Report by International Observers on the 2016 Voter Registration Process in Somaliland

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Acronyms and abbreviations

APD	Academy for Peace and Development
BVR	Biometric voter registration
DPU	Developmental Planning Unit
IEO	International election observer(s)
ID	Identification/identity document
IDP	Internally displaced person(s)
MINT	Ministry of Internal Affairs
NEC	National Electoral Commission
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
SCISEF	Somaliland Civil Society Election Forum
SONSAF	Somaliland Non-State Actors' Forum
UCL	University College London
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VOSOMWO	Voice of Somaliland Minority Women Organisation
VRC	Voter registration centre
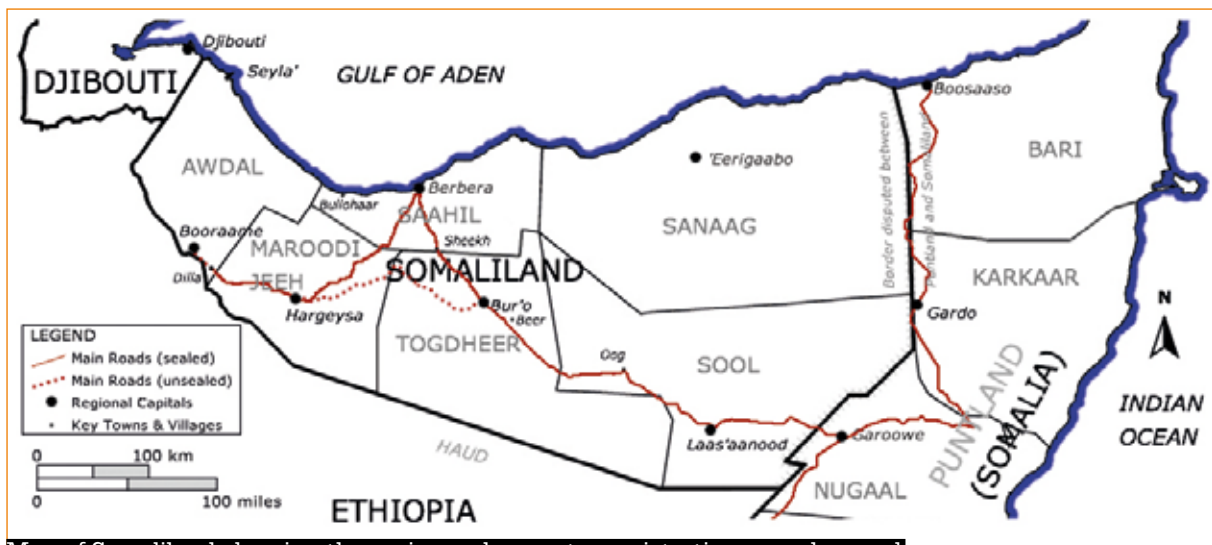
Map of Somaliland showing the regions where voter registration was observed

Introduction

The Somaliland voter registration process began on 16 January 2016, concluding on 26 September 2016, and was conducted by the Somaliland National Electoral Commission (NEC) in all six regions of the country. International development agency Progressio, the Development Planning Unit (DPU) at University College London (UCL), and members of Somaliland Focus (UK), observed the process at different points during this period. Our international election observer (IEO) mission followed previous observations by these three organisations of Somaliland's House of Representatives election in 2005, presidential election in 2010 and local council elections in 2012.
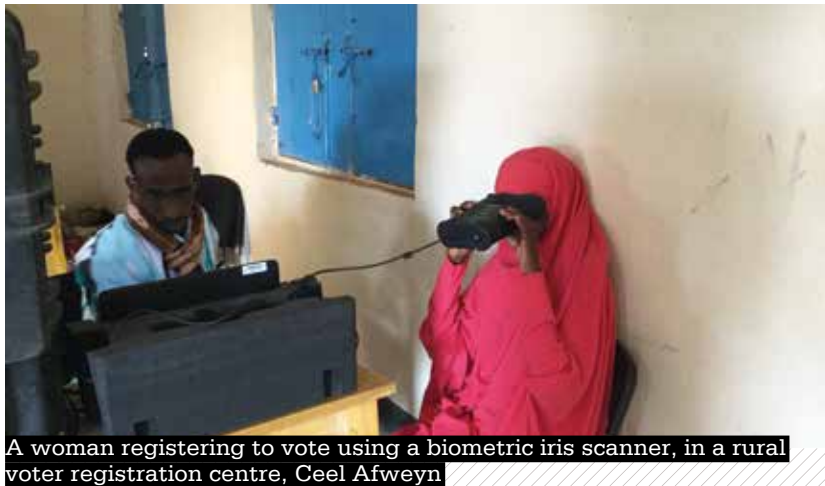
A woman registering to vote using a biometric iris scanner, in a rural voter registration centre, Ceel Afweyn

The purpose of the 2016 mission was to inform Somalilanders and key international actors about the quality and legitimacy of the voter registration process. The credibility of the presidential elections due to take place in 2017 will depend to a great degree on the legitimacy of the biometric registry. Somaliland is the first African country to undertake biometric registration based on iris-recognition software, a process expected to safeguard against multiple registrations and voter fraud. This had been a major issue during Somaliland's first voter registration process in 2008–10, during which different clans motivated their members to register multiple times in order to augment their numbers and political influence. There are therefore high expectations that the current register will provide a credible voters' list. Given common and often deliberate irregularities with voter registers in other African states, and the challenges experienced during Somaliland's previous process, having a credible register for forthcoming elections will be a major step forward for the two-decade-long process of state-building and democratisation in Somaliland – part of its quest for international recognition. Voters we interviewed also clearly made this connection, stating that voter registration is the basis for a credible election, which is in turn important for Somaliland to achieve international recognition.

Overall, we assessed that the NEC conducted a highly successful registration process, which was largely peaceful, well organised and effectively managed. The work of NEC staff was characterised by goodwill and a determination to complete the registration in a professional and independent manner.

Nonetheless, challenges remain. It is still unclear how the publication of the final voters' list will proceed, and how the NEC will undertake regular updating of the voter register. The major future risks, though, appear to be political rather than technical. To date, the NEC has been keenly aware of the sensitivities attached to registration data, particularly when disaggregated to district level, and has been cautious regarding the dissemination of this information. In our view, the most significant challenge ahead relates to the eventual release of that data. The process must be handled with care, but it is also important that registration figures to the district level are released reasonably promptly so that the discussion of electoral matters – such as the siting of polling stations and parliamentary seat allocation – can take place in an informed context.

A poster calling on citizens to sign a Ministry of Foreign Affairs petition for Somaliland recognition during the voter registration process

The IEO mission

The IEO mission to observe Somaliland's voter registration process in 2016 was formed of members from Progressio, the DPU and Somaliland Focus (UK).

Progressio is a UK charity (number 294329) which, as well as undertaking international advocacy, works by placing skilled development workers with national NGO partners. Progressio has worked in Somaliland since 1997. Current projects support work on HIV and AIDS, women's participation and violence against women. After more than 75 years of operation, Progressio will be closing on 31 March 2017 due to funding limitations.

Over the past 20 years, Progressio has been instrumental in helping Somaliland along the road to democratisation. This has included building the capacity of partner organisations, election observation, and preparing and delivering conference and briefing papers, books and periodical articles. In collaboration with DPU and a team of Somaliland researchers, Progressio is currently undertaking research on Somaliland's political settlement from a gender perspective to better understand the cultural factors which influence the exclusion of women from powerful positions in politics and the economy. This research will help inform Somaliland's democratisation process.

The Bartlett Developmental Planning Unit (DPU) is an inter-disciplinary unit operating within UCL. It offers taught postgraduate courses and research programmes, and undertakes consultancy work in international development. Its mission is to build the capacity of professionals and institutions to design and implement innovative, sustainable and inclusive strategies at the local, national and global levels. These seek to enable the people who are generally excluded from decision-making by poverty or by their social and cultural identity to play a full and rewarding role in their own development. Over the past years, DPU staff, particularly Michael Walls, have maintained a strong involvement in development-related interventions in the Horn of Africa, particularly in the Somali areas.

Somaliland Focus (UK) was established in 2005 to raise awareness of the democratic achievements of Somaliland. Its members are individuals with personal and/or professional interests in Somaliland, and include staff at the DPU and Progressio, as well as private members.

A voter registration billboard, Berbera

Progressio, DPU and Somaliland Focus (UK) do not take a position on the international recognition of Somaliland, as we regard this issue as beyond our mandate. At the same time, we welcome the increased stability, security and accountability to citizens that has in part been supported by the development of democratic institutions in Somaliland. Democracy is about more than just elections, but they remain vital.

The 2016 voter registration process

Background

Since Somaliland's unilateral declaration of independence in 1991, the country has made significant progress in establishing a locally driven system that combines elements of customary, clan-based decision-making with electoral representation. In the years since the end of widespread conflict in 1997, a series of popular votes have taken place, starting with a constitutional referendum in 2001, which was widely seen within the country as an endorsement of the restoration of Somaliland sovereignty. That was followed by full elections in 2002 (local councils), 2003 (presidential), 2005 (parliamentary), 2010 (presidential) and 2012 (local councils).

However, Somaliland's electoral process has seen its share of difficulties. Election dates have frequently been delayed, with extensions to parliamentary and presidential terms causing particular controversy. At the time of this report, both the President and the House of Representatives have exceeded their terms, with the lower House of Parliament now more than six years beyond the five-year constitutional term that followed the 2005 election. Simultaneous elections for MPs and the President were planned for 2015, but the polls were shifted to 2016 and then March 2017, before being postponed again as outlined below.

One of the challenges that has repeatedly surfaced in negotiations over election dates has been that of establishing a reliable voter register. The issue almost derailed the 2005 House of Representatives election, and an attempt in 2008–10 to register voters was extremely controversial. While the resultant register was used in the 2010 presidential election with some success, the register itself was by then so tainted by errors and problems that it was abandoned not long afterwards. The registration programme that is the focus of this report was designed to create a new voters' register.

As with the 2008–10 registration, Somaliland's electoral stakeholders were committed to using biometric technology to ensure the integrity of the voter list. This time, however, considerable planning was undertaken to try to prevent the problems with data acquisition and cleaning that had undermined the integrity of the previous voter register.[1] The NEC, in conjunction with Interpeace and foreign donors, engaged in a process of reflection and review. Amongst other exercises, this involved commissioning a report by the consultancy Creative Associates on voter registration design, including the possibility that voter registration might be integrated with a parallel process of civil registration.[2] The final decision to pursue electronic voter registration using iris-scanning technology was taken to enable more precise biometric matching and help to eliminate the possibility of multiple registrations and unintentional duplications.

Procurement for the new system was completed in early 2014, after which the NEC embarked on a technical pilot. Using versions of the registration kits provided by the selected technical contractor, the NEC conducted two field tests in Hargeysa, the capital city, and Baki, a rural area in Awdal, during June 2014. A total of 1,062 registrations were made at the two sites, with 200 registrants chosen to repeat the process in order to check the effectiveness of the system in catching duplicate entries. The full set of registration data was then sent to a team of iris-recognition experts at Notre Dame University (USA), who used algorithms to identify the false and duplicate records. The Notre Dame group reported a 100 per cent success rate in the identification of ineligible entries.[3]

A survey by the Academy for Peace and Development (APD) found that 84 per cent of the pilot's participants felt that the iris-scanning process was an effective safeguard against multiple registrations: '[d]espite the technology being new, most people felt open and ready to use it and quite optimistic about its ability to do the job'.[4] The combination of positive survey and pilot results convinced Somaliland's electoral stakeholders that the system was indeed robust, and they consequently decided to proceed with iris-based biometric voter registration. During this time, a new set of electoral commissioners (six men and one woman) was sworn in during December 2014, taking over responsibility for the planning and execution of the voter registration process. Technical problems and delays in procuring the necessary equipment also led to schedule changes, so that national registration did not commence until January 2016.
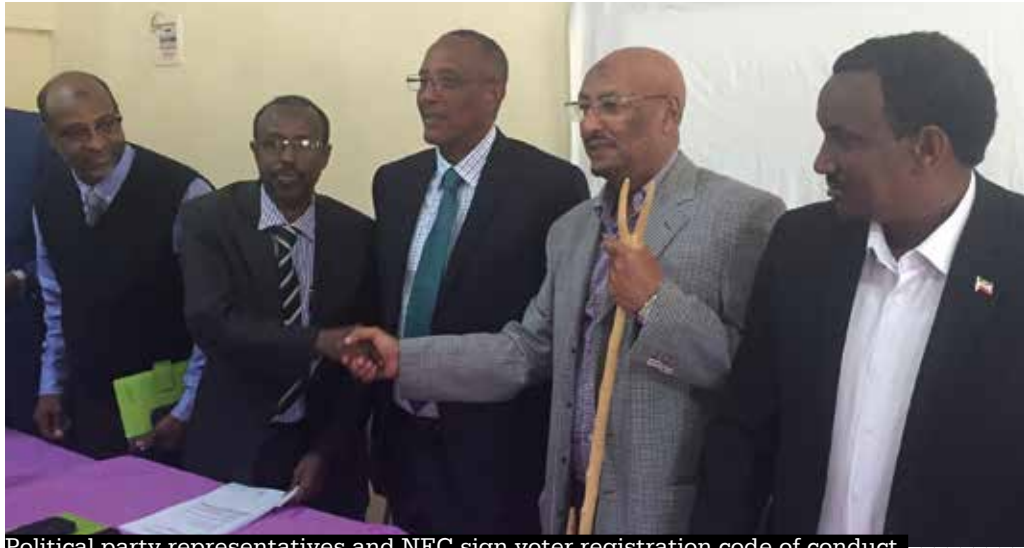
Political party representatives and NEC sign voter registration code of conduct, Hargeysa, January 2016

Legal framework

Somaliland's main election laws are Law No. 20/2001 (and subsequent amendments, including schedules 1 to 5) relating to presidential and local council elections, and Law No. 20-2/2005 relating to the election of the members of the House of Representatives.

