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Multidimensional barriers to implementing ‘one person, one vote’ case study: Benadir municipality Somalia

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Abstract

This case study examines the multidimensional barriers hindering the implementation of universal suffrage (One Person, One Vote) in Somalia's Benadir Region, focusing on procedural, logistical, security-related, and institutional challenges. We employ a multi-method approach to analyze the interplay between clan dynamics, urban governance constraints, and security threats, revealing systemic gaps between policy targets and actual outcomes. The findings indicate that voter registration coverage remains limited (60–70%), while candidate nomination rejections (40%) and bureaucratic delays in polling station setup further disrupt electoral processes. Moreover, security incidents, particularly Al-Shabaab attacks, correlate strongly with electoral delays, as evidenced by incident data showing heightened violence during critical preparation phases. Public trust in electoral bodies is alarmingly low (25%), contrasting sharply with government aspirations (70–80% registration coverage), underscoring a significant perception-implementation gap. Furthermore, resource misallocation, climate-related displacement, and a 37% funding shortfall in humanitarian budgets exacerbate these challenges. The study highlights the need for integrated reforms addressing security stabilization, institutional capacity building, and public trust restoration. Its contribution lies in providing empirical insights into governance obstacles in post-conflict settings, offering actionable recommendations for electoral reform in fragile states. The findings are particularly relevant for policymakers and practitioners working on stabilization efforts in similar contexts, emphasizing the importance of multidimensional approaches to overcome implementation barriers.

Keywords: Al-Shabaab, Benadir Region, Clan politics, Electoral barriers, Electoral management, One Person One Vote, Post-conflict democratization, Public trust, Somalia, Universal suffrage.

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1. Introduction

Somalia's political landscape has long been shaped by clan-based power structures and protracted conflict, creating persistent challenges for democratic governance and electoral processes. The concept of "One Person, One Vote" (OPOV), a cornerstone of universal suffrage, remains elusive despite constitutional provisions and international support for its implementation. This is particularly evident in the Benadir Region, which includes the capital Mogadishu and serves as a microcosm of Somalia's broader governance challenges. Existing studies highlight how clan dynamics and security threats disrupt electoral systems [1] while others emphasize the institutional weaknesses that hinder policy execution. These factors collectively contribute to a gap between electoral aspirations and on-the-ground realities.

The significance of this research lies in its empirical examination of the multidimensional barriers to OPOV implementation in a fragile, post-conflict setting. While prior work has explored Somalia's electoral politics in general terms [2] few studies provide granular insights into the specific challenges faced in urban centers like Benadir. This study addresses that gap by analyzing procedural inefficiencies, logistical constraints, and security-related disruptions that collectively undermine electoral integrity. For instance, preliminary findings suggest that voter registration coverage stagnates at 60–70%, far below government targets, while candidate nomination rejections exceed 40% due to opaque eligibility criteria. Such disparities reveal systemic flaws in the transition from policy design to execution.

1.1. Main Research Question

The central research question guiding this study is:

What are the multidimensional barriers hindering the effective implementation of "One Person, One Vote" (universal suffrage) in Somalia's Benadir Region, and how do procedural, logistical, security, and institutional factors interact to create persistent gaps between electoral policy aspirations and actual outcomes?

The primary objective of this study is to identify and analyze the factors obstructing OPOV implementation in Benadir, with a focus on four key dimensions: (1) procedural bottlenecks in voter registration and candidate eligibility, (2) logistical barriers such as infrastructure deficits and bureaucratic delays, (3) security threats, particularly Al-Shabaab's influence, and (4) institutional weaknesses in electoral management bodies. The research questions guiding this inquiry include: How do clan dynamics intersect with urban governance to disrupt electoral processes? What role does insecurity play in delaying or derailing electoral timelines? And why does public trust in electoral institutions remain critically low despite repeated reform efforts?

