid over the last three decades, Somaliland receives little aid and no military assistance. In most of its territory, the government of Somaliland has, despite its limited resources, denied al-Shabaab a foothold.

Future Outlook

Somaliland's recent nationwide elections passed with no reports of violence. This is despite the fact that al-Shabaab must have viewed such elections and mass gatherings of people as prime targets. Any attacks on the elections would have embarrassed the government and undermined trust in the authorities' ability to protect their citizens. The fact that no attacks took place, even in problematic areas near the Puntland border, is further evidence of the effectiveness of Somaliland's approach to combatting terror. Both al-Shabaab and Islamic State in Somalia are active in Puntland ([Garoweonline](#), June 16; [Somali Dispatch](#), July 18, 2020). In the case of al-Shabaab, it has repeatedly sent operatives into Somaliland from Puntland ([Horseed Media](#), February 9; [Horseed Media](#), November 17, 2019).

The Horn of Africa more broadly is not known for its stable or democratic governments. Somaliland is a success story in a part of the world where there are few. The most recent elections yet again demonstrate the country's determination to chart its own path. However, the international community should not take such success and stability for granted. Somaliland faces numerous challenges that will only become more acute with time. More than 70 percent of Somaliland's population of 4 million is under the age of 30. Youth unemployment and a chronic lack of foreign investment threaten to upend the impressive progress the country has made. Al-Shabaab and similar militant groups, if they endure, will be ready to seize on any vulnerabilities.

Notes

[1] See reports on the elections at: https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/somalia/99709/statement-international-partners_en; <https://rusi.org/commentary/somaliland-power-democracy>

[2] Author interview with regional security expert, June 2021.

[3] See: <https://hiraal institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/A-Losing-Game.pdf>

[4] Author interview with multiple regional analysts, May-June 2021.

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