



## Democratization Process in Puntland: Challenges and Opportunities

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### Background

Puntland was established in 1998. It has since then stood out as one of the few stable regions in Somalia. The 1998 Garowe Community Constitutional Conference that led to the formation of Puntland State of Somalia was a successful experiment in establishing a regional state. This pioneering act illustrates how governance and development have become localized in Somalia and that the capacity of the people from the former Northeast regions of Somalia have come to manage and finance large and complex political processes with limited international support. As in the English proverb, *the proof of pudding is in its eating*, Puntland by playing a constructive role among its Somali neighbors, hosting more than 100,000 refugees from South Somalia, and at the same time leading efforts to resolve Somalia's regional conflicts peacefully has shown its mettle as a reliable friend to all Somalis and the other peoples of the Horn Africa Region. That Puntland has been a cornerstone of the Federal government in hosting Garowe 1, 2, Galkacio conferences to implement the road-map agenda of ending Somalia's transitional junctures is another illustration of its good intentions in the region.



Puntland is part of Somalia Federal government and yet it has its unique features of governance as well as strategic geographic position in East Africa. It is increasing its importance to the international community by collaborating with the US, the European Union and other stakeholders on terrorism, piracy and on a range of other critical issues without in anyway encumbering the Federal Somali Government's efforts to forge a sustainable path for Somalia.

## **Puntland's governance role**

Thus far since its establishment, Puntland has thrived on a path of consultative clan power sharing, but it is now changing tack and getting on a path of democratic governance and public sector reform. Puntland's socio-economic status is currently better off than most of the other regions of Somalia - particularly those in central and southern regions- in terms of stability and security, and public institutions building. In its 15 years of existence, Puntland state of Somalia has created an enabling and encouraging environment for private and public sector institutions by taking on and succeeding in the building of the capacity of major social issues, including but not limited to, the level of education, improvement to the health sector, usage of electricity and wider access to water.

Despite the positive developments of the recent past, the political system remains dominated by traditional, clan-based systems of governance in the absence of political parties, across clan organization or community power structures. In addition, the parliament is selected on the basis of clan distribution quotas, with traditional elders proposing the names of MP's, ministers and administrative officials. The revival of Xeer (customary law) as an alternative to state laws following the collapse of the Central Somali government in 1991 was critical in maintaining semblance of law and order.

## **Situational analysis**

Since 1998, the government of Puntland has been gradually gaining the confidence of the people through the re-establishment of public sector institutions in order to primarily provide public security and basic services. However, the capacities of these public institutions started at different stages and the demand for services from the beneficiaries have been steadily growing in higher proportion than the delivery capacity of the government institutions. Today, the time has come for [Puntland to take the lead in framing the essential policies](#) that would shape the overall socio-economic development of the State, which would translate into major efforts organized by the government in partnership with the international community and the engagement of all stakeholders on the overall reconstruction of Puntland.

The distinction between description (how policies are made) and prescription (how policies should be made) can't be excluded from consideration of Puntland's efforts in developing relevant and appropriate policies. However, policy issues applied to any given issue may be truncated. A more analytical approach would encourage two questions: what we are trying to do and how will we know when we have done it? Since there is usually a gap between the expected and the desired futures it is necessary to identify the constraints and limiting factors. Democratic governance addresses the allocation and management of resources to respond to collective problems and is characterized by the principles of participation, transparency, accountability, rule of law, effectiveness, equity and strategic vision.

Puntland's 2<sup>nd</sup> five year Development Plan proposes the development of strong, democratic, public-sector institutions as a critical component of its mission. It is through improved

governance that the benefits of democratic development most directly impact the lives of citizens. Conversely, the inability of public sector institutions to function effectively and democratically undermines the sustainability of democratic reform. Democratic institutions provide the setting for equitable distribution of benefits from growth. In short, more peaceful and more prosperous nations contribute to a more stable environment. There are compelling reasons to care about whether the quality of governance is good across the state. For the good of our citizens and for the sake of our common aims, the capacity of weak states like Puntland to govern should be strengthened because countries that are well governed are both less likely to be less violent and are less likely to be poor.

Puntland's agenda for political parties and free elections has been a major but elusive objective since 1998. The first experiment of democratization was initiated in 2012 by the Faroole government but was quickly impeded by a perception of lack of fair and transparent election process, which resulted in violent confrontations. The opposition challenged the integrity and fairness of a system perceived to give advantage to the ruling political party. Local elections that were proposed were annulled and the presidential elections that ensued were carried in the traditional clan consultative modus operandi. The present president defeated the sitting president by only one vote and the incumbent gracefully conceded. This was unprecedented triumph in African politics and the international community expressed their high regard for this unique and peaceful transfer of power. And not to lose the momentum of the Faroole government, the present administration has decided to move forward with preparing Puntland for multiparty democratic elections.