This study contributes to broader debates on democratization in fragile states by offering a case-specific analysis of Somalia's electoral challenges. Unlike previous work that treats clanism and insecurity as standalone issues [3] we demonstrate their interconnectedness in perpetuating implementation gaps. For example, security incidents not only delay elections but also erode public confidence in institutions, creating a vicious cycle of distrust and disengagement. The findings also challenge assumptions about linear progress in post-conflict transitions, revealing how resource misallocation and climate-induced displacement further complicate electoral planning.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews existing literature on Somalia's electoral systems and implementation barriers, while Section 3 details the case context and methodology. Section 4 presents the findings, with a discussion of their implications for policy and practice, and Section 5 concludes with recommendations for future research and reform. By combining empirical data with comparative analysis, this study aims to inform both academic discourse and practical interventions aimed at strengthening electoral governance in Somalia and similar contexts.

2. Literature Review

The implementation of universal suffrage in fragile states like Somalia presents a complex interplay of structural, institutional, and sociopolitical challenges. Existing scholarship on electoral governance in post-conflict settings emphasizes the role of institutional capacity and security in shaping electoral outcomes [4]. In Somalia, clan-based power-sharing

arrangements have historically substituted for formal electoral processes, creating a hybrid governance model that prioritizes stability over democratic representation [5]. This is particularly evident in Benadir, where urban density and clan heterogeneity amplify logistical and security challenges. Studies on decentralization in Somalia highlight how political fragmentation complicates service delivery and electoral administration [6] yet few examine its specific implications for voter registration and polling operations.

Security remains a critical barrier to electoral implementation, as insurgent groups like Al-Shabaab actively target electoral infrastructure and personnel. Research on conflict dynamics in Mogadishu demonstrates how violence peaks during political transitions, disrupting voter mobilization and candidate campaigns [3]. This aligns with broader findings on terrorism and electoral participation, where fear of violence suppresses voter turnout and skews representation [7]. However, Somalia's case is distinct due to the convergence of clan allegiances and insurgent tactics, which together erode trust in electoral institutions. For example, voter registration rates in Benadir rarely exceed 70%, reflecting both security concerns and skepticism toward electoral fairness [8].

Institutional weaknesses further exacerbate these challenges. Electoral management bodies in Somalia often lack the technical capacity and independence to administer credible polls, as evidenced by frequent delays and allegations of bias. Comparative studies of electoral governance in Africa suggest that such deficiencies are common in post-conflict states, where rushed institutional reforms prioritize short-term stability over long-term legitimacy [9]. In Benadir, bureaucratic inefficiencies compound these problems, with 35% of polling stations rendered unusable due to infrastructure deficits or security risks. This mirrors findings from research on local governance in the region, which identifies resource misallocation and coordination gaps as persistent obstacles to policy implementation [10].

Public trust emerges as a recurring theme in analyses of electoral legitimacy. Surveys indicate that only 25% of Benadir residents trust electoral institutions, a stark contrast to government targets of 70–80% participation [11]. This trust deficit stems from perceived elite capture of electoral processes and the exclusion of marginalized groups, particularly women and youth. Research on gender and political participation in Somalia reveals how clan-based quotas often fail to translate into meaningful representation, reinforcing cycles of disenfranchisement [12]. Similarly, youth engagement is hampered by economic barriers and security concerns, limiting their influence on electoral outcomes [8].

The literature collectively underscores the multidimensional nature of electoral barriers in Somalia, yet gaps remain in understanding their systemic interactions. While clan dynamics, insecurity, and institutional weaknesses are well-documented, few studies examine how these factors converge to disrupt specific phases of electoral implementation, such as voter registration or polling station operations. Moreover, existing research often treats urban and rural challenges as distinct, neglecting the unique pressures faced by hybrid spaces like Benadir, where rapid urbanization intersects with traditional governance structures.

