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V.O.T.E. Somalia (Verified, Observed, and Trusted Elections - Somalia)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The stalled Somalia 2021 elections have the potential to worsen Somalia's protracted conflict. The inability of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) to hold a secure and legitimate election is worsening clan divides and providing Al-Shabaab an opportunity to advance its position in the southern region of Somalia, which presents a significant risk of further regional destabilization. Though Somalia has shown modest human development gains and economic growth over recent years, election-instigated violence risks undoing these improvements. Moreover, a credible election is a necessary step in mitigating the protracted conflict that Somalia has experienced since the 1990s. Accordingly, *V.O.T.E Somalia* (Verified, Observed & Trusted Elections - Somalia) is a low-cost, low-risk, and high-reward project designed to support Somalia in holding its overdue 2021 election. This project proposal addresses the logistics of the project design, pre-project risk assessment, operational decisions, and post-project impact. In collaboration with Global Affairs Canada (GAC) and CANADEM, the project aims to facilitate fair, transparent, robust, and sustainable elections for years to come.

PROJECT DESIGN

Objective

The proposed *V.O.T.E. Somalia* (Verified, Observed & Trusted Elections - Somalia) initiative is a track II electoral assistance and election monitoring program to support the Somali government and local clan leaders reach an agreement on the currently delayed electoral process and to fortify electoral legitimacy in preparation for carrying out the elections. Doing so will help prevent the likely reemergence of election-related extremist violence in the country.

In a country that has faced political instability and ceaseless conflict for decades, Somalia has been struggling to maintain consistent elections since its federation and the most recent elections that were scheduled for February 8th, 2021 are now in deadlock due to disagreements between the incumbent president and regional leaders regarding the legitimacy of the voting process.ⁱ Given Somalia's complex electoral system in which both the clan elders and the five federal states contribute to choosing a president, political sensitivity and tact are needed to break the gridlock.ⁱⁱ

Given the diplomatic and developmental nature of the initiative, GAC will be spearheading the project and leveraging the expertise of CANADEM, a Canada-based non-profit government-related organization, to coordinate the program. This Canadian-driven effort to pave a path to more transparent, inclusive, and representative elections aligns with Canada's commitment to a feminist foreign policy, inclusive governance, and stronger international engagement to address emerging global challenges, as reaffirmed in the Minister of Foreign Affairs' latest mandate letter.ⁱⁱⁱ It will also complement other Canadian efforts in Somalia including humanitarian relief, development assistance, and counter-terrorism.^{iv}

CANADEM will coordinate with the UN Security Council-sanctioned African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the Somali government, local Somali clan leaders, and community organizers, with a particular focus on involving women, youth, and other marginalized groups to ensure that this project is participatory and inclusive. This initiative is a low-cost, low-risk, and potentially high-reward 12-month program (with possibility of extension) that is estimated to cost \$7.5 million CAD.^{iv} The project will

ⁱ Based on a similar GAC-funded CANADEM 2009 program, price-adjusted to 2021 CAD and expanded to include funding for COVID-19-adapted measures.

provide a forum—via a series of workshops—for various stakeholders and civil society groups to share their perspectives and brainstorm ideas of how the electoral process should look like.^{2vi} These workshops will also encourage continued engagement through facilitative roles from Somalia’s international partners, including envoys from the African Union, the United Nations, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), Turkey, the European Union, the UK, and the US.^{vii}

This initiative does not attempt to directly tackle the root causes of the protracted conflict in Somalia, given that attempting to do so would require a substantial amount of resources and time commitment. This initiative instead aims to respond to the worsening country indicators to avoid the worst case scenario by promoting democratization, increasing participation of different groups, and curbing the reemergence of extremist violence. In doing so, this will better equip Somalia to address the root causes of the conflict moving forward.

The Best Case and Worst Case Scenarios

This initiative will help realize the best case scenario and avoid the worst case scenario outlined in Levesque et al. (2021) by breaking the gridlock and carrying out the 2021 elections, effectively bringing legitimacy to the government and the presidency, as well as Somalia’s democratic institution.^{viii} Consequently, this will enable the government to refocus efforts to better respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, addressing extremism, improving its drought and flood-based infrastructure, and strengthening its relations with neighbouring countries.

