

From Counting Casualties to Counting Votes: Evidence from Mogadishu's First Election in Six Decades.

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Abstract

For more than three decades, political authority in Mogadishu was shaped by violence, elite bargaining, and indirect governance, limiting citizens' direct participation. In 25 December 2025, the city held its first direct local council elections in six decades, marking a critical shift in how political authority is exercised in a fragile context.

Objective: This study examines how citizens experienced and interpreted this electoral moment and whether elections can generate legitimacy despite political contestation.

Method: Using a mixed-methods approach, the study combines district-level electoral data from 16 districts with quantitative analysis examines participation, ballot validity, party competition, and representation, while semi-structured interviews conducted among voters, captures perceptions of security, trust, and the meaning of voting.

Finding: The findings show that, despite political disputes, elections were widely experienced as a transition from imposed authority to civic choice. Voters emphasized the significance of selecting representatives directly rather than through clan leaders or coercive actors. While participation and invalid ballot rates varied across districts, security conditions were broadly sufficient to enable open voting.

The study contributes to debates on elections in fragile states by showing that elections can function as transitional institutions that normalize non-violent political competition and reframe political authority around citizen choice.

Keywords: fragile states; elections; political legitimacy; voter participation; Mogadishu; Somalia

Introduction

For more than three decades, political authority in Mogadishu was shaped largely by armed actors and informal power networks, with limited space for popular participation. The recent local election therefore marked a significant departure from a system in which leadership selection was defined primarily by force rather than ballots.

Conventional assumptions long held that elections should be postponed until full peace and stability are achieved. Recent academic research challenges this view, showing that delays in fragile contexts often entrench unelected authority, deepen political exclusion, and weaken public trust. Elections are increasingly understood not as rewards for peace but as political rights that persist even under insecurity.

Mogadishu's election took place in the absence of consensus between the central government and segments of the political opposition. Several opposition groups rejected the process, questioned its timing, or refused to participate. For citizens, the decision to vote involved uncertainty shaped by security concerns, political disagreement, and competing claims of legitimacy. This combination makes Mogadishu a critical case for examining political participation in divided and fragile settings.

Comparative evidence from other conflict-affected contexts reinforces the relevance of this case. Elections in Iraq continued despite insecurity because voting remained the only accepted non-violent mechanism for leadership selection, whereas the collapse or repeated postponement of elections in Afghanistan and Libya intensified political exclusion and strengthened non-electoral power holders. These experiences suggest that

imperfect elections may be less destabilizing than prolonged political closure.

This study examines Mogadishu's first local election in six decades by focusing on citizens' participation choices rather than institutional outcomes. It explores why some individuals voted while others abstained, and how political rejection, disagreement among elites, and perceptions of legitimacy shaped these decisions. Rather than classifying the election as a success or failure, the analysis treats it as a contested episode within a longer political transition.

Drawing on primary and secondary data from Mogadishu, the article shows how electoral processes can begin to shift political authority from violence-based selection toward popular choice. The findings contribute to broader debates by illustrating how elections, even when disputed and incomplete, may provide a non-violent pathway through which societies navigate prolonged instability.

Violence & Casualty Patterns in Mogadishu

For many years Mogadishu experienced repeated suicide bombings and mass-casualty attacks that shaped political life and public perception of governance. Violence was concentrated in public institutions, hotels, checkpoints, and commercial areas, frequently targeting civilians, students, and state officials. Casualty figures from major incidents ranged from several dozen to several hundred fatalities, with large-scale explosions becoming a recurrent feature of the city's security landscape. Over time, these attacks normalized the use of casualty counts as the primary indicator of political change and stability, reinforcing a governance environment in which authority was assessed through security outcomes rather than citizen participation. This prolonged period of violence provides the empirical baseline against which the shift toward electoral participation and vote counting must be understood.

Table1: indicates major suicide bombings and mass casualty attacks in Mogadishu. Note, the table is illustrative, not exhaustive. casualty figures are

approximate and based on widely reported estimates from media, and health centers.

Table1: Casualty attacks in Mogadishu

Year	Incident / Location	Primary Target	Estimated
2009	Shamo Hotel bombing	Graduation ceremony (Banadir Univ)	25
2011	Ministry of Education bombing	Students registering for scholarships	70
2015	Jazeera Palace Hotel bombing	Diplomats and government officials	15-20
2017	Zoobe Junction truck bombing	Civilians in a commercial area	500+
2019	Ex-Control Afgoye bombing	Civilians, students, workers	90
2020	Elite Hotel (Lido Beach) siege	Hotel guests and staff	16-20
2022	Ministry of Education bombing	Civilians seeking public services	120
2022	Multiple coordinated attacks	Government buildings and public areas	Dozens

Mogadishu Election

December 2025, elections took place in 16 of the 20 districts of Mogadishu within the Banadir Region, while newly established districts were excluded from the process. Voter registration began in April 2025 under the supervision of the National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEBC). It was the first large-scale voter registration exercise in

Mogadishu in decades and served as a test of both administrative capacity and public trust.