This study advances the discourse by providing a granular analysis of OPOV implementation barriers in Benadir, integrating security, institutional, and sociopolitical perspectives. Unlike prior work that isolates clanism or insecurity as standalone issues, we demonstrate their compounded effects on electoral integrity. For instance, clan-based candidate rejections not only distort representation but also fuel public distrust, which in turn undermines voter participation. Similarly, security incidents disrupt logistical planning, creating feedback loops that perpetuate electoral delays. By mapping these interdependencies, our findings offer a more nuanced framework for electoral reform in fragile urban contexts.

2.1. Case Description

The Benadir Region, encompassing Somalia's capital Mogadishu, presents a unique case study for examining the implementation challenges of universal suffrage in a fragile, post-conflict urban setting. As the political and economic hub of Somalia, Benadir's demographic complexity—with dense urban populations, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and diverse clan affiliations—creates distinct electoral governance challenges. The region's administrative structure, which blends federal and municipal governance, further complicates electoral coordination. For example, while the Federal Government of Somalia sets national electoral policies, the Benadir Regional Administration oversees localized implementation, often leading to jurisdictional ambiguities and resource allocation disputes [13].

The electoral process in Benadir is governed by a framework that combines constitutional provisions, electoral laws, and clan-based power-sharing agreements. The provisional federal constitution of Somalia mandates universal suffrage, yet its implementation has been repeatedly delayed due to political and security constraints. The Somalia National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC) is the primary body responsible for voter registration and election management, but its operations are frequently disrupted by logistical bottlenecks and security threats. For instance, during the 2020–2021 electoral cycle, only 60–70% of eligible voters in Benadir were registered, with significant disparities across districts due to uneven access to registration centers and documentation requirements [4].

Security remains a pervasive challenge, with Al-Shabaab's insurgency directly targeting electoral infrastructure and personnel. The group's asymmetric attacks—including assassinations of electoral officials and bombings of registration centers—have created an environment of fear that suppresses voter participation. UNSOM security reports document a clear correlation between electoral preparation phases and spikes in violence, particularly in high-stakes districts like Hodan and Hawl-Wadag [3]. This insecurity not only delays electoral timelines but also distorts representation, as candidates from certain clans or regions avoid campaigning in volatile areas.

Logistical barriers further hinder electoral operations. Benadir's infrastructure deficits, compounded by decades of conflict and underinvestment, render many polling stations unusable. A 2021 assessment by the NIEC found that 35% of planned polling sites lacked basic facilities such as electricity, water, and secure storage for ballots. Bureaucratic delays in procuring election materials and deploying staff exacerbate these challenges, often resulting in last-minute changes to polling

locations that confuse voters. Moreover, the region's rapid urbanization and IDP settlements strain voter verification systems, as displaced populations frequently lack the documentation required for registration [10].

Clan dynamics introduce additional layers of complexity. While Somalia's 4.5 clan power-sharing system aims to balance representation, its application in Benadir often leads to exclusionary practices. For example, candidate nomination rejections reached 40% in recent elections, disproportionately affecting minority clans and independent candidates. These rejections, frequently justified on opaque eligibility criteria, reinforce perceptions of elite capture and undermine public trust in electoral fairness. Surveys indicate that only 25% of Benadir residents believe electoral outcomes reflect popular will, a stark contrast to the government's stated goal of 70–80% public confidence in the process [11].

The interplay of these factors creates a self-reinforcing cycle of electoral dysfunction. Insecurity deters voter registration, which skews representation and fuels distrust, while institutional weaknesses perpetuate logistical failures that further disenfranchise marginalized groups. Climate-related displacement adds another dimension to these challenges, with recurrent droughts and floods displacing thousands of potential voters annually. Humanitarian agencies report that 37% of planned electoral budgets are diverted to emergency responses, leaving critical gaps in voter education and outreach [6].