Stakeholder Analysis

Unlike Al-Shabaab who may seek to exploit the growing political distrust and instability, most key stakeholders in the Somali conflict (including the local clan leaders, AMISOM, neighbouring countries, and IGAD) would benefit from renewed elections. In particular, the project would help parties better realize the importance of holding immediate elections, considering how this electoral impasse and the absence of a new government undermines the collective fight against Al-Shabaab. The elections would have a largely ambivalent effect on the FGS as the incumbent party faces the risk of losing power but may likely be violently ousted if they do not find a more diplomatic alternative to re-legitimize their hold on power or relinquishing it altogether. In fact, taking swift measures to break the gridlock and move forward on the elections will address the main point of scrutiny that this party faces, which may allow them to regain the support of the people and hold power for the next four years. The elections would benefit the autonomous government of Somaliland considering that it does not want the Somali conflict to re-escalate and spill over into their territory, which is likely to be the case absent any elections.

Indicator Analysis

Three of five ‘high risk and rising’ indicators in Levesque et al. (2021) can be directly addressed by the proposed initiative, namely *Governance and Political Stability*, *Democratic Stress*, and *Armed Conflict*.^{ix} The remaining two indicators, *Human Development* and *Environmental Stress*, can be addressed indirectly by the proposed initiative considering that a legitimate government is a necessary prerequisite to making meaningful progress on these fronts. Other indicators that could also benefit from this initiative include *International Linkages* (moderate risk) and *Economic Performance* (moderate risk).

² The article sheds light on the important role Somali clan leaders can play in mediation, which affirms the importance of including them as key participants in this project.

Event Analysis

Given that Somalia is a Muslim-majority country that observes the holy month of Ramadan (April 13 - May 12, 2021), reconciliation between disputant government officials and clan leaders might be more achievable during this month, providing an ideal time to begin the initiative, promote unity among disputants, and push for elections. Moreover, the need to respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as well as the seasonal droughts and floods necessitate swift elections to bring forth a coordinated government with authority, capacity, and legitimacy.

PRE-PROJECT RISK ASSESSMENT

The most significant risk toward securing an agreement between parties is a reescalation of civil strife and violence. The lack of an agreed-upon election date and structure between the federal government and clan leaders has damaged the federal government's legitimacy, which may incentivize some stakeholders such as Al-Shabaab to resort to increased violence in their aims to advance their political agendas. As this worst case scenario is intrinsically linked to Somalia's political instability and its history of armed conflict, this initiative is key to avoiding these risks by fortifying the electoral process. This program will require federal and regional stakeholders to come to an agreement on the structure of the elections, to be held as soon as logistically possible and ideally prior to 2022. The agreement should include a commitment to ending any remaining violence between belligerents under the stakeholders' jurisdictions.

Project Entry Requirements and Considerations

The project entry requirements needed to initiate this project include the need for the federal government and the main clan leaders to agree to come together again to negotiate with renewed effort. This can take place after CANADEM has met and discussed with each of the stakeholders independently, but a joint meeting will be necessary at one point to formalize any agreed-upon arrangements. The initiative itself will need to secure respect and legitimacy from leaders, and the CANADEM project implementers must not be perceived by stakeholders as biased or explicitly politically influenced to ensure that all aspects of the project design are fair.

Given that the federal government's legitimacy has been undermined with the stalled 2021 elections, it is unable to effectively respond to the ongoing crises in the region. If its legitimacy is not restored via renewed elections soon, the international community may begin withholding their international assistance from Somalia, which could further plunge the country into instability and violence. Electoral reform is therefore integral to restoring the government's legitimacy, authority, and capacity, all while discouraging conflict reescalation.

Anticipated Project Goals

The primary aims of this project include:

1. To help establish an agreed-upon electoral framework that lasts beyond the upcoming elections, potentially becoming the standard upon which future elections are held;
2. To enhance electoral monitoring and transparency to fortify the elections' legitimacy;
3. To cultivate widespread public buy-in and participation in the political arena, and;

4. To assist Somalia in its gradual transition to a stable and representative democracy that reflects their values and ideals.