By the conclusion of the registration process, voter enrollment reached the hundreds of thousands, with some reports estimating figures close to one million, indicating strong public engagement despite logistical constraints.

Political competition was relatively high, with more than 1,600 candidates contesting approximately 390 local council seats. Candidates were nominated through political associations and parties, reflecting Somalia's gradual transition toward a party-based political system. A notable feature of the candidate pool was its youthful composition, as a majority of candidates were reported to be under the age of 35.

Candidate registration took place between late November and early December 2025, and voting was held on 25 December 2025. The election was conducted under heightened security arrangements, including movement restrictions and coordinated security deployments. Despite Mogadishu's fragile security context, voting proceeded with limited reported disruptions, demonstrating the practical feasibility of holding elections in conflict-affected urban environments.

Literature Review

Recent literature diverges on whether elections under insecurity mitigate or exacerbate fragility. Norris (2017) finds that postponing elections entrenches unelected authority and weakens public trust, while Bush and Prather (2020) show that delays primarily benefit incumbent elites by reducing electoral accountability; Paris (2004), however, argues that premature elections risk institutional overload and renewed instability. Together, these findings illustrate the tension between normative democratic claims and early post-conflict stabilization concerns.

The literature also varies in how elections are conceptualized within conflict trajectories. Clayton (2021) finds that elections preserve citizen political agency even under violence, whereas Fjelde and Höglund (2021) emphasize their role in redirecting

competition from armed confrontation to institutional channels; Schedler (2019), by contrast, cautions that elections do not resolve conflict but merely regulate how power struggles are expressed. These perspectives converge on elections as mechanisms of conflict management rather than resolution.

Empirical research further disagrees on the causal strength of elections in reducing violence. Bjørnskov and Rode (2023) report that electoral contestation is associated with declining incentives for violent leadership struggles, while Daxecker and Jung (2018) find that elections primarily enhance legitimacy without consistently reducing conflict intensity; Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis (2021) argue that even where violence persists, elections constrain its political justification. This suggests that electoral impact operates more through legitimacy than immediate security outcomes.

Country-specific studies reinforce these contrasts. In Somalia, Mohamed et al. (2023) find that political exclusion channels marginalized youth toward violent forms of participation, whereas Norris (2017) interprets exclusion more broadly as a systemic legitimacy deficit; Schedler (2019) situates both within a wider pattern in which the absence of electoral competition increases reliance on coercion as a mode of leadership selection.

Comparative case studies also reveal divergent outcomes of electoral continuity versus collapse. In Iraq, Mansour (2021) finds that elections persisted despite insecurity because citizens viewed voting as the only legitimate means of contesting power, while Haddad (2023) notes that electoral participation functioned more as a symbolic assertion than an expression of trust; Suhrke (2022), analyzing Afghanistan, argues that the elimination of elections removed the final non-violent channel of leadership selection altogether.

Evidence from Libya further complicates the debate. Lacher (2020) finds that repeated election postponements strengthened armed actors, while Wehrey (2023) shows that delays eroded civilian legitimacy without reducing fragmentation; Fjelde and Höglund (2021) interpret such cases as

evidence that withholding elections may prolong conflict rather than prevent it.

Scholars also disagree on how to interpret resistance to elections. Schedler (2016) documents elite framing of insecurity as justification for delay, while de Zeeuw (2020) highlights institutional weakness as the dominant discourse; Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) argue that such narratives frequently conceal incentives to avoid accountability. These findings suggest that opposition to elections often reflects power preservation rather than security concerns.

The “prematurity argument” remains contested. Paris (2004) maintains that elections amid conflict risk destabilization, whereas Daxecker and Jung (2018) find that indefinite postponement deepens legitimacy deficits; Clayton and Sticher (2022) add that non-electoral alternatives fail to generate durable consent. Together, these studies challenge the assumption that delay produces stability.

Across this literature, a shared conclusion emerges despite differing emphases. Fjelde and Höglund (2021) argue that elections delegitimize violence as a political tool, while Clayton (2021) emphasizes their role in institutionalizing power struggles; Norris (2017) situates both within a broader normative shift that rejects peace as a prerequisite for political participation.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods design to examine the shift from violence-based political measurement to civic participation in Mogadishu’s first direct local elections in six decades. The focus is on how political legitimacy is measured and understood, rather than on electoral competition or vote choice.