Somaliland's voter registration process is regulated by the Voters' Registration (Amendments and Additions) Law No. 37/2007 (2014), a revision of the 2007 law that governed the 2008–10 voter registration process, and which now includes provisions relating to citizen registration.[5] Further details of Somaliland's voter registration process are elaborated in the NEC's Voters' Registration Implementation Regulations No. 01/2015, issued on 2 January 2016 under the powers accorded to the NEC under various provisions of Law No. 37/2007 (2014). A 46-page schedule to this document lists voter registration centres by district and region.[6]

Article 7 (2) of the Voters' Registration (Amendments and Additions) Law states that the NEC is responsible for the custody, safekeeping and production of the final voters' register six months before the date of the election. Following concern that this could cause unnecessary delay to the holding of elections, this requirement was subsequently amended by Annex 1 (May 2016) so that the final voter list is now required 'within six months' of the polling day.[7]

Under Law No. 37/2007 (2014), voter registration is the responsibility of the NEC, with citizen registration being conducted by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MINT). The law requires that any person wishing to be registered as a voter must possess a citizenship identity card issued by the MINT, or have their identity (citizenship and age) verified at the voter registration centre by an accredited MINT official (Article 25).[8] Prosecution for multiple or false registration is covered by Somaliland's penal code, as well as penalties outlined in Article 44 of Law No. 37/2007 (2014).

According to Article 11 (6) of Law No. 20/2001, the NEC is expected to carry out its duties independently and without interference. Although there have been disputes in the past over the appointment of commissioners, and while the NEC that was in office until late 2009 garnered an unenviable reputation for partisan and unprofessional conduct,[9] most of Somaliland's electoral commissions have operated in a manner that is independent of government and opposition.

Summary of the process

The voter registration process was designed on a regional basis, with each of Somaliland's six regions registered in turn over a period of 28 days, with the whole registration estimated to take around four-and-a-half months. Registration began in each region with an initial seven-day period in which a large number of voter registration centres (VRCs) were distributed throughout the region in order that the bulk of the local population could easily register. In the following two weeks, the number of VRCs was reduced significantly, principally operating in urban centres. In the final week, VRCs were only located in district capitals, with a small number of mobile teams travelling across the region to maximise the opportunity for registration.

The registration began promisingly on 16 January 2016, after the NEC had signed a Code of Conduct for Voter Registration with representatives of the three political parties on 7 January 2016. During the ceremony in Hargeysa, all national political party representatives pledged to abide by the agreed code.

Between January and March 2016, registration was completed in three of Somaliland's six regions: Togdheer, Awdal and Saaxil. At that stage, severe drought forced a month-long suspension, with the process resuming in Maroodi Jeex at the end of April. Registration was then suspended for the month of Ramadan before the process was resumed in Sanaag in July, concluding in Sool. Registration was finally completed in September 2016.

During the early phase of registration, electoral stakeholders had to resolve the long-term disagreement over the relationship between voter registration and the parallel process of civil registration being undertaken by MINT. Initially, the NEC and MINT reached a reluctant compromise in which the Ministry would appoint elders to verify registrants' identities, while also collecting identification data in paper form for the national ID card databank. There were concerns during registration in Togdheer that this arrangement was slowing registrations to the point that it might compromise the NEC's ability to process the number of voters expected. In the end, the civil registration process was altered early in the voter registration schedule, and MINT officials were relieved of responsibility for collecting data. MINT-authorised elders continued to verify identities (see Voter verification), and the frequency of NEC-MINT disputes dropped significantly as a result of this change.

The NEC's decision to withhold registration data as each region was completed almost certainly contributed to the relatively smooth registration process. However, by February 2017, detailed regional voter data had still not been released as required by NEC's Implementation Regulations No. 01/2015,[10] and despite assurances from NEC that cleaning and collation has been completed. This data needs to be shared to enable certified registrants to lodge a complaint about their registration details, and thus ensure that the register is as accurate as possible. It is also required to facilitate decisions on the siting of polling stations and, eventually, the allocation of seats in the House of Representatives. Concerns persist that publicly available district-level population numbers will fuel heated arguments about the validity and accuracy of the process (see The significance of counting people).

A registration team outside a rural voter registration centre, Ceel Afweyn

At the time of writing, voter card distribution had also not yet taken place (though it was planned to commence imminently). It also remains unclear how the register itself will be updated prior to an election to remove registrants who die or those who reach voting age between the end of registration and election day. Currently, the NEC Implementation Regulations permit periodic registration to update the electoral roll (Article 69), but clearly state that there will be no reopening of the register before the 2017 elections (Article 70 (7)), meaning that those who have lost their voter card between distribution and election day, and those who are now eligible but not registered, cannot be added.[11]

Post-registration politics

Although registration took longer than expected, these delays were not due to technical issues. However, the extension of the process meant that by the start of 2017, it was readily evident that it was too late for a presidential election in March 2017. The failed rains in western and central Somaliland that had caused registration to be suspended had spread and worsened in the east of the country. Many pastoralists had therefore relocated to areas well beyond those in which they are expected to register and vote, forcing both politicians and the NEC to conclude that neither voter card distribution nor voting itself could take place when planned. Complicating matters, Ramadan in 2017 falls unusually early (in late June), and it is widely considered unacceptable to hold either an election or the statutory one-month campaigning period that precedes it, during those weeks. Electoral postponement was therefore regarded as necessary.

These issues led to rising tensions early in the year. An intensive week of negotiations in late January resulted in an agreement that the presidential vote would be held on 10 October 2017, with the House of Representatives poll a year later. However, international donors were furious at the latest delay, issuing a strongly worded statement declaring that they would not provide any additional funding that might be required to hold the elections at a later time.[12]

At the time of writing, the electoral schedule remains far from certain. Political disagreement made the deal on the new election dates difficult. There remains significant ambiguity about whether the October poll will take place on time, exacerbated by a lack of clarity over whether the House of Elders (Guurti) will confirm the agreed dates or opt for a lengthier delay. The drought that has plagued electoral and voter registration processes continues, raising concern that this will necessitate further adjustment.

Although all of Somaliland's political parties have supported voter registration (political party agents were actively involved in observing the process), the issue of election timing continues to create upheaval. Kulmiye, Waddani and UCID were the three entities to emerge from the 2012 local council elections,[13] and have constituted three of the main actor groups in negotiations over voter registration arrangements and election dates. Internal politics within the ruling party, Kulmiye, have been particularly affected by the delay. President Silaanyo, the ageing incumbent, strongly favours an early election, vowing at one stage that he would not serve 'even a day longer' than the end of his extended term in March 2017. His Kulmiye party's nominated candidate, Muuse Biixi, fears that, if he resigns, the current Vice President will assume the Presidency and the Kulmiye candidacy for himself, thus side-lining Muuse's own campaign. Meanwhile, UCID leader Faysal Ali Waraabe is keen to rebuild his party, having lost his MPs, mostly to Waddani, and his presidential candidate, who defected to Kulmiye. Of the three parties, it is Faysal who is keenest to see imminent elections for the House of Representatives, which he sees as an opportunity to replenish his parliamentary support base.

The significance of counting people

Exercises designed to count large populations, including censuses and voter registrations, can open deep sensitivities, especially where there is no accepted history of such records. Indeed, even recent votes in the UK and USA have generated considerable debate over the integrity of registers and the eligibility criteria of voters.

The Somali context is particularly prone to these issues as any resultant register will, by definition, confirm or undermine traditional estimates of the numerical weight of clan groups. The British colonial administration steered clear of any attempt to systematically count the population for fear of upsetting a sometimes restive constituency, while even the dictatorial regime of President Siyaad Barre (1969–91) attempted two nationwide censuses of Somalia (including Somaliland at the time), but released the full results of neither for similar reasons.

These sensitivities run so deep in Somaliland because customs determining power sharing between clans and sub-clans still rest on old formulae. These have been renegotiated innumerable times to allow adjustments as different groups are drawn into the political settlement (as happened after 1991), or as groups successfully argue that their allocation is too small (for example, in 1994). But these renegotiations have only a tangential relationship to actual population numbers. While a voter register is not a census or a civil register, it represents the next most accurate approximation in the absence of a comprehensive population count. It is therefore inevitable that any register will have a direct and long-term effect on the nature of the political settlement.

People queuing up to register in a voter registration centre, Burco

The above dynamics were at play during the 2016 voter registration process. While voter verification aims to distinguish 'real Somalilanders' from those not deemed to be rightful citizens, many of the registrants interviewed believed that the process would also serve as a proxy for a census, and in so doing would reinforce clan identity amongst Somalilanders.

> *I believe that it's a good way of finding out the actual population of Somaliland. Since I was in third grade the population has been 3 million. I think that the population is more than that and I am hoping that this process will tell us the real figures.*
>
> **Woman, Biyo Dhacay VRC, Hargeysa, Maroodi Jeex**

With the abandonment of Somaliland's first voter register in 2011, as a result of bitter disputes centred on precisely these issues,[14] the voter registration of 2016/17 represents another attempt to agree a reasonably definitive list of voters. This has far-reaching social and political ramifications, many of which are yet to be fully resolved, and these lie behind the NEC's caution with the release of registration data. The most serious test of the perceived legitimacy of the register is likely to come when data from the register feeds into potent political debates about the allocation of seats in the House of Representatives.

Clan and politics

Clan influence continues to play a significant role in Somaliland's politics due to the ties that local and regional clans have with the competing political parties and individual political figures. Clan groups and leaders have strong political influence through privileged access to political actors and resources. This is likely to have impacted the registration process, particularly in rural areas where there is little government presence and clan ties and authority are strong. The concern with 'clannism' remains the degree to which voting choices in general are influenced by clan affiliation rather than the policy positions of politicians or parties.[15] Clan ties might consequently be assumed to affect the political accountability of elected politicians as they attempt to reward the loyalty of voters. This was underlined by our interviews, where some people expressed insight into the ways that local and regional clan segments influence the political process.

Observation of the voter registration process

Methodology

The IEO mission was managed by Michael Walls of DPU and Marie-Luise Schueller of Progressio. It comprised a series of country visits between 16 January and 24 September 2016, and follow-up enquiries from London when team members were not present in Somaliland. In total, seven observers from five countries were deployed to five of Somaliland's six regions.[16]

IEO team on the road in Sanaag

We assessed the process through 115 direct observations of registration centres (70 per cent urban, 30 per cent rural – see Appendix 1), including the registration of 995 people. We also conducted face-to-face interviews and meetings with key stakeholders; NEC staff and commissioners; political party representatives; international and national NGOs; civil society organisations involved in the process; domestic observers; and members of the public who were registering to vote at VRCs.

Table 1:

Number of voter registration centres observed (including repeat observations)

Region	Number of times VRCs observed		
	Rural	Urban	Total
Togdheer	1	5	6
Saaxil (including Gabiley)	1	4	5
Maroodi Jeex	2	19	21
Sanaag	30	14	44
Sool	22	17	39
Total	56	59	115

The IEO mission's direct observation methodology was as follows. We visited as many VRCs as possible per day, while spending sufficient time in each VRC (on average, 65 minutes per centre) to get a good sense of the conduct of the process. We covered rural and urban areas, and where possible, timed regional missions to capture both the opening and concluding phases of the 28-day registration cycle (see Summary of the process). This meant that we were able to observe more VRCs during the first two weeks of the registration process in each region than during the secondary phase, when only some centres were left open to enable the registration of people who had not succeeded in doing so before. The last-minute postponement of the registration process in April due to the drought meant that we were only able to observe the tail end of the registration in Saaxil, rather than the start of the new process in Sanaag, as planned.

Assessment criteria were based on Somaliland's constitution and voter registration laws and regulations, as outlined above. Specific areas observed included social, political and technical aspects of the registration process, such as citizen participation, the political environment, the functioning of registration centres, the performance of registration officials, and the handling of biometric data. We used a standard form (see Appendix 2) to record our observations. The data was then collated into consolidated Excel spreadsheets at the end of each mission, and analysed regionally and nationally using simple statistical calculations.

Voter registration centre, Cadaad

Voter registration centre, Ceel Afweyn area

Overall, the data offers a rich picture of the voter registration process. The logistical difficulties presented by observing across many different sites at different times of the year means that some data gaps do exist – for instance, opening and closing procedures were not observed in all regions,[17] and different times of day yielded more or less observation data. However the IEO mission was not designed to provide comprehensive coverage, instead, the methodological approach used aimed to provide periodic snapshots of the process. We feel that this approach has proven useful in gaining a perspective on both the reliability of registration overall, and the adaptations and problem solving of the system over time. In spite of gaps and the snapshot nature of observations, the statistical analysis reveals clear trends and points of significance that support our qualitative observations as set out in this report.

The team also conducted short interviews with 102 registrants and NEC staff of different ages and occupations in Togdheer, Maroodi Jeex, Sanaag and Sool. This includes five people interviewed in Boorama (although formal observation did not take place in Awdal). The interviews were designed to help us gain a better understanding of why people were registering, how they saw this latest registration in comparison with the last one, and how they thought they and Somaliland might benefit from it. Selected and anonymised quotations from those interviews are used throughout the report, and inform the next section on perceptions.