This initiative, by pushing for renewed elections and restoring legitimacy to FGS, will allow the new government to refocus its limited resources on addressing ongoing crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, seasonal droughts and floods, and the possible rise of Al-Shabaab.

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Project Operation Risks

Based on the most recent publicly-available data, COVID-19 is rapidly spreading in Somalia. While on February 10, 2021 there were 4,862 recorded cases, on April 3rd that number rose to 11,623 cases, with over 500 people recorded having died from COVID-19 since March 2020.^x We predict that these official WHO numbers are likely much lower than reality. Accordingly, project implementation must ensure the continued safety of staff and must be in accordance with WHO health and safety guidelines.

The project will need to procure PPE equipment and hygiene products in advance of project implementation to serve all staff and stakeholders involved. Designated quarantine sites should be arranged in the event that a staff member contracts the virus and is unable to quarantine in their regular quarters. According to the US Embassy in Somalia, it is anticipated that COVID-19 testing for staff will cost ~\$30 USD/test, which will need to be covered by the program.^{xi} Testing is available at private hospitals, mostly located in Mogadishu.^{xii} Given the localized nature of the program, in the event that staff begin to develop symptoms and are situated in areas where testing is not readily available, staff are to still quarantine for 14-days as a precautionary measure.

OPERATIONAL DECISIONS AND IMPACT MONITORING

Operational Limitations

One significant limitation is if government officials or clan leaders refuse to engage with the initiative, particularly if they perceive that electoral reform would undermine their authority. In this case, it will be important to address any implicit concerns and fears that they may have prior to moving forward in the initiative. These conversations should occur under circumstances that encourage stakeholders to reveal their BATNA and propose concessions. It can include leveraging the holy month of Ramadan and inviting respected third-party community leaders such as former president Sharif Sheikh Ahmed (known as The Father of Modern Somalia) or former parliamentary speaker Mohamed Osman Jawari to support CANADEM in its efforts.^{xiii}

Another possible challenge to the program would be an outbreak of violence led by spoilers like Al-Shabaab before, during, or after the initiative takes place. As a preemptive measure, it is important to collaborate with AMISOM to prepare a protocol for this scenario while also actively attempting to minimize the risk of violence that would affect the staff, community, and project.

Project Monitoring and Oversight

CANADEM will be responsible for monitoring and assessing the project's impact (before, during, and after the initiative) using representative sample surveys based on a combination of pre-existing indicators from GAC and Freedom House. These surveys will help project implementers and GAC better understand the effectiveness of the project as well as public perceptions surrounding the initiative's impact (or lack

thereof) on the electoral reform process. This will enable for continuous improvement in the project's implementation and in future iterations of similar projects. While CANADEM is expected to carry out these surveys and report them to GAC, GAC should routinely validate survey results with independent field studies.

POST-PROJECT IMPACT

The immediate impact of the *V.O.T.E. Somalia* initiative will include the substantial participation of Somalis in their resumed elections, leading to the successful election of a president. The project will strengthen and lay the foundation for future elections by engaging Somali leaders in finalizing an agreed-upon federally-administered election process. As outlined in Article 91 of Somalia's Constitution, presidential elections are to be held every four years.^{xiv} This project aims to facilitate an election ideally by the end of this year, and if required and given the consent of the local Somali leaders, another iteration of this initiative can be established for further election monitoring, electoral capacity-building, and institution-building in the coming 2025 elections.

The project seeks to increase social buy-in and reduce distrust in the election process. Given existing tensions and distrust among the incumbent government and certain clan leaders, the project implementers will serve as external and impartial mediators to help break the gridlock and resume the elections. Project implementers will measure the project's impact in facilitating the election by:

1. Successfully building trusting and sustainable relationships with the Somali communities and their leaders, and enabling the project to continue as planned without concern of violence, and;
2. On election day, monitor the elections as an impartial and independent body, while simultaneously being transparent about the election-monitoring process.