Quantitative Data

Secondary data from the local electoral process will be used to document voter registration levels, district-level participation, and institutional coverage. These data demonstrate the emergence of vote counting as a political metric. The analysis excludes party performance, candidate outcomes,

and vote shares, as these are outside the scope of the study. Where figures vary across sources, conservative ranges are reported to account for data limitations common in fragile settings.

Qualitative: Semi-Structured Interviews

Primary qualitative data are collected through semi-structured interviews with voters and non-voters. A purposive sampling strategy is used to ensure variation across gender, age, and district experience. Interviews focus on perceptions of safety, trust in electoral institutions, motivations for participation, and comparisons between periods of violence and the experience of voting.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews are conducted in respondents’ preferred language and recorded with consent. Participation is voluntary, and no personal identifiers are collected. Given the sensitive context, respondents may decline to answer any question, and care is taken to avoid traumatization.

Findings

In the Banadir local council elections, districts are classified into two categories A and B: Category A districts, each allocated 27 council seats, generally exhibit higher participation levels than Category B districts and Category B districts, allocated 21 seats. Districts with more than 50,000 registered voters are categorized as A, whereas districts with fewer than 50,000 registered voters are categorized as B.

Candidate participation in Category A districts ranges from 87 (Hiliwaa) to 132 (Yaaqshiid), with several districts such as Hodan (127), Dharkiinley (119), and Wadajir (113) displaying particularly high engagement. In contrast, Category B districts record candidate participation levels between 74 (Shibis) and 100 (Waaberi).

On average, Category A districts demonstrate noticeably higher participation than Category B districts, suggesting that larger representation associated with stronger voter engagement. Despite the overall category-level pattern, candidate participation varies substantially within each group.

Among Category A districts, Yaaqshiid (132) and Hodan (127) stand out as high-participation cases, while Hiliwaa (87) records one of the lowest participation figures.

Similarly, within Category B districts, Waaberi (100) and Xamarjajab (95) demonstrate relatively high candidate participation, contrasting with Shibis (74) and Shangaani (79). These variations indicate that district category alone does not fully determine participation outcomes.

Many Category B districts such as Shangaani, Xamarweyne, and Shibis are historic central districts of Mogadishu, while many Category A districts such as Yaaqshiid, Dayniile, and Dharkiinley are larger, more peripheral residential districts.

The lower participation observed in several Category B districts may therefore reflect not only seat allocation but also factors such as population density, voter mobility, administrative congestion, and historical patterns of political engagement.

Candidate Submission Levels

Political associations were grouped according to the number of candidates submitted, relative to the required threshold of 390 candidates per association. The groupings are based solely on submission counts.

Full Submission Group

Table 2. Associations Submitting the Full Candidate List

Political Association	Required	Submitted	Missing
Caddaaladda iyo Wadajirka	390	390	0

High Submission Group

Associations in this group submitted more than half of the required candidates but did not reach full coverage. Table 3. Associations Submitting 200–299 Candidates.

Table 3. 200–299 Candidates.

Political Association	Required	Submitted	Missing
Karaama	390	231	159
Towfiiq	390	222	168
Ramaas	390	215	175

Medium Submission

This group submitted between one-quarter and one-half of the required candidates. Table 4. Associations Submitting 100–199 Candidates

Table 4: 100–199 Candidates

Political Association	Required	Submitted	Missing
Sincad	390	138	252
Madalsan	390	105	285

Low Submission

Associations in this group submitted a limited share of the required list, Table 5. Associations Submitting 10–99 Candidates

Table 5. 10–99 Candidates

Political Association	Required	Submitted	Missing
Horumar Iyo Midnimo Qaran	390	87	303
Saab	390	55	335
Muwaadaniinta Soomaaliyeed	390	24	366
Horyal Qaran	390	20	370
Cadaaladda Iyo Midnimada Tiir	390	10	380

Minimal Submission

This group recorded the largest numerical shortfalls relative to the nomination requirement. Table 6. Associations Submitting Fewer Than 10 Candidates.