### **Institutional development**

The socioeconomic challenges facing populations, especially in developing and least-developed countries, are enormous. The challenge of weak institutions underscores the need to strengthen institutions for sustainable human development in these countries. In over the past few decades, scholars and policymakers have turned their attention to problems of governance, including such topics as democratization, corruption control, capacity-building, electoral systems, judicial systems, and so forth. It is now commonplace to observe that development will occur only if a country has "good institutions" in place, and many of these institutions are either intrinsically political or are political by extension. Thus, the establishment of effective institution reform depends upon a structure of law and law enforcement; it does not and cannot exist independently of government. Similarly, the development of a strong civil society is virtually impossible without the development of strong formal institutions of government.

The present administration promotes effective public-sector institutions and processes that operate in a manner consistent with democratic values of transparency, representation, pluralism and accountability. To ensure democratic governance by enhancing the capacity and efficiency of the government institutions as well as keeping under control government budget by reducing wasteful expenditure and enhancing the revenue collection that leads to sustained growth.

Puntland government with the leadership from the top, the President of Puntland, His Excellency Dr. Abdiweli Mohamed Ali Gaas, has embarked on an over-arching vision of Civil Service reform that is to be carried out and strategic objectives that are to be achieved, both in the immediate future. The reform components have their strategic directions and are coupled with the strengthening of core public sector institutions to improve their efficiency, effectiveness, implementation arrangements, milestones and action plans. The ultimate goal of the President is to strengthen the national public service human capacities and institutions for an effective public administration and better public service delivery to the citizens of Puntland in the framework of a comprehensive civil service reform.

However, much of the Puntland community subscribes to the notion that political reform attired in the traditional clan garb is not enough. If democracy is not established, public disillusionment with the traditional governance will continue to grow. In other words, democratic governance that is open and fair can be successful in the eyes of the Puntland citizen.

### **The Legislature**

A capable and effective national legislature is one of the foundational pillars of democratic governance. The Administration envisions democratic elected legislators with the capacity of representative institutions to communicate with citizens and respond to their concerns, to shape laws and policies that reflect national and constituent interests, and to oversee the work of the executive branch, particularly in the promulgation and implementation of the national budget. It is imperative that legislators be provided support in these tasks so that they contribute to the development of laws needed to make Puntland a stronger democracy. This includes constitutional reform, as well as revising other procedures that are key factors to adopting democracy.

### **Poverty reduction**

Problems of development are inextricably tied to governance reducing poverty. Unless local, regional, and State governments perform their assigned responsibility, and do it in a tolerably efficient manner, little respite will be found from poverty, disease, illiteracy, crime, civil war, and other problems plaguing the developing world. There is only so much that international bodies, nongovernmental organizations, and market forces can do. Governance is aimed to underscore the role quality of governance plays in the development of a country. A country where the poor have a voice in their government is more likely to invest in national policies that reduce poverty. When people's interests, needs and human rights are at the center of governance institutions and practices, there can be real progress in combating poverty.

According to Merilee S. Grindle of Harvard University "For many in the development community, democratic governance has become as imperative to poverty reduction as it has become to development more generally". How can democratic governance and institutional reform bring about poverty reduction in Puntland? Which policies and institutions are right?

How can causal relationships between democratic governance and measures of well-being are to be established?

Clearly, much of the above has to do with setting priorities among governance reforms. Priorities can be better set if there is more understanding about which actions produce more results in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, responsiveness to public service delivery, which produce the most benefit for the poor, which logically precede others, which are easier to undertake or produce results in the short term, and under what conditions particular reforms are likely to have the most impact. Puntland has a commitment to poverty reduction; this is part and parcel of transitioning to democratic governance. Democratic governance supports development of poverty reduction plans and sustainable development, the focus is on a quality of governance that is participatory, transparent and accountable, effective and equitable, and it promotes the rule of law.

### **Local government and Decentralization**

According to some experts, decentralization has emerged as a popular strategy to improve public sector efficiency, responsiveness and accountability in the developing world. In short a recipe of good democratic governance. Democracy empowers decentralization and creates opportunities of citizen participation and ownership of the local issues and increasing as well local and social and political stability.

The national charter of Puntland that established the State in 1998 has defined decentralization as part of its governance structure. The power sharing of clans that originate from diverse regions gave the local parole the right to nominate and establish their own representatives to councils in regional and district levels. Analysis of Puntland decentralization efforts, the devolution of power is seen as a model of democratic governance that can attribute to sustainable peace in a post-conflict period. The election of local councils was realized in several Puntland districts. In Baran, Senaag, there are nine women out of 27 elected officials of the local council. These elections represented positive development in the decentralization process. The prevalent view is that democratic effective local administrations are foundations of Good Governance and a vehicle of local government. A functional local government that provides basic services to the communities is essential to peace and prosperity.