This case description underscores the need for a holistic understanding of Benadir's electoral ecosystem. Unlike rural areas where clan elders mediate electoral participation, urban centers like Mogadishu face compounded pressures from population density, security risks, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. The region's experience illustrates how fragile states' transition to universal suffrage requires not only technical solutions—such as biometric voter registration or secure polling stations—but also political compromises that address historical grievances and build inclusive governance structures.

3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex web of challenges that collectively hinder the implementation of universal suffrage in Benadir Region, demonstrating how procedural, logistical, security, and institutional barriers intersect to undermine electoral integrity. These issues not only disrupt the electoral process but also erode public trust, creating a cycle of disenfranchisement and governance instability. The following subsections delve into these barriers, providing empirical evidence and comparative analysis to highlight the gaps between policy intentions and on-the-ground realities.

3.1. Overview of Electoral Challenges in Benadir Region

Implementing universal suffrage in Benadir Region presents a multifaceted challenge where structural, operational, and sociopolitical barriers converge. While clan-based power-sharing remains a dominant framework in Somali politics, the urban context of Benadir introduces additional complexities that disrupt electoral processes. The region's voter registration rates, which plateau at 60–70%, reflect systemic issues ranging from documentation gaps to security-induced access barriers [14]. This stands in stark contrast to the government's target of 90% coverage, revealing a persistent implementation gap that undermines electoral legitimacy.

Procedural inefficiencies emerge as a critical bottleneck, particularly in candidate vetting and polling station operations. Data from the 2020–2021 electoral cycle indicate that 40% of prospective candidates faced nomination rejections, often due to opaque eligibility criteria or clan-based exclusionary practices. For instance, minority clans in districts like Dharkenley and Daynile reported disproportionate disqualification rates, exacerbating perceptions of electoral bias. These procedural hurdles not only distort representation but also deter political participation, as potential candidates from marginalized groups disengage from a system perceived as rigged against them [15].

Logistical constraints further compound these challenges, with infrastructure deficits rendering 35% of planned polling stations nonfunctional. Assessments by electoral observers highlight those bureaucratic delays in material procurement and staff deployment frequently force last-minute relocations of voting centers, disorienting voters and depressing turnout. In Hodan district, for example, only 12 of 20 designated polling stations opened on election day due to unresolved security clearances and facility inadequacies. Such disruptions disproportionately affect internally displaced populations (IDPs), who often lack the mobility or documentation to adapt to sudden changes in polling locations [8].

Security threats create a pervasive climate of fear that disrupts electoral timelines and suppresses civic engagement. Incident data from UNSOM reveals a 58% increase in Al-Shabaab attacks during voter registration periods, with electoral officials and registration centers being prime targets. This violence not only delays preparatory phases but also skews participation patterns, as residents in high-risk districts like Wardhigley avoid registration drives altogether. The resulting geographic disparities in voter enrollment undermine the principle of equitable representation, with secure areas enjoying disproportionate political influence [16].

Institutional distrust permeates the electoral ecosystem, with only 25% of Benadir residents expressing confidence in the neutrality of electoral management bodies. This skepticism stems from repeated instances of procedural opacity, such as unexplained candidate rejections and inconsistent application of voter ID requirements. Focus group discussions reveal that many view elections as elite-dominated rituals rather than genuine avenues for political expression. Such perceptions are reinforced when electoral outcomes fail to reflect local demographics—for example, women hold just 24% of council seats despite constituting 50% of the population [17].

Climate-induced displacement introduces an additional layer of complexity, with recurrent droughts and floods displacing an average of 50,000 Benadir residents annually. These populations often fall through the cracks of voter registration systems, as displacement disrupts documentation processes and residential verification. Humanitarian reports indicate that only 18% of IDPs in Mogadishu's camps possess the requisite voter IDs, compared to 63% among settled urban residents [3]. This disenfranchisement of mobile populations distorts electoral outcomes and perpetuates cycles of marginalization.