Marie-Luise (Progressio) talking to NEC staff in a voter registration centre

Perceptions of the 2016 voter registration

Our observations on perceptions do not purport to be representative of the Somaliland population, as they are based on a limited number of interviews. Nevertheless, we feel that the views expressed offer a valuable insight into some possibly significant patterns.

Many of the registrants we interviewed felt that the experience of the 2016 voter registration was far better than previous political processes, particularly the 2012 election where multiple voting was widespread. A number of people also noted that they felt that an honest registration process should lead to a credible election.

It is different because the last one we registered many times so that the political party we wanted to win could have more votes. I registered 5 times and I told everyone I know to do the same. This process is better though. It is more honest and you can only register once. Hopefully we will get a good and honest president from this process.

Older woman, Gacan Libaax VRC, Hargeysa, Maroodi Jeex

People waiting outside a voter registration centre, Ceerigaabo

However, a few individuals from amongst both registrants and VRC staff suggested that the voter registration process was too bureaucratic. Others complained that elections were not leading to actual change for citizens, referencing dissatisfaction with government service delivery. These opinions corresponded with perceptions of corruption and 'clannism' in Somaliland's political processes.

If everything goes well we will hopefully get an honest president and parliament. It seems as if the current parliament does not care about poor people and those that are struggling. They swore on the Quran to help develop the country but there are still people that are struggling. People that do not have houses or access to water. To me it seems as if they have given up on those promises. Somaliland has become a corrupt country.

I wanted to register my vote so that I can put forward an honest candidate for the presidential election. One that will help the poor people, one that will see the potential of all the young students in our universities. It is their country and it's wrong that they cannot find jobs in their own country when foreigners can.

Young man, Biyo Dhacay VRC, Hargeysa, Maroodi Jeex

Somalilanders' perceptions of voter registration are varied, however, and depend on a number of factors, including age, location and clan affiliation. In general, younger interviewees tended to be sceptical and less informed about the registration process. They were also more likely to express concerns about data security and the possible (mis)use of their personal details. We gained the impression from interviews that a proportion of younger registrants were concerned that registration details might somehow disadvantage them if they were to find work overseas after (legally or illegally) traveling outside Somaliland. Some expressed concern that registration might compromise their chances of securing refugee status in Western countries, for example.

Given the history of political opposition in the east of the country, respondents in these areas, and particularly in Sool, were initially more inclined to distrust voter registration as a whole. This clearly related to mixed feelings towards Somaliland itself. It is notable that, in particular amongst Dhulbahante respondents, initial levels of distrust reduced as the registration in Sool continued. This was due to the active participation of traditional leaders in voter education and mobilisation by the newly appointed Minister for Interior (who is from the region) encouraging people in Sool's rural areas to come out and register. The fact that the government appointed an interior minister from Sool increased levels of trust in the process, and also fostered some sense of competition amongst Dhulbahante sub-clans to mobilise registrants.

In other areas, there was generally a high-level of enthusiasm for voter registration, with many respondents commenting that they considered it an essential step towards legitimate elections. One interviewee even hoped that it might lead to international recognition, though another felt that recognition in itself was less important than the display of Somaliland's capacity for self-reliance.

> *I am here today for my country. For registering to vote in the election and for the voter card. So that I can vote for an honest president.*
>
> **Young woman, Ceerigaabo**

Others felt that registration held personal significance, bringing with it the possibility of an ID card that would permit greater freedom of movement, travel to neighbouring countries and identification at banks and schools. These opinions highlight the difficulty posed by the near-simultaneous process of registering for a national ID card (the MINT's 'civil' registration process), which could be used for these purposes, and voter registration, which leads to an ID card for voting only. Indeed, we observed widespread confusion as to the differences or complementarities between the civil and voter registration processes.

There was significant evidence in respondents' comments that awareness of the practicalities and purpose of voter registration was patchy. We gained the impression from interviews that the awareness-raising aspect of the registration had not been as effective as it could have been. Many respondents did not understand the cyclical nature of the 28-day registration period – specifically, when VRCs would be open in or near their locations, and when they would close. Unsurprisingly, this kind of confusion was most prevalent in more remote locations, and in Sool, and there was some specific indication that the now customary methods of announcing a VRC's presence (notices in newspapers and on broadcast media, or a car with a loudspeaker mounted on the roof) had proven ineffective, especially amongst young, eligible registrants and those living in rural areas.

Many were also unaware of any plans for the distribution of voter cards once registration was complete. This was unsurprising, as the NEC plans in this regard were themselves unclear. However, this uncertainty had the worrying consequence of leading registrants to surrender their registration certificates to elders for 'safekeeping'. Some interviewees suggested that the individuals collecting the certificates believed they could 'sell' them to one or other political party once cards were ready for collection (see Voter verification).

Assessment of the process

The NEC and its partners designed the 2016 BVR system to be utilised at over a thousand voter registration centres on a regional rolling basis. This required that the process be identical across time and space, replicating each registrant's experience to ensure that each eligible voter would be registered accurately and uniquely.

Each VRC was an outpost of the central NEC operation, equipped with a number of standardised biometric registration kits (two or three on average) with which trained NEC personnel could register eligible voters. These client kits were connected via an online network to the main NEC server so that de-duplication (checking that a person was not already registered) could be immediately undertaken. Each BVR kit contained a laptop, camera, spotlight, iris-scanning device, and printer.

The process of registration was as follows. Prospective registrants queued to enter the VRC. The first step was to have their eligibility verified by a MINT-accredited official (see Voter verification). If they passed this stage, a registrant moved to the first station to be interviewed. This necessitated providing their biographical details, including name, age, year and place of birth, and telephone number, and indicating their preferred polling centre for election day. The registrant then reviewed and signed/made a mark upon the form to confirm the details were correct (or had the form read to them if they were illiterate). The registrant then took the form to one of the BVR stations,[18] where the operator entered the details from the form into the electronic registration system. A digital version of this profile was then

A poster in a voter registration centre explaining the registration process

printed out, and manually checked by the registrant and confirmed by a second signature/print. The registrant then posed for a photograph of their head and shoulders, to be used for in-person recognition (not facial recognition software, as in 2008); and an image of the iris of both eyes was scanned (see Iris scanning). These two processes generated a third form carrying the registrant's biographic details, photograph and a barcode, which was then reviewed and confirmed by the registrant by signature/print, with a duplicate detached as receipt of registration. All three official forms were finally stapled together and kept as a physical record of the registration to be sent to the central NEC office. Registrants left with the paper record, and were told that they would receive an SMS when their voter card was ready for collection.


Inside a voter registration centre, Hargeysa

Technical evaluation

Somaliland's biometric voter registration was a complex technical operation, in which there appeared to be learning over time as skills grew and problems were anticipated, but which nonetheless continued to be afflicted by several technological and operational issues.

The IEO mission assessed the functionality of the BVR technology at almost all sites through visual evaluation and reports from VRC teams. The most common technical error observed or reported at VRCs was system connectivity, which included problems with the internet router and the network link-up with the main NEC server. Indeed, all VRCs were observed to be offline in Sool and Buuhoodle – a region-wide problem.[19] However, excluding the weakness or outright failure of internet connectivity, almost 60 per cent of VRCs were recorded as having no technical errors or deficiencies. This figure disguises considerable regional variation, however, with few technical errors recorded in the majority of observed Maroodi Jeex and Saaxil centres, but a number of VRCs in Sool and Sanaag logged as having some form of technical error beyond internet connectivity (see Figure 1). These problems included lack of electricity; incomplete equipment or an insufficient number of BVR kits; problems with printers and slow computers; and issues with the BVR kits, such as broken light bulbs or iris-scanning failures, discussed in turn below.

Figure 1:
Most common technical problems (excluding connectivity) observed and reported in each region
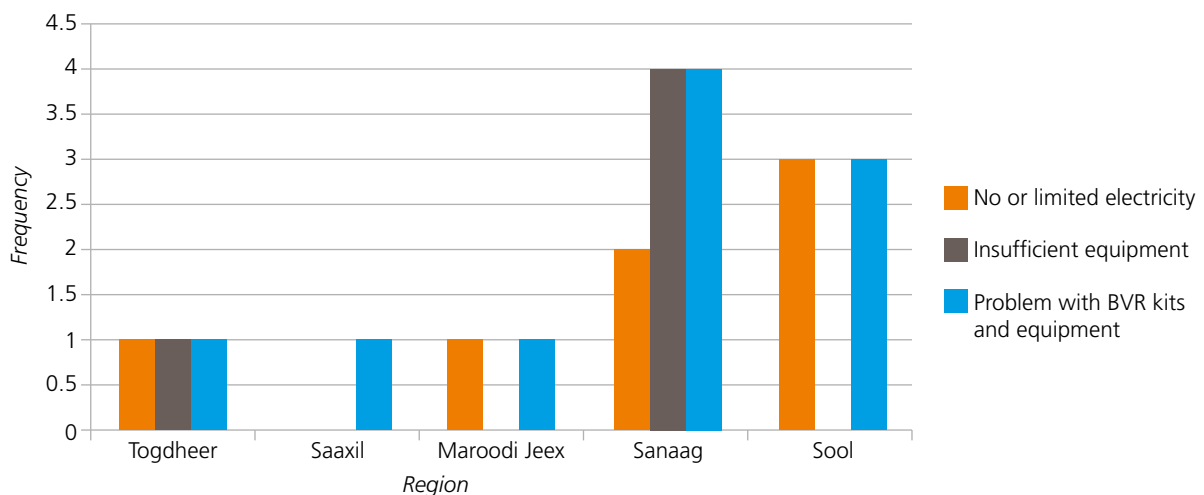
System connectivity

The 2016 BVR process was designed as an online system to enable simultaneous cross-referencing with the main server in order to flag multiple or duplicate registrations. Electronic de-duplication was a two-part process, checking first against the local server to determine whether the iris image had already been taken in that area, then against the central server to determine whether it existed in the main database.[20] Both these processes required that the iris scan be correctly made, and that the system was online in order to verify against existing records.

The temporary infrastructure of the BVR process in each region necessitated the use of portable internet routers that utilised Somtel's telecommunications network. Although in many cases this functioned effectively, as expected connectivity was a problem outside major urban areas. The NEC therefore introduced an internet 'dongle' in order to connect individual computers to the online network and enable better communication with the central NEC server.

Operators in a voter registration centre, Arabsiyo

In May 2016, the NEC deputy registrar reported that 85 per cent of the data was being sent automatically to the central server.[21] Over the course of the IEO mission, however, half of all VRCs were observed or reported to have problems with internet connectivity, affecting system back-up, the override feature (see Iris scanning), and de-duplication. This was not only the case in Sool (where all VRCs were without internet connection), since it was observed that there were temporary connectivity issues in Saaxil, Maroodi Jeex and Sanaag as well.

In centres with connectivity problems, registration had to proceed 'offline', which meant that unique registration could not be assured at the time of data entry. Aside from concerns about the possibility of multiple registrations, VRC teams reported that offline working slowed computer functionality because of the need to locally store the data (for later upload), affecting registration times. Connectivity issues also increased the workload of the NEC's mobile troubleshooting teams (see below).

Electricity provision

The second most common technical problem observed in VRCs was also most prevalent in Sool: problems with consistent electricity provision (Figure 1). Although Somaliland conducted biometric voter registration in 2008, no technical infrastructure from that process remained. This, together with the need to locate VRCs in a wide variety of locations so as to be proximate to the dispersed population, required the temporary construction of the BVR infrastructure at each VRC in 2016. In many places, this included the use of portable electricity generators since the absence of a national electricity grid in Somaliland means that many urban and the majority of rural buildings do not have consistent electricity access.[22] However, although this might have been anticipated to pose potential problems, electricity problems were not widely observed or reported. Even in Sool, where VRCs experienced problems with consistent electricity, we did not record this as a significant problem for the registration process.

Availability of resources

In a small number of cases, we noted problems arising from a lack of resources, including an insufficient number of BVR client kits for the numbers of registrants at a centre, and incomplete equipment. However, we did not observe this to significantly impair the work of VRC teams: no VRC was recorded as having been rendered non-operational or forced to temporarily close, for instance. Resourcing is an issue that was addressed by the NEC's mobile troubleshooting teams (see below); the NEC can also ameliorate these issues with better inventorying practices and asset distribution in the future.

BVR kit functionality

In general, we observed the BVR kits as functioning well, with few problems during the periods of observation. Although the BVR system was an electronic system, human operation was of course a central part of the data entry. We observed isolated incidents in which operators seemed unfamiliar or unconfident with the BVR kits, such as fixing printer problems, but we did not record any errors or efforts that might accidentally or deliberately have created duplicates.[23]

Iris scanning

Iris scanning was an integral part of Somaliland's voter registration, enabling de-duplication through the comparison of high-quality biometric data. The Somaliland data capture process took an image of a registrant's left and right eye using a binocular-style scanner with an enclosed case and pin-light to focus the pupil.[24] Registrants had to look into the scanner, which took two images that were rated by the software according to a traffic light system: only 'green' images were accepted as of sufficient quality.

Iris scanning was generally observed to be reliable, with a very high proportion of registrants able to successfully provide a clear iris image for both eyes. We observed that there was generally good understanding of the iris-scanning procedure amongst registrants, and the majority of registrants were able to quickly

Man having his iris scanned, Ceerigaabo

move through this part of the BVR process. In some cases, VRC operators assisted registrants by holding the binoculars to their face or physically demonstrating how to look into the binoculars, which seemed to be a useful intervention in the BVR process.

Since the system required two clear iris images, should a registrant have a problem in one eye (such as a cataract), the record could not be completed – even if the other image was rated 'green'. To address these cases, an override had been built into the BVR system, enabling a registrant with low-quality vision to continue with the registration process without the need to provide biometric data. Each BVR kit operator had only a limited number of daily overrides, and the system blocked any additional attempts without special permission from the central NEC office, thus minimising the number of potential records in the system that needed manual review.