The expected project outcomes include an agreed-upon reform and implementation of the electoral process by Somali authorities and the clan leaders, as well as restored legitimacy of the electoral process from both the population and the international community. If achieved, these outcomes are expected to significantly improve Somalia's Freedom House Political and Civil Liberties scores.^{xv}

Potential Follow-up Activities

Following the resumption of the 2021 elections, continuous monitoring of Somalia's electoral process by supporting organizations like CANADEM can ensure electoral robustness until Somali leaders determine that the country has the capacity to independently establish routine elections without outside support. In the same vein, the pre-electoral preparation procedure should be formalized, ideally by establishing an impartial federal electoral commission (responsible for establishing, monitoring, and validating election outcomes) to ensure that elections are no longer contingent on the planning and willingness of the president of the day. To do so, it will be important to demonstrate to the incumbent government how depoliticizing the electoral process can insulate a president from many of the criticisms that the incumbent president faces, and to emphasize that taking such steps would garner support from virtually all stakeholders involved. This would ensure that extremist groups do not gain the support of a population otherwise disenfranchised in the electoral system.

NOTES

ⁱ Hamza Mohamed, “What Is Delaying Somalia’s Elections?,” *AlJazeera*, February 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/10/what-is-delaying-somalias-election>.

ⁱⁱ Mohamed.

ⁱⁱⁱ Government of Canada, “Minister of Foreign Affairs Mandate Letter” (Government of Canada, December 13, 2019), <https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2019/12/13/minister-foreign-affairs-mandate-letter>; Government of Canada, “Minister of Foreign Affairs Supplementary Mandate Letter” (Government of Canada, January 15, 2021), <https://pm.gc.ca/en/mandate-letters/2021/01/15/minister-foreign-affairs-supplementary-mandate-letter>.

^{iv} High Commission of Canada in Kenya, “Canada - Somalia Relations” (High Commission of Canada in Kenya, March 26, 2020), https://www.canadainternational.gc.ca/kenya/bilateral_relations_bilaterales/canada_somalia-somalie.aspx?lang=eng.

^v Government of Canada, “Project Profile — International Election Observation” (Government of Canada, December 31, 2013), <https://w05.international.gc.ca/projectbrowser-banqueprojets/project-projet/details/a034062001>.

^{vi} Hudda Ibrahim, “The Role of the Traditional Somali Model in Peacemaking,” *The Journal of Social Encounters* 2, no. 1 (2018): 60–68.

^{vii} Abdulkadir Khalif, “Puntland, Jubbaland Finally Join Somalia Electoral Process,” *The EastAfrican*, January 28, 2021, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/east-africa/puntland-jubbaland-finally-join-somalia-electoral-process-3272012>.

^{viii} Samira Levesque et al., “Somalia: Conflict Diagnostic,” Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) (Ottawa: The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, February 2021), <https://carleton.ca/cifp/wp-content/uploads/2021-Somalia-Conflict-Diagnostic.pdf>.

^{ix} Levesque et al.

^x WHO, “COVID-19 in Somalia” (World Health Organization, April 7, 2021), <https://covid19.who.int/region/emro/country/so>.

^{xi} U.S. Embassy in Somalia, “COVID-19 Information” (U.S. Embassy in Somalia, January 29, 2021), <https://so.usembassy.gov/covid-19-information/>.

^{xii} U.S. Embassy in Somalia; Reuters, “Doctor’s Self-Funded Test Lab Leads Way in Somalia’s COVID Fight,” *CNN*, November 6, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/11/06/africa/somalia-test-lab-covid-intl/index.html>.

^{xiii} Daniel Psirmoi, “Ex-Somalia President Sheikh Sharif Sets Eye on Presidency,” *The Standard*, January 23, 2019, <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/africa/article/2001310489/ex-somalia-president-sets-eye-on-presidency>.

^{xiv} Federal Republic of Somalia, “Somalia’s Constitution of 2012” (Constitute Project, 2012), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Somalia_2012.pdf?lang=en&fbclid=IwAR19eRh2wIL_KMzDF4KA4pCuUOKcJ1aV6qnLIHSNio0S2foVVTbEB8dxibY.

^{xv} Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2021: Somalia” (Freedom House, 2021), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/somalia/freedom-world/2021>.