Table 6. Fewer Than 10 Candidates

Political Association	Required	Submitted	Missing
Midnimada Shacabka	390	8	382
Dadka Soomaaliyeed	390	8	382
Damiirka Soomaalinimada Iyo Horumarka Socod	390	7	383
Dimuqraadiga Soomaaliyeed	390	5	385
Dowlad Wanaagga Soomaaliyeed	390	3	387
Qiimo Qaran	390	2	388
Qaranka ee Dimuqraadiga ah	390	1	389
Soomaalinimo	390	1	389
Qaransoor	390	1	389

Gender Distribution (All Groups)

Female candidates were present in all submission groups but remained numerically lower than male candidates in each case. Across all associations:

Polling Hours

The National Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (NEIBC) set uniform polling hours for the Banadir local council elections, with polling stations operating from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. This twelve-hour voting window aligns with international best practices in electoral administration, aiming to maximize voter access by accommodating diverse daily routines, work schedules, and mobility constraints.

However, the poster's explicit instruction that voters must arrive before the closing time to cast their ballots highlights a critical integrity trade-off. While fixed closing rules are essential for orderly counting and security, they can disproportionately affect voters in districts characterized by long queues, high population density, or limited polling infrastructure. In such contexts, strict enforcement of closing times may interact with administrative

bottlenecks to produce exclusionary effects, particularly for elderly voters, persons with disabilities, and women with care responsibilities.

Gender Composition

Candidate participation is male-dominated. Men account for 1,243 candidates (77%), while women constitute 361 candidates (23%). This distribution highlights a substantial gender gap in electoral entry, suggesting that formal pluralism (multiple parties/organizations) does not automatically translate into gender-balanced representation among contestants.

Candidate Age structure

The candidate pool is relatively young. Candidates aged 20–35 years represent the clear majority at 69%, followed by the 35–50 age group at 23%, while 50–65 represents only 8%. This pattern suggests that local electoral competition in Banadir is driven primarily by younger adults, with older cohorts comparatively underrepresented among candidates.

Candidate Eligibility

Candidate eligibility in the Banadir local council elections was governed by a standardized administrative framework requiring proof of identity and voter registration, financial compliance, security clearance, and formal endorsement. Requirements such as an ID document, voter card copy, photograph, CID clearance, and adherence to a code of conduct were designed to safeguard electoral integrity and procedural order.

At the same time, financial obligations including a USD 100 acceptance fee and mandatory endorsement mechanisms introduced access barriers that may have disproportionately affected women, youth, and economically marginalized candidates. These conditions likely reinforced existing power asymmetries and favored established political networks over independent or first-time aspirants.

Overall, the eligibility framework reflects a trade-off between institutional control and political

inclusion, helping to explain observed patterns of limited descriptive representation and party dominance in the election outcomes.

Voter Card Distribution and Collection

District-level registration data reveal pronounced variation in both absolute volumes and collection efficiency across Banadir. High-population and peripheral districts dominate in voter card issuance, including.

Table 7. Voter Card Printing & Collection

#	District	C. Print	C. Coll	%
1	Cabdicasiis	9,855	6,835	69.4
2	Kaaraan	109,204	70,305	64.4
3	Yaaqshiid	114,197	72,707	63.7
4	Wadajir	67,564	40,960	60.6
5	Dharkeynley	89,978	53,742	59.7
6	Xamarweyne	10,907	6,330	58.0
7	Hiliwaa	62,121	36,036	58.0
8	Boondheere	17,291	9,674	56.0
9	Hodan	127,103	68,031	53.5
10	Howl-Wadaag	61,961	33,024	53.3
11	Xamar-Jajab	17,676	9,002	50.9
12	Shangaani	8,546	4,254	49.8
13	Wartanabadda	64,438	29,308	45.5
14	Shibis	21,947	9,769	44.5
15	Waaberi	25,072	10,205	40.7
16	Dayniile	111,030	43,734	39.4

Overall, collection ratios range widely from 39% to nearly 70% highlighting uneven voter readiness shaped by district-specific demographic, administrative, and mobility conditions.

Polling Centers and Polling Stations

The spatial distribution of polling infrastructure in Banadir reflects marked variation across districts, corresponding closely to population size and electoral demand. In total, the election was administered through 213 polling centers and 523 polling stations across 16 districts, indicating a multi-tiered administrative structure designed to accommodate high urban voter density.

Large and peripheral districts account for a disproportionate share of polling infrastructure.

Yaaqshiid (36 centers; 65 stations), Kaaraan (31; 63), Dayniile (26; 70), Hodan (22; 55), and Dharkeynley (21; 69) collectively host the majority of polling stations. These districts are characterized by expansive residential areas and higher voter registration volumes, necessitating greater logistical capacity to manage turnout and reduce congestion.

By contrast, historic inner-city districts operate with substantially fewer facilities. Shangaani (3 centers; 4 stations), Xamarweyne (4; 10), Xamar-Jajab (4; 8), and Boondheere (5; 14) exhibit limited polling infrastructure, consistent with their smaller geographic size and lower registered voter counts. However, these districts are often densely populated and administratively congested, suggesting that absolute facility numbers may understate operational pressure on election day.