We only recorded a small number of overrides during our observations – for instance, in Maroodi Jeex, we saw two overrides out of 249 complete registrations, a mere 0.8 per cent of the registrations observed in that region. In a small number of observations, overrides were not attempted and alternative pathways for data collection were pursued. For instance, in a Maroodi Jeex VRC, a registrant was successfully registered on the second BVR kit; in another centre in the same region, a registrant was asked to return the following day, as was also observed in a small number of cases in Sanaag. In Saaxil, a registrant was asked to register at a nearby VRC in order to overcome problems with the scanning. These workarounds may have been because the day's override quota had been exhausted or because it was a temporary eye problem; necessary overrides may also have been postponed because of internet connectivity issues.

Overall, it appeared that the override function was used exceptionally (as intended by the NEC) with the safeguards to minimise abuse and prevent deliberate or accidental exclusion proving effective. The small number of instances where registrants were asked to return on a different day or to register at a different VRC demonstrate the importance of clear communication and voter education to ensure that those with eye problems are not unintentionally disenfranchised or excluded.

Registration duration

The average time for a single, completed registration across all our observations was just under 10 minutes, counted from the moment assessment of a registrant's eligibility was begun through to receipt of the registration record. Technical errors and deficiencies undoubtedly affected the speed of registration, not least problems with the BVR kits, problems with scanning (delays and overrides), and the lack of internet connectivity. VRC management, in particular the number of kits for the number of registrants, was also observed to significantly affect registration times: 'quick' registrations often took place when there were few people queuing, specifically in between the interview and data capture phase, as well as because of competent staff and error-free operation of the BVR kits.


Man waiting inside a voter registration centre, Sanaag

Table 2: **Average duration of a single registration by region**

Region	Togdheer	Saaxil	Maroodi Jeex	Sanaag	Sool	National
Average Time	00:12:06	00:10:59	00:07:28	00:11:17	00:08:04	00:09:59

Non-technical factors also increased registration times. For instance, the need to have a telephone number was noted as impeding registration as registrants without a mobile phone tried to obtain that of a relative or friend. The assessment of eligibility also sometimes added to the duration of a person's registration, particularly if additional verification was required (see Voter verification).

Figure 2:
Average time taken to register one eligible voter across all observed VRCs by region
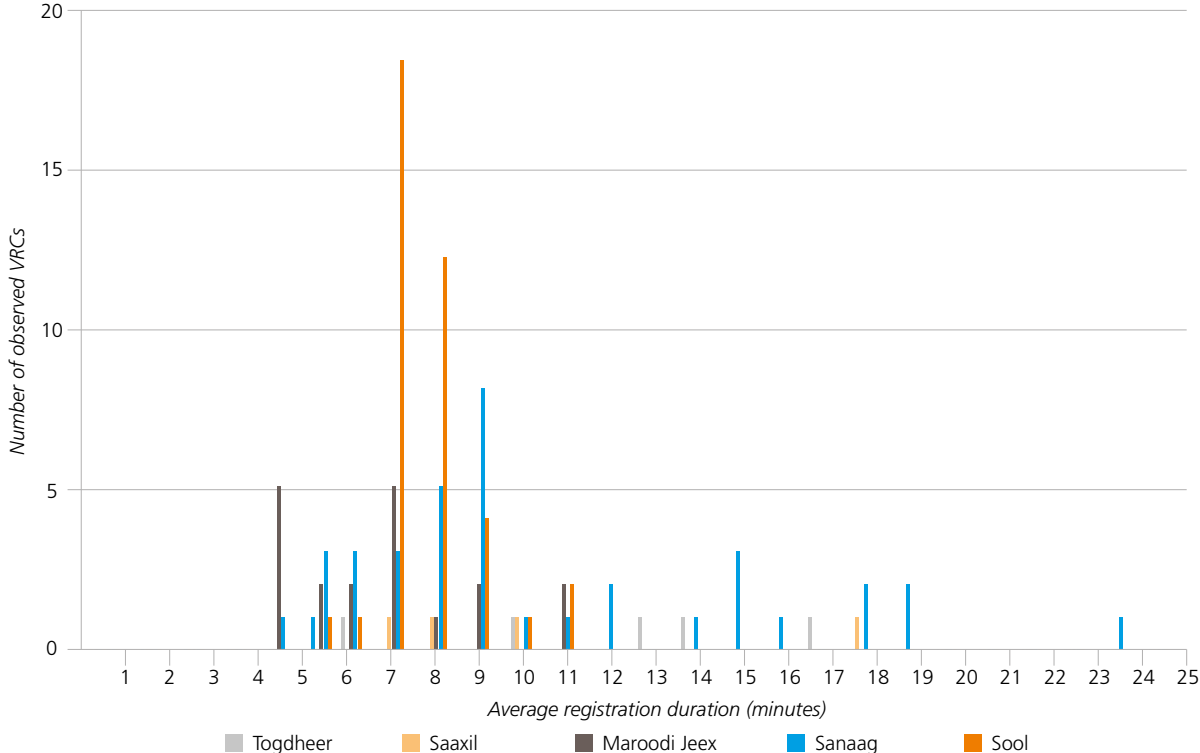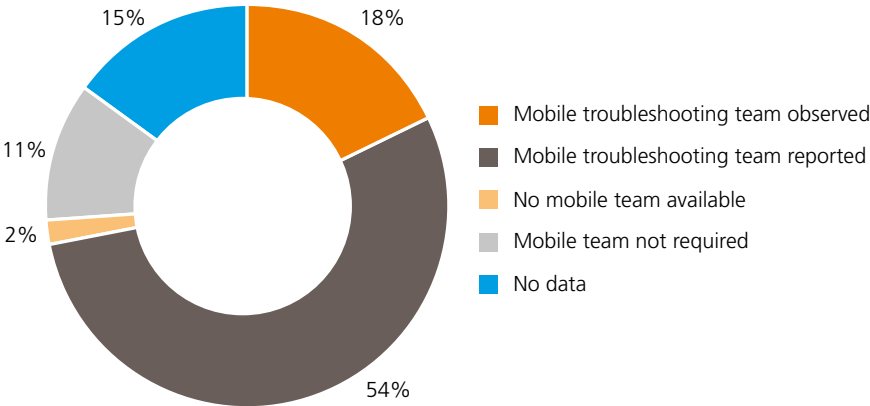

The available data shows almost no difference between the average time for registration across urban and rural VRCs (9 minutes 40/41 seconds), with both showing considerable ranges and a median value of just over 8 minutes. However, there was considerable regional variation. As illustrated by Table 2 and Figure 2, the average registration time was highest in Togdheer, and lowest in Maroodi Jeex, with the greatest range observed in Sanaag (between 5 minutes 55 seconds and 24 minutes 13 seconds).[25]

The efficiency of registration in Maroodi Jeex may be explained by the fact that the observations took place during the second part of the registration cycle, with the majority of observed VRCs in the capital city, Hargeysa, which benefits from a more established technical infrastructure. Maroodi Jeex was also the third region to be registered, suggesting that the NEC's operations had benefited from the steep learning curve experienced in Togdheer and Saaxil. The increase in average registration times in Sanaag might be explained by the constraints on the technical infrastructure (including problems with internet connectivity, remote locations and the late creation of a number of VRCs in temporary venues), as well as the impact of the break in registration activities posed by Ramadan. In particular, connectivity issues appear to be a key determining factor, since VRCs in Sool – which operated 'offline' – were observed to return above-average registration times, in comparison with Sanaag which reported slow registrations and a high volume of connectivity problems.

NEC technical support

A key issue in the 2008 voter registration process was that technical problems took time to resolve leading to delays and frustration. Planning for the 2016 voter registration therefore took into account the need for rapid technical response so that issues with BVR kits, such as printers and cameras, as well as software and connectivity issues, could be dealt with by specially trained technicians.

Chart 1:
Presence and availability of mobile troubleshooting team (observed and reported)

- 18% — Mobile troubleshooting team observed
- 54% — Mobile troubleshooting team reported
- 2% — No mobile team available
- 11% — Mobile team not required
- 15% — No data

There were therefore a number of mobile support teams in each region, and the expertise and competence of these seemed to increase over time. In Saaxil and Gabiley, SONSAF domestic observers reported that technical deficiencies were 'constantly resolved' by NEC mobile troubleshooting teams but that doing so depended upon the ability of the teams to travel to sites, which was sometimes affected by long distances and rough roads.[26] However, these technical teams were deemed useful, and SONSAF reported that the number of troubleshooting teams had been increased for the registration phase in Maroodi Jeex.[27]

During the IEO mission, mobile troubleshooting teams were either directly observed or reported to be available (and come when requested) at over 70 per cent of VRCs (Chart 1). Indeed, only two of the visited centres reported that there was no mobile team available to assist them. VRC personnel gave mixed reports about the effectiveness of the troubleshooting process: in general the NEC's troubleshooters were seen as good at bringing spare parts or extra kits, but sometimes it was reported to observers that they had not been able to fix connectivity issues. In two VRCs in Togdheer, we observed that NEC troubleshooters appeared to interfere in VRC management with behaviour such as shouting, telling BVR operators what to do, and trying to create order. Where this occurred, it seemed unsettling for the VRC team. In most cases, however, the mobile troubleshooting process appeared to be a good innovation that directly addressed a key concern from the 2008–10 voter registration process, and ensured that the minor technical errors and deficiencies that could have impeded registration were addressed as quickly as possible.

NEC team, Arabsiyo

NEC team, Ceerigaabo

Speaking to NEC staff, Arabsiyo

VRC management

Through radio announcements and other awareness campaigns, eligible voters were invited to register at the closest VRC of their choosing. Most VRCs for the 2016 registration process had been polling centres in the 2012 local council elections,[28] and were planned to double up as polling centres for the next election, in order to ensure that voters were able to easily identify their preferred polling station.[29] The diversity of the locations available to the NEC meant that planning was required to ensure that each VRC site was organised appropriately for registration activities. VRC teams were therefore instructed by the NEC to visit their centre the day before registration in order to decide the layout and thus ensure accessible entry and exit points, a smooth flow of registrants, and the sequenced seating arrangements for each station.[30]

Figure 3:
Organisation and spaciousness of observed VRCs[31]
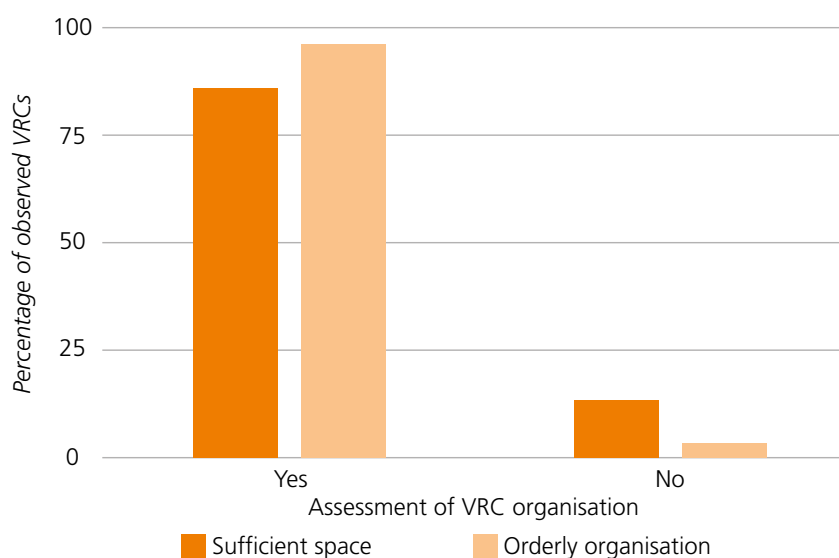
Note: This excludes Togdheer since this data was not collected during observation in this region.

The organisation of the physical space of VRCs impacted the experience of registration for both VRC personnel and registrants. We considered that the majority of observed VRCs (86 per cent – Figure 3) had sufficient space for the set-up and operation of the equipment, and the movement of people within the centre. Typically, the most spacious VRCs were government buildings such as schools or municipal offices. Occasionally, VRCs had been erected in smaller spaces, such as the shops and tents designated at shorter notice in Sanaag, and conditions were correspondingly cramped. In most cases, however, we assessed that this did not affect the orderly organisation of the registration centres.

Of course, in some cases, limited physical space did affect the comfort of VRC personnel and registrants. Very small buildings and tents meant that there was sometimes little room for registrants to move between the different stations and therefore fewer people could be present in the VRC, extending registration times. Limited space also meant that BVR stations were sometimes closely arranged together, and it was possible for observers and waiting registrants to see laptop screens, possibly diminishing registrants' privacy. We also observed that in cramped VRCs, registration officers had to manage with very little desk space, sometimes working on their lap or the bench in order to extend the limited space. This was not observed to hinder the registration process, but may have affected the working conditions of NEC personnel.

In some observed sites, limited space affected the arrangement of the desks for each registration stage, which – by design or necessity – did not follow the planned registration sequencing.[32] Since the information banner describing the different stages of registration was commonly affixed outside the VRC, the registration sequence inside was sometimes not clear. As a result, registrants had to be directed to different parts of the centre rather than following a clear pathway. In some cases, it was observed that registrants tried to leave after the interview stage, not knowing that there was a subsequent phase of registration. This may indicate a gap in voter education; clear signposting of the different stages of registration within each centre would help ensure that this does not occur in future registrations.