Puntland 2<sup>nd</sup> five year Development Plan proposes the strengthening of Puntland local governance in its pursuit of transitioning to democratic forms of governance. Therefore decentralization is identified as one of the pillars to peace, security, and efficient public service delivery in Puntland.

### **Challenges**

On the other hand it appears that the Puntland community is profoundly divided on the merits of democracy. Some have suggested that in the Puntland context, the emphasis on elections is an example of Western influence imposing its value system and political practices where they may not be appropriate. Others argue that for elections to work there must be the rule of law, a certain



level of education, and sufficient economic development to allow voters to make a free choice and not feel beholden to their clan leaders. Others are of the opinion that like Somaliland political parties will remain clan based and will further mobilize divisions within society and that an abundance of unemployed and often uneducated youth is a particularly destabilizing force, easily manipulated by their clan politicians.

The trouble with the arguments of these critics of democracy is that majority of Puntlanders wholeheartedly embrace elections as a way to express their will. In fact, given the opportunity Puntlanders are likely to vote with enthusiasm.

The discussion of “Asian values” more than twenty years ago advanced the notion that despite countries' economic progress, “cultural” barriers to democracy and elections existed in such places as Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, and Thailand. Yet look at where many of these countries are now: there is little question they are more democratic than during the height of the “Asian values” debate. They are not perfect democracies, but then neither is the United States, France, or the United Kingdom. There are numerous examples of successful elections. Ghana is remarkably similar to Ivory Coast in its divisions, yet it has had a series of successful elections. Liberia was a victim of “big man” politics for years, yet Liberians saw the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2005 as credible. There is also South Africa, where international observers and South Africans themselves as legitimate have regarded every election since the end of apartheid in 1994.

## **Opportunities**

Puntland government strategy involves institutionalizing a climate of change within the governance environment toward the objective of building democratic institutions that strengthens public institutions integrity with a plan for paradigm shift. Certain core principles are shared by all democracies, there is no one "correct" model for democratic government. Democratic governance has three distinct advantages over other forms of governance. First, democracies are better able to manage conflicts and avoid violent political change because they provide opportunities for the people to participate in the political process of the country. Second, democracies are better able to avoid threats to human survival because the checks by the opposition parties, uncensored criticism of public policies and the fear of being voted out of office. Third, democracies lead to greater awareness of social development concerns including health, primary health care and rights of women and minorities.

Effective executive leadership is essential for successful democratic governance programs and it is particularly important when Puntland is undergoing complex or systemic change of governance. It is a lot to expect but there is a prevalent view of the public that the present administration can make it possible for Puntland to have a better chance of success in the pursuit of transforming traditional governance to democracy. Many are convinced that the Present administration is likely to make it open and fair. The public considers the President's experience of successfully leading the implementing the Road Map transition for the Federal government when he was a Prime Minister a plus. The administration view of establishing an Electoral

Commission could lead to new political forces to be given time to organize.

The present administration recommends an inclusive representation that will be administered with transparency and skill. If electoral laws are crafted and elections are free and fair it is unlikely that undemocratic forces can effectively compete. According to PDRC recently completed research report, Puntlanders are demanding "democracy" characterized by free elections and the end of traditional clan patronage.

## **Conclusion**

From this limited exposition of Puntland's destiny with democracy, this article is intended to demonstrate that the introduction of democracy in Puntland is not about if, but about when. A majority of the populace thinks that the current system of governance, the claim to clan exceptionalism that propels the current politics and the distribution of resources is doomed to history's scrapbooks. In its place democracy will emerge resilient. The fact that even the die-hard adherents to clan hegemony are losing faith gives the Puntland government and progressives the confidence to proceed with the democratic process. The people are coming to the realization that this cherished system that is mired in our history and traditions is not sustainable as a vehicle of governance.

However, with this realization comes a sobering after thought, for in establishing democracy there will be considerable challenges. As in Somalia's attempt in the period between 1960 and 1969 when unbridled democracy flourished but was defeated by a local coup, foreign intervention and people's benign neglect, democracy anywhere in Somalia could become a victim to the vagaries of history. But, at this time in Puntland instead of a coup, the challenges could come in the form of assortment of bad actors. For one, clan interests will rear its ugly head, criminal cabals will try to dominate and fight over the weak system, there will be a tussle between the regions for resources, and for a considerable component of the population grinding poverty will not allow them to exercise democracy. Nonetheless, all these challenges could be overcome with forethought, meticulous planning, organization, transparency, fairness and remedying historic injustices to women and marginalized groups.

Thus, the Puntland government with the wind of luck at its back, traditional elders and the legislature at its front, and informed populace and mobilized civil society on its sides vows to make democracy a reality in Puntland. The plan is to begin the democratic process with wobbly baby steps and increase the pace as people take ownership of the process. The pace will depend on the people's acceptance of each step of the process, but for sure the journey will begin soon.

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