Mid-range districts such as Wadajir (15; 36), Hiliwaa (8; 24), Howl-Wadaag (8; 39), Warta-Nabadda (10; 22), Waaberi (6; 14), Cabdicasiis (6; 17), and Shibis (8; 13) occupy an intermediate position, balancing moderate voter volumes with proportional polling coverage.

Overall, while NEIBC's allocation broadly reflects population distribution, the findings suggest that future elections would benefit from district-specific optimization of polling station density, particularly in high-demand districts and administratively constrained historic centers, to strengthen participation quality and representational legitimacy.

Voters with Disabilities

Out of 923,220 total registered voters (100%), a total of 22,483 voters are recorded as having disabilities/special needs (2.435%). This share is not marginal: in administrative terms, it represents a sizable subgroup whose effective enfranchisement depends heavily on accessible registration, clear voter information, and disability-sensitive polling operations.

Composition by disability type

The disability-registered electorate is highly concentrated in mobility-related impairments, while sensory impairments represent a small fraction of the recorded group: table 8. Indicates segment of each group voted

Table 8: Disability voters

Disability category	Count	% of dis. voters	% of all voters
Arm/upper-limb impairment	13,532	60.2%	1.466%
Leg/lower-limb impairment	8,250	36.7%	0.894%
Hearing impairment	564	2.5%	0.061%
Visual impairment	137	0.6%	0.015%
Total Dis. Voters	22,483	100%	2.435%

Mobility access is the dominant inclusion challenge. With roughly 97% of disability-registered voters falling under upper- or lower-limb impairment, the binding constraint is likely physical accessibility: distance to polling locations, queue management, entry ramps, seating, and the layout of voting rooms. In practice, these factors can shape turnout and the probability of procedural error (including invalid ballots) among affected voters.

Sensory impairments are small in the administrative record but high-risk for ballot errors if unsupported. Even though visual (0.6%) and hearing (2.5%) impairments appear limited, these groups can face disproportionate barriers if polling instructions are not accessible (e.g., lack of clear guidance, no adapted communication). In fragile or high-congestion polling environments, such barriers can translate into higher ballot invalidation or reliance on informal assistance, raising both integrity and privacy concerns.

Vote Distribution

Elections reveal substantial variation in voter participation, party dominance, and electoral competitiveness across Mogadishu's districts. Valid votes range from 3,765 in Shangani to 36,583 in Kaaraan, indicating strong spatial inequality in electoral weight. Peripheral and high-population districts such as Kaaraan, Hodan, Yaaqshid, Wadajir, and Dharkeynley account for a disproportionate share of total valid votes, while historic inner-city districts contribute comparatively fewer votes.

Integrity and Ballot Validity

Invalid ballots are a critical but often underexamined dimension of electoral integrity. High invalid vote rates may signal voter confusion, administrative weaknesses, inadequate voter education, or ballot design problems rather than voter apathy. In fragile political environments, such patterns can undermine electoral legitimacy and distort political representation.

Overall, Vote Validity

Across the sixteen districts, total votes range from 4,367 in Abdiiaziz to 40,233 in Kaaraan, reflecting major disparities in district size and electoral weight. While valid votes constitute the majority of ballots in all districts, invalid vote rates vary dramatically from as low as 2.08% to 33%. This wide range suggests that invalid voting is not a marginal phenomenon but a structurally significant feature of the electoral process in certain districts.

Districts with Low Invalid Vote Rates

Several districts demonstrate relatively strong electoral performance in terms of ballot validity: Dharkeynley (2.08%), Wartanabadda (2.70%), Howlwadag (2.74%), Waberi (3.54%), Heliwaa (3.70%). These districts combine moderate to high voter turnout with consistently low invalid ballot shares. This pattern suggests effective polling administration, clearer voter understanding of ballot procedures, or stronger civic engagement mechanisms.

Districts with Moderate Invalid Vote

A second group of districts exhibits moderate invalid vote rates, typically between 5% and 11%:

Table 9. Districts with Moderate Invalid Vote Rates (5–11%)

District	Invalid Vote Rate (%)
Cabdicasiis	5.18
Boondheere	6.13
Hodan	9.08
Kaaraan	9.07
Wadajir	10.07
Dayniile	10.46
Yaaqshid	10.47

While these rates do not indicate systemic failure, they remain sufficiently high to influence electoral outcomes in competitive races. Notably, several of these districts are among the most populous in Banadir, meaning that even moderate invalid rates translate into large absolute numbers of discarded votes.