Woman looking at voter registration poster, Burco

Despite the physical constraints of some VRCs, we noted favourably that the great majority of VRCs (96 per cent) were organised in an orderly fashion. Although some VRCs were recorded as messy, with unfiled paperwork on show, computer and power cables presenting a potential trip hazard, or evidence of habitation (mattresses, food containers or other rubbish), other VRCs were commendably clean and tidy, with team members sweeping the floor during quiet periods or ensuring that items were replaced in their assigned place after use. Overall, we considered that the best-organised VRCs were those with the space to 'zone' registration activities, with clearly demarcated areas for waiting, interviewing and registration; and with the area around each station free from being overlooked.

VRC personnel: role-sharing and competence

An important aspect of VRC management was the effectiveness of registration personnel and the sequencing of their responsibilities. VRC personnel were recruited from Somaliland's largest universities following a written exam. Successful applicants completed a number of days' training by NEC officials and trainers, and were provided with a manual about the process and the operation of the kit. In addition, the NEC utilised a 20-minute video about the registration process, and set up a 'hotline' so that VRC personnel could get advice on hardware, software and procedural problems once in the field.

Each VRC had a dedicated team of interviewers, operators and supervisors, who conducted registration at that site for the duration of the centre's operation, ensuring consistency and the build-up of experience. As registration moved to the next region, new VRC teams were trained and deployed, reducing the level of institutional memory but ensuring that VRCs were staffed with fresh personnel, important for the long working days.

Since VRCs contained specially trained personnel, it was important that staff fulfilled their particular job function.[33] In most observed VRCs, staff kept to their prescribed role, with supervisors generally overseeing the process and completing relevant paperwork. In some cases, supervisors supported or substituted for BVR operators. In a number of Maroodi Jeex VRCs, for example, it was observed that the supervisor acted as an interviewer in busy periods in order to direct more registrants to the operators. In a small number of instances, we observed that supervisors and operators 'role-shared'; in one case in Maroodi Jeex this was to give the operator a 'rest' from the computer; in another it was to enable the operator to engage in prayer. In one rural Sanaag VRC, it was done because the second operator was absent. The supervisors' work on the second BVR kit enabled the queue of registrants to be managed but his supervision duties appeared to be correspondingly neglected.

We noted that some of the observed VRCs had two 'interviewers' at the pre-registration station, but that it was sometimes not clear whether the second interviewer was a MINT official or a second NEC interviewer.[34] Whilst additional staff should have enhanced the effectiveness of the process, we observed that these doubled-up configurations occasionally presented drawbacks. Ideally, each interviewer would send a registrant to an operator, but different starting points and varying lengths

of time for registration meant that this was sometimes imbalanced. In busy VRCs, this occasionally led to bottlenecks, creating a second queue after the interview stage. In cramped VRCs, this was sometimes problematic because there was little space for waiting registrants. In a significant number of cases, however, this was ameliorated by effective management of the initial inflow of registrants by supervisors and security guards (see Queue management).

VRC staff appeared to be generally competent and comfortable with their tasks. In two cases in Sanaag, we observed that operators had trouble with elements of the registration process (manually taking a photograph), and in Maroodi Jeex, one operator struggled with the printer. These seemed to be exceptions. Overall, we considered that VRC personnel were effective and experienced in the required procedures, whilst working diligently for long stretches of time.

Assistance to disabled and illiterate voters

VRC personnel were required to support disabled and illiterate voters in the completion of the registration process. In a majority of our observations, we saw VRC personnel assist illiterate registrants by reading out the registration forms at the interview and operator stage, and helping registrants to make their mark in the appropriate place. We only observed assistance given to physically disabled voters a few times because of the small number of occasions that such voters came to register, rather than because support was not given. In these cases, protocols for assistance were followed; elderly people, who were brought to the front of the queue, and those with eye problems (as discussed in Iris scanning), were also assisted. The very small number of observations of physically disabled registrants may be coincidental, but

Security outside a voter registration centre, Ceel Afweyn area

the NEC's review of the BVR process should check that the process was sufficiently accessible and inclusive for physically impaired registrants to register in the locations of their choice.

Police presence

To ensure the security of the registration process, members of the Somaliland police force were assigned to each VRC. As on election day, they were supposed to remain at their post throughout the hours of operation, and to remain outside the VRC in order to maintain vigilance of the vicinity and to prevent the possible intimidation of registrants. In the large majority of observed VRCs, we recorded that police officers were present at the centres, and that there were no obvious signs of intimidation.[35]

Chart 2:
Police presence at observed VRCs

- Police outside VRC
- Police inside VRC
- No data

9%
22%
69%
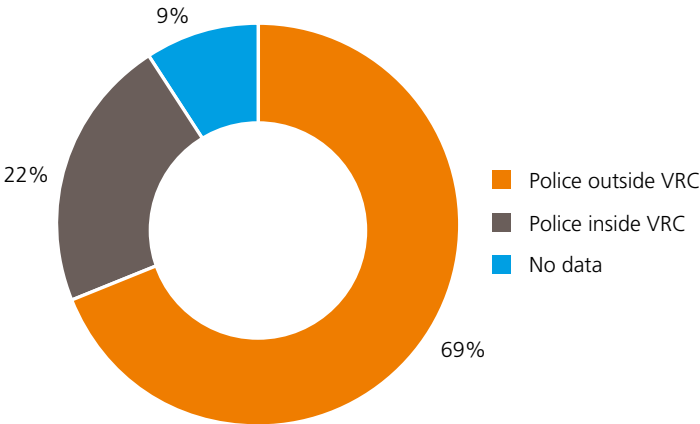
Note: Some of the Sool data did not disaggregate into these categories and so was coded as 'outside'.

In around two-thirds of observed VRCs, police officers were situated outside the VRC (Chart 2). In a small number of VRCs, we noted that police officers were positioned at the threshold of the centre, making an obstacle to entry. In just under a quarter of observed centres, we saw police fully inside the VRC. This may have been because VRC supervisors had invited them in, as permitted within the NEC regulations. In some cases, police officers supported VRC staff in organising the queue of registrants and managing the flow of people within the centre (see Queue management). We also observed one case in Maroodi Jeex in which the police officers came inside the VRC when there were no registrants because there was little shade outside for them to comfortably sit during the heat of the day. It is important, however, that NEC rules about police presence are followed during voter registration and polling so as to create a safe environment for voters and staff.

Queue management

The management of waiting registrants was generally good. Where there were queues, we observed these to be orderly and move relatively quickly meaning that prospective registrants did not have to wait outside the centre for long periods of time. In some cases, we noted that there was a second queue inside the VRC – typically between the interview and operator – and occasionally there was insufficient space to wait, as remarked above.

Early morning queue on the first day of registration, Burco

We did not witness disturbances in queues or the misuse of force by security guards.[36] However, discrepancies in queue management at closing time were observed in a small number of VRCs (see Closing). Whether this was from flexibility, uncertainty in the application of regulations, or intervention/malfeasance could not be determined, but demonstrated a small but not insignificant inconsistency in VRC management.

Disputes

Inevitably, we observed occasional disputes in VRCs, though we did not observe any worrying patterns or frequency in such events. The greatest number of disputes arose in the early period of registration, when tensions between the NEC and MINT officials spilled over from time to time (see Summary of the process). Within VRCs, supervisors and caaqils were generally able to manage any problems or tensions.

VRC operating hours

Official VRC operating hours were 6am to 6pm on each day of the registration period. VRCs were to be available for registration at all points throughout the day in order to ensure that all eligible voters had the opportunity to register.
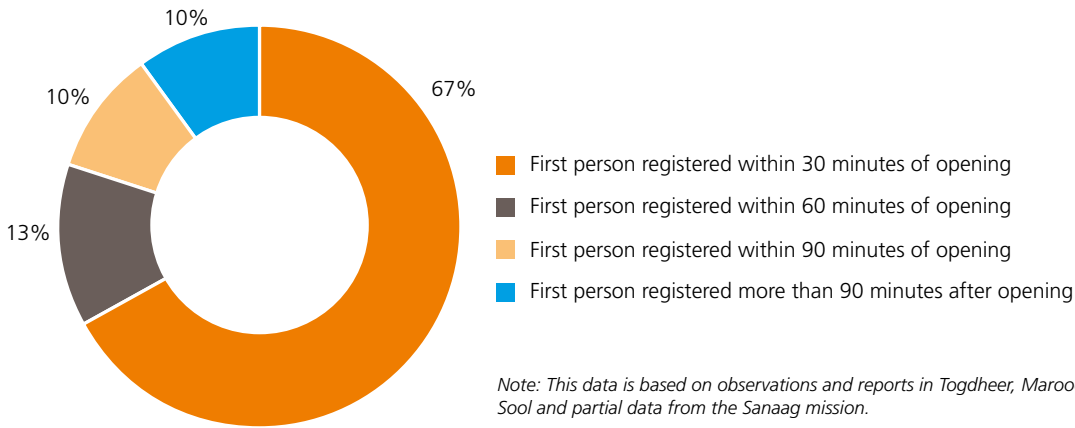
Opening

During BVR training, VRC personnel were instructed to be at their centre no later than 5.30am in order to undertake the required opening procedures in time for the announcement 'at 6am sharp'

that 'the VRC is now open'.[37] The VRC would then begin to register any eligible person in the queue or wait for the first registrant.

Data was collected on 45 VRC openings through direct observation and reports from VRC staff. Most VRCs within the sample opened after 6am and before 7am (54 per cent), with a lower proportion opening at 7am or later (30 per cent). Only one VRC was observed as opening before 6am (at 5.59am in Maroodi Jeex), though a number of centres in Sool reported their opening times as 6am. The latest openings were reported in Sanaag at approximately 8am, and Sool at 8.30am and 9.30am, the reasons for which varied from technical problems to the lack of registrants due to early animal grazing.

Chart 3:
Time of first registration after opening (observed and reported)[38]

10%
10%
10%
67%
13%

■ First person registered within 30 minutes of opening
■ First person registered within 60 minutes of opening
■ First person registered within 90 minutes of opening
■ First person registered more than 90 minutes after opening

Note: This data is based on observations and reports in Togdheer, Maroodi Jeex, Sool and partial data from the Sanaag mission.

The actual opening of VRCs was, on occasion, not clear. In a small number of cases, whilst the doors were 'opened', the BVR kits were not operational and thus the VRCs were not actually ready to register eligible voters.[39] In a Maroodi Jeex VRC where we observed this, the supervisor began set-up at 6.55am, but the kits were not powered on until 7.20am when other staff members arrived. In Sanaag, it took around 1.5 hours to organise a VRC, with the supervisor and interviewer beginning the procedures around 30 minutes after opening the doors of the VRC. In this case also, the remaining staff arrived around one hour after the initiation of set-up. Similarly, in Togdheer, whilst the doors were opened at 6am, officials did not arrive for 90 minutes, after which the first registrant was quickly processed. Whilst in none of these cases were registrants kept waiting (there were no queues), overall these reports indicate that some VRCs across the four observed regions did not meet official opening times.[40]

In 67 per cent of VRCs where the time of the first registration was recorded, an eligible voter was registered within 30 minutes of opening (Chart 3). Of the centres we observed that opened between 6am and 7am, just under two-thirds (61 per cent) began registration within 30 minutes. Of the centres that opened at 7am or later, the majority (77 per cent) registered a person within 30 minutes. These cases suggest that there was demand for early-morning opening. However, it is not necessarily the case that urban VRCs were more likely to receive early registrations: whilst the VRC in Maroodi Jeex that opened before 6am registered its first eligible voter immediately, two urban VRCs in Sool and Sanaag registered their first voter 90 minutes or more from the time of opening.

Voter registration centre, Yufle

The substantial delays that did occur between opening and first registration (more than 30 minutes) might be explained by a number of variables, including saturation (people in the immediate vicinity having already registered) and registrant preference (people choosing different times of day to register). In most cases, the time lag between opening and first registration appears to be explained by the absence of registrants. In general, therefore, the VRCs we visited were found to be ready and waiting for registrants after opening.

Closing

Closing times for observed VRCs followed a similar pattern to opening, although with closer compliance to official regulations. A third of observed VRCs closed at 6pm, with over half of the remaining centres closing by 7pm, within one hour of the official closing time.

Chart 4:
Time of last registration before closing (observed and reported)[41]

- No queue at time of closing
- People in queue not permitted to register
- Last person registered within 30 minutes of 6pm
- Last person registered within 60 minutes of 6pm
- Last person registered within 90 minutes of 6pm

Note: This data is based on observations and reports in Togdheer, Maroodi Jeex, and partial data from Sool and Sanaag.
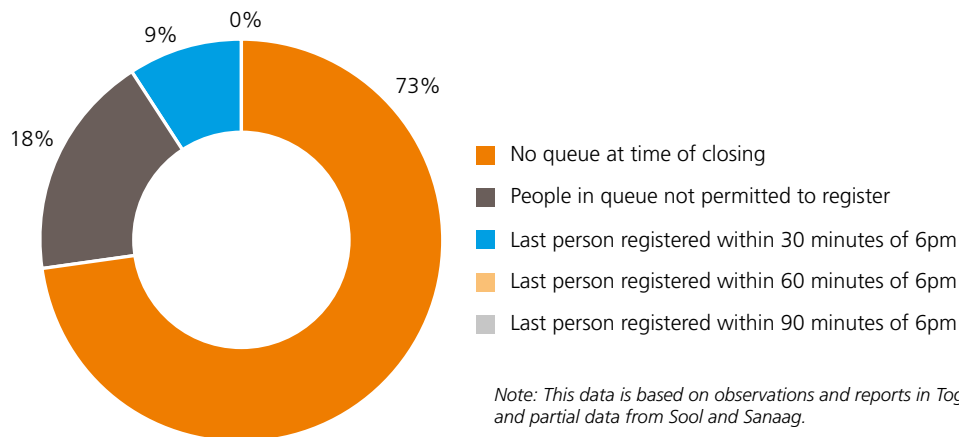
In almost all cases, closing delays were not due to the continued registration of people already in the queue at 6pm (as permitted by the NEC's procedures), since 73 per cent of observed VRCs did not have a queue at the time of closing (Chart 4). Rather, the delay in closing seemed to be explained by the time taken to complete registration processes, confirm the absence of a queue, and prepare for closure – all procedures that were difficult to do whilst registering people. We also noted that in some areas, the closing time correlated with *Maqrib* (evening prayer).