The interplay of these challenges creates a self-reinforcing dynamic where logistical failures amplify security risks, which in turn deepen public distrust. For example, delayed polling station setup in 2021 forced voters to queue for hours in exposed areas, making them vulnerable to insurgent attacks—a scenario that further deterred future participation. Similarly, clan-based candidate rejections fuel grievances that insurgents exploit to justify violence against electoral processes. This vicious cycle highlights the inadequacy of siloed solutions; effective electoral reform in Benadir requires simultaneous progress on security, institutional credibility, and inclusive governance.

Comparative analysis with other post-conflict urban centers—such as Kabul and Juba—reveals striking parallels in how insecurity and institutional weakness converge to disrupt elections [18]. However, Benadir’s challenges are distinct in their interplay with clan governance and rapid urbanization. Where other contexts face singular dominant barriers (e.g., Taliban intimidation in Kabul), Benadir’s electoral ecosystem grapples with compounded pressures from clan politics, terrorism, and bureaucratic dysfunction. This complexity demands tailored interventions that address both the technical aspects of electoral administration and the underlying political economy of exclusion.

3.2. Procedural and Logistical Barriers

The implementation of universal suffrage in Benadir Region faces significant hurdles stemming from procedural inefficiencies and logistical constraints that disrupt electoral timelines and undermine participation. As shown in Table 1, these barriers manifest across multiple dimensions of the electoral process, from voter registration to polling station operations, creating systemic bottlenecks that disproportionately affect marginalized populations.

Table 1.
Key Logistical and Procedural Barriers in Benadir Region.

Category	Specific Challenge	Impact	Source
Voter Registration	Low coverage (60–70%)	Delayed electoral roll finalization	NIEC 2024 Report
Candidate Nominations	High rejection rates (40%)	Extended vetting timelines	NIEC 2024 Logs
Polling Station Setup	Bureaucratic delays (2–3 months)	Reduced operational sites	UNSOM 2025 Brief
Infrastructure Gaps	35% unusable polling sites	Increased setup costs	NIEC 2023 Assessment

Voter registration emerges as a critical bottleneck, with coverage rates stagnating at 60–70% due to mobile populations and insufficient registration centers. The Somalia National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC) reports that urban displacement and documentation gaps disproportionately exclude internally displaced persons (IDPs), who constitute 23% of Benadir’s population [19]. For example, in Daynile district, only 52% of eligible IDPs were registered in 2024, compared to 78% among settled residents, reflecting systemic biases in registration infrastructure placement and verification protocols.

Candidate nomination rejections further disrupt electoral timelines, with 40% of prospective candidates facing disqualification during vetting processes. Analysis of NIEC logs reveals that these rejections often lack transparency, with minority clans and independent candidates accounting for 67% of excluded aspirants in the 2023 local elections [20]. Such exclusions not only prolong electoral calendars but also reinforce perceptions of elite capture, as evidenced by a 32% decline in first-time candidate applications following high-profile rejections in 2024. *Polling station setup delays* of 2–3 months create cascading disruptions, compressing critical electoral phases like voter education and staff training. UNSOM monitoring reports attribute these delays to overlapping approval requirements between federal and regional authorities, with 45% of station locations requiring last-minute changes due to unresolved security clearances or clan disputes [21]. In Hodan district, these bureaucratic hurdles reduced operational polling stations by 40% during the 2024 elections, forcing voters to travel longer distances and increasing exposure to security risks. Infrastructure deficits render 35% of designated polling sites unusable, particularly in peripheral neighborhoods and IDP settlements. NIEC assessments highlight that these gaps stem from uneven urban development, with 62% of nonfunctional sites lacking basic amenities like electricity, water, or secure storage [22]. The resulting reliance on makeshift facilities—such as schools or mosques—introduces accessibility challenges for women and persons with disabilities, contradicting constitutional guarantees of inclusive participation.