Districts with High Invalid Vote Rates

Three districts stand out for exceptionally high invalid vote rates: Shangaani (33.21%), Xamarweyne (29.92%), Xamar-Jajab (24.66%), Shibis (21.43%). In these districts, more than one-fifth and in two cases one-third of all ballots cast were invalid. Such levels raise serious concerns about electoral quality and voter enfranchisement. These districts are historically dense urban areas, often characterized by older populations, congested polling environments, and complex social structures.

Implications for Representation

High invalid vote rates effectively disenfranchise large segments of the electorate. In districts such as Shangani, Xamarweyne and Xamar-Jajab, (1,872, 1,885, 2,006) respectively, the number of invalid votes exceeds the winning margin observed in many competitive races, suggesting that electoral outcomes could plausibly differ under improved voting conditions. This raises normative concerns regarding political equality and the representative legitimacy of elected local councils.

Margins of Victory

Margins of victory provide a direct measure of electoral competitiveness. The data reveal a sharp contrast between districts characterized by landslide victories and those marked by highly competitive races.

Districts such as Yaaqshid (47.95%), Kaaraan (45.24%), Boondheere (42.61%), and Shibis (41.52%) exhibit wide margins, indicating entrenched party dominance and low short-term volatility. In contrast, Xamar-Jajab (2.90%), Xamarweyne (9.58%), Dayniile (11.68%), and Hodan (12.20%) display narrow margins, reflecting highly competitive electoral environments.

These competitive districts are likely to be more politically contested in future elections and may be more vulnerable to disputes in the absence of robust electoral administration.

Vote Concentration and Top-Two Party

The Top-Two Share percentage further illustrates differences in party-system structure across districts. Table 10. Districts with High Top-Two Vote Concentration

Table 10. Top-Two Vote Concentration

District	Top-Two Share (%)
Heliwaa	75.67
Howlwadag	71.97
Boondheere	71.27
Yaaqshid	70.09

votes are heavily concentrated among the two leading parties, indicating quasi-two-party competition or dominant-party systems.

Conversely, districts such as Xamarweyne (40.29%), Dharkeynley (56.17%), and Xamar-Jajab (56.99%) exhibit lower concentration, reflecting broader dispersion of votes across multiple parties. This variation suggests that electoral competition in Banadir oscillates between consolidated and fragmented patterns depending on district-specific social and political conditions.

Party-System Fragmentation

The Effective Number of Parties (ENP) provides a standardized measure of party-system fragmentation. ENP values range from 2.68 in Yaaqshid to 8.26 in Xamarweyne, revealing stark contrasts in party competition. Low ENP districts including Yaaqshid (2.68), Heliwaa (2.70), Kaaraan (2.92), and Howlwadag (2.96) are characterized by stable dominance and limited pluralism. By contrast, high ENP districts such as Xamarweyne (8.26), Xamar-Jajab (5.60), Dayniile (4.64), and Dharkeynley (4.37) reflect highly fragmented party systems.

Importantly, high ENP values coincide with narrower victory margins and lower top-two concentration, reinforcing the relationship between fragmentation and electoral competitiveness.

Gender Composition of Elected Councils

The final composition of the Banadir local councils reveals a clear gender imbalance despite the formal inclusiveness of the electoral process. Across 16 districts and 20 political organizations, a total of 390 council seats were allocated. Of these, 291 seats (74%) were won by men, while 99 seats (26%) were secured by women. This outcome indicates that women's representation, while non-negligible, remains substantially below parity in Somalia's first direct local elections in decades.

District-level variation

Gender representation varies across districts but follows a consistent overall pattern of male dominance. In Category A districts, male representation typically ranges between 74% and 81%, with districts such as Dharkeynley, Wadajir, Yaaqshiid, and Hodan each recording 81% male and 19% female representation. Hiliwaa and Dayniile show slightly higher female presence (30% and 26%, respectively), though men still hold a clear majority.

In Category B districts, female representation is somewhat more uneven. Boondheere and Howlwadaag record comparatively higher female shares (33%), while Waaberi shows the lowest female representation at 19%. Historic inner-city

districts such as Shibis and Cabdicasiis display particularly low female participation, with women holding only 38% and 39% of seats respectively, reinforcing patterns of gender exclusion in older, densely populated urban areas.

Party Dominance

Across the sixteen districts analyzed, CADDAAALADDA IYO WADAJIRKA emerges as the dominant political force, winning 14 out of 16 districts. Its vote share varies considerably, ranging from 24.94% in Xamarweyne to 59.02% in Yaaqshid, suggesting that dominance is not uniform but context-dependent.