We recorded two anomalous cases of closing procedures. In both Togdheer and Sanaag, we noted that a VRC was closed despite the presence of people in the queue – an apparent contravention of NEC rules. In Maroodi Jeex, a centre was kept open despite the absence of a queue in order to enable people attending the call to prayer in the nearby mosque to register. In this case, it seemed that the VRC personnel were influenced to do this by a non-NEC individual, who counselled them to prepare for mosque attendees. The VRC was thus kept open for a further 25 minutes. In these three cases, the decision to prematurely end or extend operating hours contradicted official NEC regulations, but without further observations of these sites, it is not possible to determine whether these were anomalous incidents or part of standard practice at these centres. Despite the small sample of closings, however, the observation data suggests that such practices were not systemic, and may therefore be explained by reasons peculiar to the site and day of observation. Nonetheless, these issues – particularly the possibility of influence upon VRC personnel – do need to be reviewed as potential violations of NEC regulations.

Unscheduled closures

The scheduled operating hours of the VRCs made for very long days for VRC staff (more than 12 hours). Whilst the VRC was nominally always open between 6am and 6pm, in reality we noted that VRC teams undertook unscheduled closures to enable staff to engage in prayer and to eat lunch. These breaks and closures varied in type. In one Maroodi Jeex centre, for instance, the (female) supervisor remained behind whilst her (male) counterparts went to the local mosque for prayer. The supervisor closed the doors of the VRC and turned off the generator, stating that she did not expect registrants since it was prayer time. In another VRC in Maroodi Jeex, the supervisor turned away three men during *Dhuhr* (midday prayer), saying that the centre was closed. In two further centres in Maroodi Jeex (urban and rural), all staff left the centre at lunchtime, shutting down equipment, locking the doors, and leaving by car. In one of these cases, people turned up to be registered, and were forced to wait outside for the VRC team to return. In another case, the security guard permitted two registrants to wait inside the centre whilst the VRC team was away for prayers. When the team returned, they then registered the two people before shutting down completely for lunch. One of these registrants complained that he had come to register the day before but there had been no personnel present at the centre because of closure for prayer.

These issues reinforce the importance of ensuring that the registration process is planned in a way that is productive yet manageable for staff and registrants alike. It is obviously vital that no one is excluded from registration intentionally or accidentally through these pragmatic adaptations of NEC regulations. Unlike polling day, voter registration takes place over a long time, and the importance of sufficient breaks for registration personnel may therefore need to be taken into account in future planning.

People who arrived in trucks to register to vote have a lunch break, rural Sanaag

Voter verification

The 2016 registration was open to all eligible voters in Somaliland. As specified in Laws No. 20/2001, No. 20-2/2005 and No. 37/2007 (2014), a voter is someone who is a citizen of Somaliland ('born to' Somaliland or naturalised, according to Article 1 of Law No. 22/2002 on citizenship) and no less than 16 years old on election day. Age and citizenship therefore had to be proved as part of the registration process. The MINT has responsibility for citizenship affairs and therefore was required to support the verification of voters. As in previous elections, the MINT provided accredited clan elders known as caaqils (or samaroon in some regions), who represent their birth clans but also have extensive knowledge about all Somaliland clans, to assess whether someone was an authentic Somaliland descendent or a lawful naturalised citizen.[42] They typically did this by verbally verifying a registrant's genealogical line. Following the introduction of the MINT national ID card in 2015, caaqils also inspected ID cards as proof of eligibility (see Summary of the process).

Caaqil verifying voters at a voter registration centre, Ceerigaabo

While our observations could not confirm a representative pattern across all regions, caaqils were present at the majority of VRCs observed. Our observations suggest that caaqils adopted varied approaches to their task. Some were very proactive in the registration process, in some cases checking old or new identity cards or otherwise assisting with VRC duties. Caaqils in rural VRCs tended to be more involved in the verification process of registrants than those in urban areas.

> *I ask them questions about where they come from, their family and their clan. If they fail to give the right answers or have the right papers that verify that they are Somalilanders we tell them that they can't register. I have turned down many applicants so far.*
>
> **Caaqil, Kodbuur, Maroodi Jeex**

There was some variation in practice with respect to the verification process. According to the procedure agreed between NEC and MINT, the process was intended to commence when the caaqil verified the eligibility of the registrant, who would then proceed to completion of the registration form with a VRC interviewer. The interviewer would use information from the registrant's national ID card or ask for details regarding age and citizenship. In some instances, registrants would start with the VRC interviewer, who would call on the caaqil only in cases where they were not satisfied with the registrant's answer or documentation. In such cases, the caaqil's knowledge of Somali clan genealogy was essential. Frequently, the caaqil would quickly ascertain eligibility by requesting the name of the registrant's father, grandfather and great grandfather, using this to determine their genealogical line and clan. Variations in procedure, while sometimes not adhering strictly to established NEC procedures, frequently worked well enough in practice. In particular, the active involvement of the caaqil often seemed to help smooth the process.

In the VRCs we visited, it tended to be the caaqil who also decided if a registrant was underage or not. Since Somaliland citizens are allowed to vote at the age of 16, this meant that registrants could be 15, or even as young as 14, at the time of registration, so long as their sixteenth birthday fell on or before election day. Law No. 37/2007 (2014) specified that age of registrants be determined by the age on their national ID card. However, not all registrants held this card, therefore verbal assessment of age was required. We noted 17 specific incidences where apparently underage boys and girls were turned away by an caaqil, while children were observed in the queue at approximately 21 per cent of the VRCs visited, across Togdheer, Maroodi Jeex, Sanaag and Sool.[43] The decision to permit boys and girls that looked underage to register was often based on verbal confirmation of age eligibility from the registrant rather than on identity documentation. In some instances, the parents of the registrant were asked to swear on the Quran to verify the age of their offspring, as permitted under Article 51 of the NEC Implementation Regulations. We observed eight incidents where registrants that looked underage were allowed to register without verification from parents or documentation establishing age.

It seems inevitable that the mere presence of international observers at VRCs would have served to motivate VRC staff to chase children away, and perhaps to deter children who were intending to attempt to register from doing so while the observer team was present. We therefore surmise that the number of successful registration by underage registrants is under-reported to some degree. We have no means to verify this, of course, or to arrive at a figure that is more accurate. Our suspicion is that the significant number of children seen outside VRCs is indication that the rate of underage registration may be relatively high.

As explained elsewhere in the report, the voter registration process did not immediately furnish registrants with a voter card. Instead, these will be printed after the publication of the voter register, and distributed to registered voters before election day. With the procedure for card distribution not finalised at the time of registration, registrants were asked to provide a mobile number to which an SMS would be sent when the card was ready to collect. In cases where registrants, usually in rural areas, did not own or have access to a mobile phone, the caaqil would often register his own mobile number in order to notify registrants of when to pick up their voter cards. In a few instances, we observed elders also collecting the voter registration certificates required when a registrant collects their card. The potential for abuse of that system is obvious, though we were not able to ascertain the extent of the practice.

> *It's only when you try to register more than once that the police gets involved. If you are caught the police will come and take you to jail.*
>
> **Caaqil, Hargeysa**

In the design of this voter registration system, attempts at double or multiple registration were identified at the third stage of registration (BVR data entry) and not at the verification stage, since previously collected biometric data (such as in the 2008–10 voter registration) was not available to be used for identification (for instance, through the use of fingerprint scanners). However, as with most biometric registration systems, the system was not designed to assess eligibility, but only to determine whether someone had already registered with that iris image. As noted previously, Sool was offline throughout registration, with multiple registrations only able to be detected once the registration data was collated and cleaned back at the main NEC server in Hargeysa. It was therefore not possible to observe the efficacy of safeguards against multiple registrations in that region.

In other regions, we did observe people trying to register multiple times. In one Sanaag VRC, for example, a young woman tried to register who had previously registered in Togdheer. When the NEC operator detected this, the police were called to escort her from the VRC. We were unable to observe whether further action was taken after that, although reports indicate that the police were accorded some latitude as to whether an individual was to be held for longer or released. In any case, the fact that real-time online checking for multiple registrations was unavailable in Sool and in some, mainly rural, VRCs from time to time, meant that, in our view, it would have been inappropriate to impose harsh penalties in those instances in which registrants were caught, while being unable to do so in other cases which were not detected until much later.

Political party representation

Article 35 of Somaliland's Voters' Registration (Amendments and Additions) Law No. 37/2007 (2014) requires that each political party 'appoints a representative to be sent to each registration station to ensure that the registration activities are conducted in accordance with the law, no discrimination takes place, and that no citizen is unlawfully denied registration'. This is further specified in Somaliland's 2015 Voters' Registration Regulations, which require party agents to register a formal complaint if they observe any of the above matters or the unlawful registration of underage voters or persons who are not citizens of the Republic of Somaliland.

They are not supposed to interfere with or obstruct the ongoing registration process, and are expected to come to work when the station is opened and leave when the station is closed. They are also not allowed to campaign at the registration station or its surroundings.

The IEO mission encountered all three party agents observing the process in 27 per cent of 110[44] centres. Waddani representatives were present in 60 per cent, Kulmiye representatives in 56 per cent and UCID representatives in 35 per cent of the centres observed. At times (in 16 per cent of centres observed) there was only one party representative present, but mostly we encountered at least two. In 27 per cent of cases no party agents were present.

Overall, party representatives conducted themselves in line with the NEC regulations outlined above, and were actively observing the registration process. We did not see them making any formal complaints or interfering when people who seemed underage tried to register. In a few cases, they seemed distracted but overall they were vigilant, even though they were rarely present during the opening and closing of the centres.

Political party representatives observing registration in a voter registration centre, Ceerigaabo

We did not observe any party mobilisation in the queues. However, there was unquestionably clan-based mobilisation, and the relationship between parties and clans is still so strong in some areas as to render it impossible to distinguish party-focused activities from those that are more locally clan-based. During our visit to a mobile registration team near the Somaliland-Ethiopian border, we were informed that a Kulmiye parliamentary candidate had helped to organise the movement of registrants from across the border, giving each registrant a large bag of rice and sugar 'from Muuse Biixi'. From the beginning of voter registration, Kulmiye presidential candidate Muuse Biixi took to the road to promote the process with such vigour that his opponents complained that he was engaging in illegal political campaigning. His Waddani counterpart, Abdirahman Abdillahi 'Irro', followed suit, and once the registration reached Sanaag, senior members of each party descended on the region to urge people to register.

In general, though, our impression is that enthusiasm for registration was widespread and largely transcended political affiliation.

Trucks bringing people to a remote voter registration centre, Sanaag

Domestic observers

SONSAF, a coalition of non-state actors, trained 230 long-term observers including 100 Somaliland Civil Society Election Forum (SCISEF) members with the support of the European Union and Saferworld. SONSAF published a briefing paper on each region soon after the registration was completed. The papers were invaluable to assess the registration process in areas we were not able to observe, such as Awdal, and were also useful for triangulating our own observations. Similar to the international mission, they monitored compliance with the voter registration law and implementation regulations.

The SONSAF-trained domestic observers were dispatched to all regions and assigned to specific centres where they stayed from opening to closing. SONSAF reported good coverage: 45 observers reached 56 per cent of voter registration centres in Togdheer;[45] 83 per cent of voter registration centres were visited in Berbera, Sheikh, Gabiley and Balligubadle;[46] 67 observers were present in 79 per cent of centres in Maroodi Jeex;[47] 42 observers covered 167 operational centres in Sanaag;[48] and DEOs observed 75 of 175 voter registration centres in Sool and Buuhoodle.[49]

Table 3:
Number of domestic observers encountered in VRCs

Region	Togdheer	Saaxil	Maroodi Jeex	Sanaag	Sool	Total
Domestic observers (DOs) encountered	6/6	0/5	0/21	7/44	12/39	25/115
Week of registration cycle	Week 1	Week 4	Week 2/3	Week 1	Week 1	Week 1

Domestic observers (DOs) were usually dispatched during the first few days of each regional process. This meant that we were more likely to encounter DOs during the first phase of registration (Table 3). We met DOs in all of the six centres observed in Togdheer (day 1, week 1), in 7 out of 44 centres observed in Sanaag (week 1) and in 12 out of 39 centres observed in Sool (week 1). We did not observe DOs in any of the five centres visited in Saaxil (week 2) or the 21 centres observed in Maroodi Jeex (week 4).

Women, minorities and displaced persons

Women

Article 21 (2) of the Somaliland Constitution guarantees equal participation of women and men in the electoral process, including the right to vote and be elected to a public office.

It is estimated that women constitute more than 60 per cent of the eligible voting population, but they face major challenges when it comes to their participation in political leadership. The 82-member House of Representatives has only one female MP; the House of Elders (Guurti) has none. Following the 2012 election, only ten out of 379 local councillors are women. Long-time demands by women's groups for a quota for women in parliament culminated in a House of Representatives Internal Affairs Committee Bill on Reserved Seats for Women & Excluded Minority Groups (July 2012). This was, however, voted down by male parliamentarians, despite earlier campaign promises by the current ruling party to establish a 25 per cent quota for female candidates in subsequent elections. Discussions to grant women a smaller quota of 10 per cent (or even less) are ongoing, but it remains unclear whether these will bear any fruit in time for the forthcoming election.