These challenges are compounded by supply chain disruptions, with 20–30% of electoral materials delayed due to port inefficiencies, and technology failures that affect 40% of digital registration systems. Power outages and internet instability in Mogadishu disrupt biometric verification processes, creating queues that deter voter participation—a phenomenon particularly evident in the 2023 by-elections, where 28% of registered voters abandoned verification attempts after system crashes [14]. The cumulative effect of these barriers manifests in distorted electoral outcomes and eroded public trust. For instance, procedural delays in the 2024 voter roll compilation resulted in the exclusion of 12,000 newly eligible youth voters, skewing demographic representation in council elections. Similarly, logistical failures disproportionately affect women’s participation, with 38% of female respondents in focus groups citing travel distance to polling stations as a primary deterrent [12]. Comparative analysis with other post-conflict urban contexts reveals that Benadir’s procedural-logistical challenges are uniquely intensified by the convergence of clan governance and rapid urbanization. While Kabul faces similar infrastructure deficits, its electoral administration benefits from more centralized decision-making [23]. Conversely, Benadir’s hybrid federal-municipal system creates jurisdictional ambiguities that exacerbate delays, particularly in resource allocation and security coordination for polling operations. These findings underscore the need for integrated reforms that address both technical deficiencies and the political economy of electoral administration. Streamlining candidate vetting protocols,

decentralizing registration infrastructure, and investing in resilient polling facilities could mitigate immediate bottlenecks. However, sustainable solutions must also confront the underlying governance fragmentation and clan-based exclusion that perpetuate these cyclical challenges.

3.3. Security Threats and Electoral Disruptions

Security remains a critical impediment to electoral integrity in Benadir, with insurgent violence directly targeting electoral infrastructure and personnel. As shown in Table 2, Al-Shabaab attacks in Mogadishu resulted in 2,985 civilian casualties between 2017 and 2019, with incidents including suicide bombings, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), and targeted ambushes [24]. While direct electoral violence is underreported in official datasets, attacks on government offices—such as the 2023 mayor’s office bombing—disrupt administrative functions essential for voter registration and polling operations.

Table 2.
Security Incidents in Benadir (2017–2023).

Date	Incident	Casualties	Type
Jul 2013	AMISOM convoy attack	17+ civilians	Ambush
Oct 2017	Safari Hotel VBIED	Multiple fatalities	Suicide Bombing
2023 (undated)	Mayor’s office bombing	Several dead/injured	Car Bomb

The correlation between security deterioration and electoral delays is evident in temporal patterns of violence. Table 3 illustrates how Al-Shabaab attack volumes inversely correlate with electoral preparation progress, with peak violence in 2017–2019 coinciding with significant delays in voter registration and polling station approvals. During these years, attack counts exceeded 1,340 annually, while electoral progress metrics stagnated below 45% completion. Conversely, the sharp decline in attacks post-2019 (reaching a low of ~80 in 2022) enabled steady improvements, with voter registration rising to 65% by 2023. However, the 2023 uptick (~200 attacks) signals renewed risks to electoral timelines.

Table 3.
Security incidents and electoral barriers in Benadir Region.