The second-largest party, DIB U HESHIINTA IYO HORMARINTA TOWFIIQ, receives 28,414 votes (13.74%), less than one-third of the leading party's vote share. Together, the top two parties account for 60.17% of all valid votes, indicating a strong concentration of electoral power.

Two notable exceptions challenge this district dominance. In Xamar-Jajab, the party RAMAAS secured first place with 29.95%, narrowly defeating (27%) CADDAAALADDA IYO WADAJIRKA. Similarly, Cabdicasiis was won by SINCAD with 51.24%, representing the second district where CADDAAALADDA IYO WADAJIRKA finished second with (17%).

Secondary Tier of Competition

Below the two leading parties, a second tier of competitors emerges, consisting primarily of RAMAAS (9.70%) and KARAAMA (9.49%). These parties attract substantial support but remain clearly subordinate to the leading party. Combined, the top four parties capture 79.36% of valid votes, suggesting that meaningful electoral competition is limited to a small subset of parties, despite the formal presence of many alternatives.

Fragmentation and the Long Tail

The remaining sixteen parties each receive less than five percent of the vote, with many capturing under one percent individually. Parties such as SINCAD (4.34%), SAAB (3.19%), and MADALSAN (2.49%) occupy a marginal yet visible space, while others

such as SOCOD (0.33%), QARANKA EE DIMUQRAADIGA AH (0.38%), and MIDNIMADA SHACABKA (0.41%) demonstrate minimal electoral traction.

Collectively, parties outside the top four account for approximately 20.6% of valid votes, illustrating a classic “long-tail” distribution typical of fragmented but weakly institutionalized party systems.

Overall, Vote Distribution

The election results demonstrate a highly uneven distribution of votes across parties. CADDAAALADDA IYO WADAJIRKA dominates the party system with 96,019 votes, accounting for 46.43% of all valid ballots. This level of support places the party well ahead of all competitors and establishes it as the central actor in Banadir’s electoral politics.

Aggregate Electoral Outcomes

The aggregate results from the Banadir local council elections cover 16 districts and 20 political organizations, providing a comprehensive overview of electoral participation and ballot validity at the regional level. A total of 233,314 ballots were cast, reflecting substantial voter engagement in Somalia’s first direct local elections in decades.

Of the total ballots cast, 210,586 were valid votes, while 22,728 were invalid, yielding an invalid ballot rate of approximately 9.7%. This proportion is non-trivial by international standards and indicates meaningful procedural or informational challenges during the voting process. Additionally, 390 ballots were formally contested or unresolved, representing a very small share of total ballots and suggesting that post-voting dispute mechanisms were relatively contained at the aggregate level.

Qualitative Findings

This section presents findings from semi-structured interviews with voters and nonvoters. Analysis followed a thematic qualitative approach, with coding guided by the core interview questions on participation, security, institutional trust, administrative access, and electoral legitimacy. The findings are presented thematically, with illustrative

quotations embedded to reflect respondent perspectives.

Participation and Motivation

In response to the question “*What factors influenced your decision to participate (or not participate) in the local council election?*”, respondents consistently emphasized participation as an expression of civic agency rather than an expectation of immediate political or material benefits. Voting was described as meaningful precisely because it marked a departure from past exclusion. One voter explained, “*I voted because for the first time I was choosing, not being chosen for.*” This framing suggests that participation was motivated by symbolic ownership of the political process, supporting interpretations of elections in fragile contexts as acts of political re-engagement rather than instrumental choice.

In contrast, non-voters articulated a more skeptical and contested reading of the electoral process. Several argued that the election was effectively one-sided, with outcomes perceived as predetermined. One respondent remarked that “*the ruling party invested in the election budget, so it should reap the seeds of success,*” implying that resource control translated into inevitable victory. Others pointed to the absence or withdrawal of opposition leaders and parties they supported, leading to a sense of political disenfranchisement. As one non-voter stated, “*I don’t see the opposition leaders, and the party I support has rejected the election, so I have no one to vote for.*”

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a dual dynamic: while participation for some represented a reclaiming of political voice, abstention for others reflected concerns about electoral fairness, elite dominance, and constrained political choice. This tension highlights that, in fragile contexts, elections can simultaneously function as symbols of democratic inclusion and sites of contestation over legitimacy and competitiveness.