Young women queuing to register outside a voter registration centre, Burco

Women waiting to register in rural Sanaag

Some progress has been made in terms of women's participation in VRC teams. In the 94 centres where we were able to record gender-based data, 44 per cent of supervisors were women. Overall, there seemed to be a relatively good gender balance amongst NEC registration staff. This seems to be attributable to a deliberate recruitment effort and recognition of women's organisational skills by the NEC. Somalilanders consider women to be trustworthy and honest, and NEC registration personnel are expected to show 'capability, honesty, and trustworthiness, and have a good reputation within the community'.[50]

The IEO team also observed fair and equal treatment of both sexes during registration. During our observations, we saw a slightly higher number of women registering than men: out of 995 registrations observed, 474 were men (48 per cent), and 520 were women (52 per cent).[51] We also observed that women, and particularly young women, were more likely to register at midday or in the afternoon once the bulk of their household and childcare activities had been completed.

> *The country cannot move forward if we don't have a president that we can stand behind. This is the reason why I have been going around to everyone in my neighbourhood and urging them to register. No one is paying me for this. I am a mother; I have kids to take care of but as soon as I have some time I tell everyone to register. I do this with the hopes of electing an honest president. The current parliament has been in power too long. They have looked out for their own interests. We want a parliament that will actually do something for the people. Hopefully this will come true.*
>
> **Older woman, Hargeysa**

Some women were very enthusiastic about registering and even mobilised others in their community to do so, seeing this as a chance to elect better political leadership in the future. Others were disappointed with past elections and the fact that elected male representatives had not enacted policies that addressed women's priorities, so they chose not to register. They felt that even though many women had campaigned for men in previous elections, once the men won, they 'forget about women'.

> *If I register and vote what will I benefit? I have no water, no health, no mental care. So I have to keep my vote and stay home. I know I am a citizen and I took the ID card but I don't want to register for the vote.*
>
> **Hargeysa civil society activist quoting women who did not want to register**

This confirms the importance of getting more women and men who understand the specific needs and rights of women into positions of power, where they can meaningfully represent women's gendered interests and influence public policy accordingly.

Minorities, internally displaced peoples and refugees

In Somaliland, minority clans are made up of members from the three main occupational groups: Gabooye, Yibir and Tumal.[52] In 2010, IRIN estimated that Hargeysa was home to approximately 8,000 Gabooye families, amounting to about 48,000 individuals.[53] Although it is said that the status of minorities is slowly improving in Somaliland, civil society organisations such as Voice of Somaliland Minority Women Organisation (VOSOMWO) are still reporting that Somaliland citizens from minority clans are discriminated against and marginalised on a daily basis.[54] While minorities as a group are marginalised throughout the six regions of Somaliland,[55] minority women face multiple levels of discrimination due to both gender and clan affiliation. That status further undermines their ability to engage politically.

Participation in voter registration held special significance for members of Somaliland's minority communities, as it supported the hope that marginalised and exploited groups in Somaliland might be represented in political decision-making. Still, due to political, economic and social adversities, very few members of Somaliland's minority clans are in prominent leadership positions.

In an effort to provide some corrective to this, VOSOMWO organised a voter registration awareness campaign. That campaign was similar to those carried out throughout the regions by groups such as SONSAF, except that in VOSOMWO's case, minority voters were specifically targeted. One of the awareness campaigns took place among the Gabooye clan in the port town of Berbera in Saaxil. VOSOMWO stated that the objective behind the awareness-raising campaign was to promulgate information about both the registration and electoral process aimed at encouraging eligible members from the minority communities to register to vote. According to the organisation, the voter education campaigns rolled out by the government and other civil society organisations were only targeting areas inhabited by majority clans.

Although a high percentage of women registrants in all regions were reached by awareness programmes, it is difficult to ascertain participation from members of minority clans. The NEC themselves did not gather information on whether registrants were from minority clans. However, personnel from the NEC said that, in accordance with the Somaliland Constitution, every Somalilander that is eligible to vote has the right to register. Furthermore, caaqils were required to be present in each VRC in order to verbally verify the genealogical line of each registrant, and the IEO team was told by NEC that some of the centres had caaqils present from minority clans. However, we did not observe such verification.

According to the NEC, internally displaced peoples (IDPs) and returnees are allowed to vote as long as they provide proof that they are of Somaliland heritage in line with the 2002 Somaliland citizenship law (Law No. 22/2002). However, some IDPs and returnees, coming either from neighbouring Somalia in the south, Ethiopia, or Yemen in the east, are not recognised as citizens of Somaliland,[56] making them ineligible to register to vote or to participate in Somaliland elections. According to both NEC personnel and caaqils, there were more foreigners or non-Somali people attempting to register during this voter registration process than had been the case in 2008. The largest such group were from the Oromo ethnic group from Ethiopia or were Djiboutian residents without kinship ties to Somaliland. We were not able to verify these statements, but we did observe that IDPs and returnees residing in the displacement settlement of Hargeysa State House were able to register to vote.

While the sensitivities involved in such cases are significant, it is important that verification procedures are generally accepted as fair, so care should be taken in areas affected to provide verification capacity that caters for all groups.

- This recommendation applies also to minority groups, although in that case, the solution must be national in scope rather than focusing on specific areas. Priority should be given to ensuring that an caaqil from minority clans is available to verify the eligibility of minority registrants when necessary.

Voter card distribution

- There is some evidence from our observation of individuals collecting registration certificates with the intention, in some cases, of 'selling' them on to political parties prior to card collection. We suggest that stringent conditions be put in place to ensure that cards are not distributed in bulk to individuals holding multiple certificates.

Voter register maintenance

- The announcement that the election scheduled for March 2017 would be delayed to October 2017 raises the issue of register maintenance. We are unaware of specific plans for procedures to remove registrants who die prior to the next election, or to add those who become eligible to vote in the same period. We are also unaware of procedures to deal with registrants who misplace voter cards. For the register to be considered legitimate at the time of the next election, it is imperative that such procedures be determined in advance, that they are able to accommodate the needs of eligible voters, and that they are publicised in sufficient time to permit full and methodical update prior to the election.

- While we acknowledge that the Somaliland voter register should be considered a 'periodic' register that is valid only for a single electoral event, we note that a second combined parliamentary and local council election is scheduled for October 2018. We therefore urge the government and the NEC to give consideration to maintenance of the voter register that is generated from this registration process in a manner that enables its use in future elections.

Conclusion

We are very pleased to note that key recommendations that we have made in previous election observation reports are being addressed, principally in this case the introduction of a credible voter register. While the current process has not yet been finalised, the registration itself appeared to proceed remarkably efficiently.

The challenges ahead appear to be primarily political rather than technical. As noted at the start of this report, the eventual release of district-level data is particularly likely to feed into heated debates over clan and political representation and parliamentary seat allocation. The NEC has been keenly aware of these sensitivities, and has guarded registration data closely. We address this sensitivity in our first recommendation below.

We were encouraged by the high levels of participation in registration from men and women throughout Somaliland. However, we remain keenly aware of the low levels of women in political processes more generally.

Voter registration centre, Marawade, Sanaag

Women who see their interests represented in parliament and public policy making are more likely to register and vote. There is an urgent need to align Somaliland's constitutional commitment to gender equality[57] with the reality on the ground. The Government of Somaliland could achieve this by creating a favourable environment for women's active and meaningful political participation. This should include addressing the negative attitudes many people harbour against women in leadership roles, and identifying entry points to changing political mobilisation along clan lines – currently the main barrier to women's political participation – as well as instituting adequate affirmative action policy measures, such as quotas. Together, these measures would enable women to overcome the structural discrimination they face in the political process and participate in a more equitable manner.

While these comments do not relate specifically to the voter registration process (and are therefore not included in the list of recommendations that follows), they are central to the legitimacy of political processes more broadly.

Recommendations

Release of voter register data

- Our most significant recommendation relates to the eventual release of registration data. The process will be politically sensitive and must be handled with care. However, it is important that data to district level is released promptly so that discussion on siting of polling stations, parliamentary seat allocation and related election-management issues can take place in an informed context.

Operation of voter registration centres

- As with the design and management of polling stations, care must be taken to ensure that every registration centre is fit for purpose, with sufficient size and space for registration personnel to work easily and effectively, and to ensure registrants' privacy and comfort.

- The NEC has very detailed instructions regarding how centres are to be set up. In order to ensure this is followed in all centres, there is a need to adapt training procedures of centre staff in order to ensure that practices are standardised as much as possible across VRCs.

- Electoral authorities should utilise previous registration and voter turnout statistics to ensure that there are sufficient biometric registration kits at each registration centre, and consider the ratio of interviewers to operators to ensure that queues do not form inside registration centres, potentially compromising privacy.

- Strict adherence to rules regarding official opening and closing times must be observed, without external influence or interference. To ensure that registration personnel are not overtired, electoral authorities should design the registration schedule to permit official breaks for prayer and refreshment. This timetable should be clearly communicated to registrants and NEC staff to ensure that no one is excluded from registering during publicised operating hours.

- The provision of adequate covered space for police officers is an important consideration in the location and organisation of VRCs in order to ensure that the police presence complies with NEC regulations.

- An online connection must be secured wherever possible to ensure that immediate de-duplication is undertaken and thus prevent the possibility of multiple registrations or data-cleaning backlogs.

Voter education

- Established methods of raising awareness of the presence and opening periods of VRCs should be expanded in future to include the use of social media, mobiles and the internet as well as the more commonly employed posters and other printed materials. Radio, TV and newspapers are restricted to the main cities, while cars mounted with speakers also have a limited range.

- While NGOs were involved in voter education, it was not clear how systematic this engagement was in terms of coverage. Also, it was not feasible in all regions. In Sool, for example, political and security concerns resulted in limited outreach early in the registration process, although the active engagement of traditional leaders in voter education later on did ensure high levels of participation in the end. Customary elders could be engaged in a more systematic way in the future. A central coordination mechanism for civil society groups and the NEC could also be established to agree on regional coverage, though that would require funding arrangements for such activities to be in place sufficiently ahead of time.

Voter verification

- Until reliable demographic records are available in Somaliland, it will remain difficult to implement effective safeguards against the registration of underage individuals. However, there is sufficient evidence that this problem may be significant to warrant greater emphasis in training of NEC staff, and especially those managing VRCs or polling stations, in methods of age verification, and the importance of vigilance in this area.

Inclusion of minority and non-dominant clans

- Caaqils in VRCs were inevitably from the dominant clan in the area. While this generally works well for those from major lineages, areas in which inter-clan relationships are tense sometimes proved more difficult. Sanaag was particularly notable for instances in which registrants complained that caaqils were inadequately addressing the verification needs of some registrants.

Appendix 1: Visits to VRCs[58]

No.	Region	VRC Name	Number
1	Togdheer	Geerashka Ilma Aw Xirsi	622
2		Guriga Caqaasaha	589
3		Sooyaal	590
4		Suryo	635
5		Xanaanada Dhexe	581
6		Xarunta Faarax Oomaar	604
7	Saaxil	Arabsiyo (Mobile Team)	
8		Berbera 26 June	
9		Berbera MCH	
10		Berbera Ministry of Agriculture	
11		Sheikh	9027
12	Maroodi Jeex	Ahmed Dhagax Primary School	
13		Ahmed Dhagax Primary School	305 & 315
14		Ahmed Dhagax Primary School	9018
15		Biyo Dhacay Secondary School	
16		Cali Jamac School	9017
17		Cali Jamac School	9017
18		Degmada Gacan Libaax	9014
19		Faraweyne (Mobile Team)	225
20		Faraweyne (Mobile Team)	225
21		Hadhwanaag	258
22		Ina Mooge School	9013
23		Isgoyaka Warcadde	9012
24		Jamacadda Hargeysa	272
25		Jarta Airport	346
26		Khayrirada	9011
27		Khayriyada	9011
28		Mohamed Ahmed Ali School (M Haybe District)	9019
29		Mohamoud Ahmed Ali School	9019
30		S.H. Ali Ibrahim School	9016
31		State House	
32		State House	
33	Sanaag	Badhi-Gelis	877
34		Baraagaha Dhabar-Mamac	878
35		Booca	944
36		Boosta	1406 & 901
37		Cadaad	848
38		Ceel Afweyne 8	857
39		Ceel Ileed	947

No.	Region	VRC Name	Number
40	Sanaag cont'd	Ceel Laaman	984
41		Ceel Midgan (Nimco)	875
42		Ceel-Afweyn A	856
43		Darar-Weyne	858
44		Dayacan	898
45		Dayaxah	929
46		Dhaban	921
47		Dhaxamo	973
48		Dugsiga Dayaxa	1308
49		Fadhi Gab	842
50		Gar'adag B	837
51		Gara'adag A	836
52		Gawsa Weyne	846
53		Geel Caseey	847
54		Goob	946
55		Jiidali	969
56		Kal-Mac	914
57		Kal-Sheik	874
58		Karin-Biyood	887
59		Kulmiye	904
60		Laan-Ojciye	918
61		Lafoole A	894
62		Mara-Wade	922
63		Masagan	971
64		Masle	880
65		Shiisha	832
66		Tuula Dacar	900
67		Xaafadda Kulmiye A	896
68		Xaafadda Oktober A	891
69		Xaafadda Shaquaaliaha (Beredeha)	893
70		Xaafadda Soomal	902
71		Xabow	905
72		Xabow	905
73		Xamas	907
74		Xamilka	895
75		Xarunta Dawladda Hoose A	889
76		Yufle	919
77	Sool	Adhi Caddeys 'A'	822
78		Adhi Caddeys 'B'	823

No.	Region	VRC Name	Number
79	Sool cont'd	Bad-Weyn	781
80		Balaahis	797
81		Bisha Cas	1068
82		Canjiidh 'Hotel Xamdi'	1073
83		Caynabo 'B'	778
84		Caynabo A	777
85		Ceel Dhaab	789
86		Ceelal	800
87		Ceelka Cali Bare	1065
88		Daaraha Mareykan	1062
89		Dhaban-Saar	825
90		Dhadhin-wiyleed	808
91		G. Tifafle 'Waqdari'	1074
92		Gocondhaale	1080
93		Guirga Gobolka	1056
94		Guumays	812
95		Habari-Heshay	784
96		Istopka Bariga	1085
97		Jawle	902
98		Kalax	813
99		Kiridh	786
100		Mashruuca	791
101		MCH Ka Dhexe	1059
102		Oog A	789
103		Oog B	780
104		Rigga-S-Xawle	826
105		Saldhigga Bariga	1088
106		Sin-Dhoobo	827
107		Tukub	799
108		Tuulo-sama-kaab	824
109		Ulasan	785
110		Waadaama Goo	783
111		War-Idaad	782
112		Waxari-ka-ciday	821
113		Wiriir	787
114		Yogoori A	810
115		Yogoori B	811

Appendix 2: The IEO observation form

		AREA OF OBSERVATION	
		DATE	
		VRC Name	
		VRC Number	
		Time of arrival	
		Time of departure	
A	**Centre Opening**		
1	Time of opening[1]		
2	All personnel present when opened? (NEC, Min of Interior, party agents)[2]		
3	Time first person registered		
4	Equipment complete?		
B	**General**		
1	All personnel present during observation?[1]		
2	Is there sufficient space inside the VRC to permit orderly registration?		
3	Is the VRC generally managed in an orderly fashion?		
4	Any disputes? Between whom? Resolved? How?		
5	Any staff interference in other people's responsibilities?		
6	Any staff performance/competence problems?		
7	Time it takes to register one person (average for VRC)		mins
8	Any technical problems? What? (check internet connection)[3]		
9	Any mobile support teams around or available when required?[4]		
10	Visitors to centre (NEC commissioners, observers, etc)?		
11	Any party/clan mobilisation in queue?		
12	Number of people registered at time of visit (M/F)		
13	Assistance provided to disabled/illiterate registrants?		
14	Any children trying to register? (in queue? inside VRC?) How dealt with?		
15	Mechanisms used to verify eligibility?[5]	*(circle)* **a) caaqil b) national ID c) verbal d) other**................
16	Any police in the centre? Any intimidation?[6]		
17	Any other concerns, issues?		
C	**Closing**		
1	Time VRC closed (no more allowed to join queue)?[1]		
2	All NEC officials/party agents present for closure?[2]		
3	Closing procedures orderly?		
4	Any queue at 6pm? People in queue at 6pm allowed to register?[1]		
5	Number of people registered in day? In VRC to date?		
6	What time registrations finished?		
7	Was internet connection functioning? If not, how was data uploaded?		

NOTES

1 VRCs are supposed to open at 6am and close at 6pm, with those in the queue at 6pm permitted to register.

2 Personnel present should include at least 1 NEC official, at least 1 Ministry of Interior official, 1 part agent from each of the 3 parties and 2 security guards (police).

3 There should be a live internet connection at all times. When there is not, there is a local back-up system, with registration data uploaded to the central server when internet is available. Observers should ask if the connection has been consistent or how much downtime there has been.

4 Mobile NEC teams are supposed to be available to assist should technical or other problems arise.

5 Should a registrant not be able to satisfy VRC staff as to their eligibility to register, *an caaqil* is supposed to be available to authenticate their identity.

6 Police are not permitted to enter VRCs except when invited to do so by the NEC supervisor.

Notes

1   Mathieson, D and Wager, R (2010) Somaliland National Electoral Commission: Report on the Preparation of the Voter Register January to June, ERIS, London; Kibble, S and Walls, M (2013) Swerves on the Road: Report by International Election Observers on the 2012 Local Elections in Somaliland, Progressio, London.

2   Creative Associates (2013) Civil and Voter Registration Assessment, Somaliland, 2013 –2015, Contract No. DC2013/251/KC, DANIDA.

3   Sandhana, L (2014) 'Iris register to eyedentify voting fraud in Somaliland', New Scientist.

4   Hersi, M with Osman, N (2014), Voter Registration Field Study – Field Report, APD, Hargeysa: 11, 14.

5   Jama, I H, ed (2016), Somaliland Voters' Registration Law and Regulations combined text of laws, amendments and NEC regulations, www.somalilandlaw.com/Somaliland_Voter_Reg_Law___Regs_2016.pdf (accessed 30 January 2017).

6   Schedule One of the NEC Voters' Registration Implementation Regulations No. 01/2015 is available at www.somalilandlaw.com/Voters_Registration_Regs_Schedule1_F070316.pdf (accessed 30 January 2017).

7   Amendments & Additions (Annexe 1 of 2016) to the Voters' Registration Law 2014 amends Articles 7(2) and 26(2) of the 2014 law.

8   See also Articles 42–44 of the Voters' Registration Implementation Regulations No. 01/2015, available in Jama (2016).

9   Walls, M (2014), A Somali Nation-State: History, Culture and Somaliland's Political Transition, 2nd Edition, Ponte Invisibile/Redsea-online, Pisa: 266–282.

10 Articles 8, 61, 62–64 of the Voters' Registration Implementation Regulations No. 01/2015, available in Jama (2016).

11 The voters' register will, however, be opened at least 6 months in advance of the next scheduled poll (Articles 69–70, NEC Regulations) to permit cleaning, new registrations, the distribution of new cards, and the production of the final voters' list within 6 months of the election (as required by Annexe 1 of the 2014 amended law).

12 Statement from Denmark, EU Delegation, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, UK & USA, EEAS, Brussels (26 January 2017) 'Statement by international partners to Somaliland on the postponement of the Presidential and Local elections', https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/final._statement_by_the_international_partners_to_somaliland._2017.01.26.pdf (accessed 7 February 2017).

13 In an effort to encourage parties to build cross-clan alliances, the Somaliland Constitution specifies that a total of three political parties may legally be registered to contest elections. The evolving political settlement has determined that the exception to that rule is for local council elections, for which any number of political associations, having met legal requirements, may stand candidates. The three most successful political associations are then permitted to form parties that are entitled to contest presidential and parliamentary elections. Under that system, the governing Kulmiye party, UCID and Waddani emerged from the 2012 local council elections as the three entities legally eligible to register as parties.

14 Walls (2014): 266–282

15 Norris, P (2004), Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behaviour, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

16 Due to time limitations, we were not able to observe the process in Awdal.

17 While we aimed to observe opening and closing procedures of centres, this was not always possible, especially in rural areas due to logistical restrictions that required us to be back in urban centres before dark.

18 Typically, there were two BVR operators. The number of stations was determined by the number of client kits, of which there was a maximum of six per VRC (interview with NEC official, Hargeysa, May 2016).

19 SONSAF (2016e), Voter Registration Briefing 6 – Sool and Buuhoodle (2 September), SONSAF, Hargeysa: 3.

20 Data was encrypted at the point of entry (from client to local server), and also encrypted from the local to the central server, with a firewall around the whole system.

21 Interview with NEC official, Hargeysa, May 2016.

22 A number of private firms have established 'micro-grids' in Hargeysa (see Lochery, 2016), but the cost of electricity in Somaliland is amongst the highest in the world. See Lochery, E (2016) 'Providing for the Public: The electric Power Business in Somaliland', Somaliland Informer (26 March); and DFID (2016) 'Somaliland Electricity Sector Regulation', Legal Assistance for Economic Reform Programme DFID, London: 2.

23 For instance, in February 2016, the NEC stated that there had been some unintentional duplicates because of mistakes with the camera operating system, specifically that repeated efforts by operators to take a correct image had each been recorded in the system as a new record (SONSAF (2016a) Voter Registration Briefing 1 – Togdheer (14 February), SONSAF, Hargeysa: 2). However, since we were not able to view the data entry process, a complete assessment of the iris-scanning process cannot be made.

24 The chosen model was determined to be the best apparatus for people with poor eyesight – a key factor in Somaliland where there is a significant incidence of eye problems – and it was found to function appropriately during the 2014 field test, as validated by the Notre Dame assessment.

25 It is important to note that the most observations were made in Sanaag, increasing the data available for these calculations.

26 SONSAF (2016b) Voter Registration Briefing 3 – Sahil, Gabilay and Bali-gubadle (22 March), SONSAF, Hargeysa: 2.

27 SONSAF (2016c) Voter Registration Briefing 4 – Hargeysa and Salaxley (12 May), SONSAF, Hargeysa: 2.

28 The list of VRCs was set out in an annex to the NEC Voter's Registration Implementation Regulations No. 01/2015. Some VRCs in Sanaag were added just before or during registration in order to address concerns that centres were inadequately dispersed across the region, leading to the use of different kinds of premises or temporary structures.

29 Both the Voters' Registration (Amendments and Additions) Law No. 37/2007 (2014) (Articles 31, 34), and Voter's Registration Implementation Regulations No, 01/2015 (Articles 53, 56, 57, 68), state that a voter has the right to choose their preferred polling station. The NEC (2016), Biometric Voter Registration Manual, NEC, Hargeysa (page 20) noted that registrants in rural areas would vote at the same place that they registered, whereas urban registrants would be able to choose from up to four proximate polling station locations at the time of registration. This information was included as part of their registration in both types of location, and the voter card is supposed to be designed to carry the name of their designated polling station.

30 NEC (2016): 9.

31 This excludes Togdheer since this data was not collected during observation in this region.

32 The ideal layout of a VRC, including the order of the stations, is briefly covered in the NEC (2016: 9), but this was constrained by the choice of venue.

33 Articles 36–40 of the Voter's Registration Implementation Regulations No. 01/2015 cover the recruitment and functions of each of these roles.

34 Observers received different responses about their identity. Caaqils were present in some but not all observed sites. Sometimes they were said to be nearby and available if there was a question of eligibility. See Voter verification.

35 Some of the Sool data did not disaggregate into these categories and so was coded as 'outside'.

36 Note, however, that SONSAF domestic observers did report some isolated incidents in Awdal, Maroodi Jeex, Sanaag and Sool, related to broader political issues such as constituency demarcation. See SONSAFa–e (2016).

37 From NEC (2016), 'Trainers Guide for VRC Management', unpublished document.

38 This data is based on observations and reports in Togdheer, Maroodi Jeex, Sool and partial data from the Sanaag mission.

39 These have been coded by the time of the doors 'opening', but the 'observer effect' should be considered here i.e. that the presence of observers distorted or affected the behaviour of VRC personnel.

40 It is important to note, however, that the doors may have been opened for us (the 'observer effect') or for lighting because set-up could not begin until the generators were powered up.

41 This data is based on observations and reports in Togdheer, Maroodi Jeex, and partial data from Sool and Sanaag.

42 Article 1 of Law No. 22/2002 declares that a citizen is 'an individual who descended from persons who were resident in the territory of Somaliland on 26 June 1960 or before, and a person who had Somaliland citizenship conferred on him lawfully'. The citizenship law is available in English from www.somalilandlaw.com/citizenship_law.htm (accessed 11 February 2017).

43 No children were observed queuing in the small number of VRCs visited in Saaxil.

44 This number excludes Saaxil where this information was not recorded.

45 SONSAF (2016a).

46 SONSAF (2016b).

47 SONSAF (2016c).

48 SONSAF (2016d).

49 SONSAF (2016e).

50 Article 37 (1g) of the Voters' Registration Implementation Regulations No. 01/2015, available in Jama (2016).

51 In one case, the gender was not recorded.

52 Hill, M (2010), No Redress: Somalia's Forgotten Minorities, Minority Rights Group International.

53 Ahmed Shide Jama (2010) 'It is as if no one knows we are here' IRIN (2 July), www.irinnews.org/interview/2010/07/02/ ahmed-shide-jama-it-if-no-one-knows-we-are-here (accessed 3 January 2017).

54 Masal, L Y, 2016, 'Somaliland VOSOMWO Intensifies Drive for Minority Clans Empowerment', Somaliland Sun (19 March), www.somalilandsun.com/community/8710-somaliland-vosomwo-intensifies-drive-for-minority-clans-empowermen (accessed 2 January 2017).

55 Hill (2010).

56 Somaliland's citizenship law is controversial amongst some Somalis from outside the country. Somaliland's unrecognised status means that international agencies and Somalia itself consider all Somalis from within the wider area of the old Somali Republic to also be citizens of Somaliland. Somaliland, of course, disputes this, meaning that Somalis designated refugees in Somaliland are usually considered internally displaced by non-Somaliland parties.

57 Article 22 of the Somaliland Constitution states that 'every citizen shall have the right to participate in the political, economic, social and cultural affairs in accordance with the laws and the Constitution'. Article 36 (1) clarifies that 'the rights, freedoms and duties laid down in the constitution are to be enjoyed by men and women, save for matters which are specifically ordained in Islamic Sharia.' This tends to be commonly interpreted in such a way that women should not hold the highest positions such as president or judge, but can hold other political positions. The Somaliland Constitution is available in English at www.somalilandlaw.com/somaliland_constitution.htm (accessed 11 February 2017).

58 Where a VRC is listed more than once, that indicates multiple observer visits.

Front Cover Photo: Women queuing up outside a voter registration centre, rural Sanaag, Somaliland, July 2016 (photo © Marie-Luise Schueller/Progressio)