Security Perceptions and Willingness

When asked “*How did perceptions of safety before and on election day affect your willingness to engage?*”, most respondents reported that security

conditions were sufficient to allow participation. Visible security presence and the absence of major incidents were widely cited as enabling factors, with respondents emphasizing that security conditions were stable both during and after voting. Several voters noted that they were able to vote openly without fear, including being seen by others or by the media, indicating confidence that participation carried no security risk. As one respondent explained, *"You do not need to hide yourself while voting; there is no threat."* Voters further reported moving freely across the city after casting their ballots, suggesting that electoral participation did not expose individuals to post-voting insecurity. While some respondents still preferred to complete the process efficiently, this behavior reflected personal convenience rather than fear, underscoring that the security environment was broadly reliable and conducive to open civic engagement.

Trust in Electoral Institutions

Responses to the question "To what extent do you trust the election commission and polling officials to conduct elections fairly?" revealed mixed but nuanced perspectives. Many voters expressed confidence in the election commission's technical role and described the voting process as generally orderly and secure, noting that participation could take place openly without fear and that movement across the city after voting was unrestricted. Several respondents emphasized that the election felt "normal and organized" compared to past political experiences.

At the same time, trust was contested at the political level. One party that participated in the election rejected the results and questioned the commission's neutrality, while supporters of opposition parties that boycotted the process argued that the election committee lacked independence. The leader of the Wadajir Party publicly accused the commission of being influenced by the sitting president. In contrast, the president formally endorsed the conduct of the elections, highlighting their peaceful nature and framing them as an important step toward democratic consolidation.

Administrative Barriers and Access

In response to the question *"What challenges did you experience during registration or voting?"*, interviewees generally did not describe a lack of assistance at polling stations. Several respondents stated that election staff and volunteers were available and willing to help elderly voters and persons with disabilities when support was needed.

Instead, respondents emphasized challenges related to voter awareness and familiarity with the voting process. Many interviewees noted that this was the first time they had ever voted, given the absence of direct elections for nearly six decades. As a result, some voters reported difficulty recognizing party logos and understanding how to correctly mark the ballot. Interviewees mentioned cases where voters placed marks outside the designated boxes or hesitated over which option to select. According to respondents, these knowledge gaps rather than the absence of assistance contributed to voting errors and help explain the occurrence of invalid ballots in several districts.

From Violence to Voting Perceptions

Finally, when asked *"Compared to periods of violence or indirect governance, what does voting mean to you?"*, interviewees overwhelmingly framed elections as a fundamental shift from imposed authority to personal choice. Many respondents contrasted the current process with earlier systems in which clan elders selected representatives on behalf of communities. As one male voter explained, *"Before, clan leaders chose who would represent us. This time, I chose the person I wanted."*

Respondents repeatedly emphasized the personal satisfaction of casting a ballot for candidates who had directly engaged with them. A female voter noted, *"This time the candidate came to us and asked for our support. I voted for the person I believed in."* Another respondent highlighted the symbolic importance of participation, stating, *"Before, power came from guns; now it comes from votes."*

Across gender and age groups, interviewees expressed pride and happiness in participating, describing voting as an affirmation of dignity and

citizenship rather than merely a procedural exercise. These accounts suggest that electoral legitimacy in Banadir was derived less from flawless administration and more from the opportunity for citizens men and women alike to freely choose their representatives for the first time in decades.

Conclusion

This study examined Mogadishu's first direct local elections in six decades as evidence of a shifting basis of political authority in Banadir from coercion and elite selection toward civic choice. Across interviews, voters consistently framed participation as historically meaningful: many described voting as the first time they could select a representative directly rather than having leaders chosen by clan elders or informal power brokers. Even respondents who noted administrative imperfections emphasized that the core achievement was the restoration of citizen agency through ballots. In this sense, the elections marked a symbolic and practical break with decades in which political change was commonly measured by insecurity and casualties rather than by participation.

The quantitative findings reinforce this transition by documenting a functioning city-wide electoral infrastructure across 16 districts, substantial registration and turnout, and measurable patterns of competition at district level. The data also show that participation was not uniform, but the overall picture is one of operational feasibility: polling took place under stable security conditions, citizens reported being able to vote openly, and movement after voting was described as normal. Together, these patterns indicate that, despite a fragile context and political contestation, the election created a credible public space for non-violent political engagement and demonstrated that direct elections can be implemented in Mogadishu at scale.

Overall, the Mogadishu case supports the argument that elections in fragile settings can function as transitional institutions imperfect, contested, but still politically consequential. The central contribution of this study is to show that electoral legitimacy in Banadir was grounded less in flawless

administration and more in the lived experience of citizens exercising choice. By enabling voters women and men to participate directly and safely, the election helped redefine what political authority looks like in the capital. In doing so, it offers evidence that, rather than being a reward that follows peace, elections can contribute to the gradual normalization of civic politics and the delegitimization of violence as a means of leadership selection.

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