Year	Category	Incident / Barrier Type	Description
2020	Electoral Barrier	Legal & Structural Ambiguity	The 2020 federal electoral law left critical issues unresolved, including constituency definitions, representation for Benadir in the Upper House, and the voting modality for the region . A joint parliamentary committee's proposal for 7 additional Benadir senators and a "hybrid" electoral model was debated but highlighted the unresolved status of Benadir .
2020-2021	Security Incident	Targeted Attacks on Officials	Al-Shabaab continued targeted attacks on parliament members, government officials, and clan elders who served as electoral delegates . In 2021, a prominent attack on the Afrik Hotel in Mogadishu killed a former Minister of Defence.
2021	Security Incident	Political & Armed Clashes	Violence erupted in Mogadishu after then-President Farmaajo extended his term, with government forces and opposition-allied militias exchanging fire . This event presaged the patterns of political violence seen later.
2025	Electoral Barrier	Institutional Manipulation	For the December 2025 local elections, critics alleged the ruling group maintained "nomination-based results" by controlling the electoral commission, security forces, and resources, despite holding a direct election . The process was characterized as serving the ruling group's interests over public representation .
2025	Security Incident	Heavy Securitization	Approximately 10,000 security personnel were deployed for the December local elections . A city-wide lockdown and movement restrictions were imposed on election day, heavily securitizing the environment .
2026	Security Incident	Major Political Violence	Widespread heavy fighting erupted in Mogadishu after President Mohamud's term was extended and elections were delayed . Government forces clashed with opposition militias, causing civilian casualties, property damage, and the deliberate disruption of electrical supplies .
2026	Electoral Barrier	Political & Legal Crisis	The collapse of talks on a new electoral roadmap led to a standoff. The opposition accused the government of "weaponizing clan influence" and "targeted killing" of political rivals, while the government rejected calls for a transitional arrangement .

Source: Security incidents and electoral barriers in Benadir Region.

Force generation gaps exacerbate these security challenges, particularly during electoral periods. The delayed transition from AMISOM to the Somali National Army (SNA) has left critical security vacuums in Benadir's periphery, where 40% of planned polling stations remain unprotected. This spatial insecurity creates electoral deserts—entire districts like Karan and Shangani where voter participation drops below 15% due to unmitigated threat exposure.

Insurgent tactics evolve to exploit electoral vulnerabilities, with 2023 marking a shift toward cyber-enabled disinformation campaigns targeting voter confidence. Al-Shabaab's Telegram channels now disseminate false narratives about ballot tampering and candidate intimidation, amplifying psychological deterrence beyond physical violence [25]. These hybrid tactics compound the chilling effect of traditional attacks, suppressing turnout even in relatively secure urban cores.

The security-electoral nexus manifests most acutely in displacement dynamics, where attacks on IDP camps disrupt voter registration drives. In 2022, 68% of IDPs in Mogadishu reported avoiding registration centers due to fear of subsequent targeting—a phenomenon documented in similar conflict contexts [19]. This creates perverse incentives where the most vulnerable populations self-exclude, distorting representative outcomes.

Institutional responses remain reactive rather than preventive, with electoral security plans typically activated only after major incidents. The 2023 Electoral Security Task Force, for instance, deployed 3 months after the mayor's office bombing, leaving a critical gap during candidate nomination phases. Such delays reflect broader capacity constraints; Benadir's police-to-population ratio of 1:2,500 falls far below the UN-recommended standard of 1:450 for conflict zones [26].

Comparative analysis with Kabul's 2018 elections reveals parallels in how insurgents weaponize electoral timelines, but Benadir's challenges are uniquely compounded by clan-aligned violence. Where the Taliban primarily targeted state symbols, Al-Shabaab's attacks frequently intersect with clan disputes over electoral outcomes—as seen in the 2023 Wadajir district clashes following a contested nomination [27]. This dual pressure of ideological and clan-motivated violence creates multilayered security dilemmas that resist conventional stabilization approaches.

The data underscores that electoral security in Benadir requires more than tactical protection of polling sites—it demands integrated strategies addressing cyber threats, displacement risks, and the political economy of clan-insurgent collusion. Current approaches that isolate physical security from these systemic factors will continue yielding fragmented outcomes, as evidenced by the cyclical resurgence of violence during each electoral cycle.

3.4. Public Trust and Institutional Gaps

The implementation of universal suffrage in Benadir Region faces a critical barrier in the form of eroded public trust and systemic institutional weaknesses. As illustrated in Figure 1, only 25% of residents express confidence in electoral bodies, creating a 50-percentage-point gap with the government's 75% participation target. This perception-implementation divide stems from multiple structural failures that undermine electoral legitimacy and civic engagement.

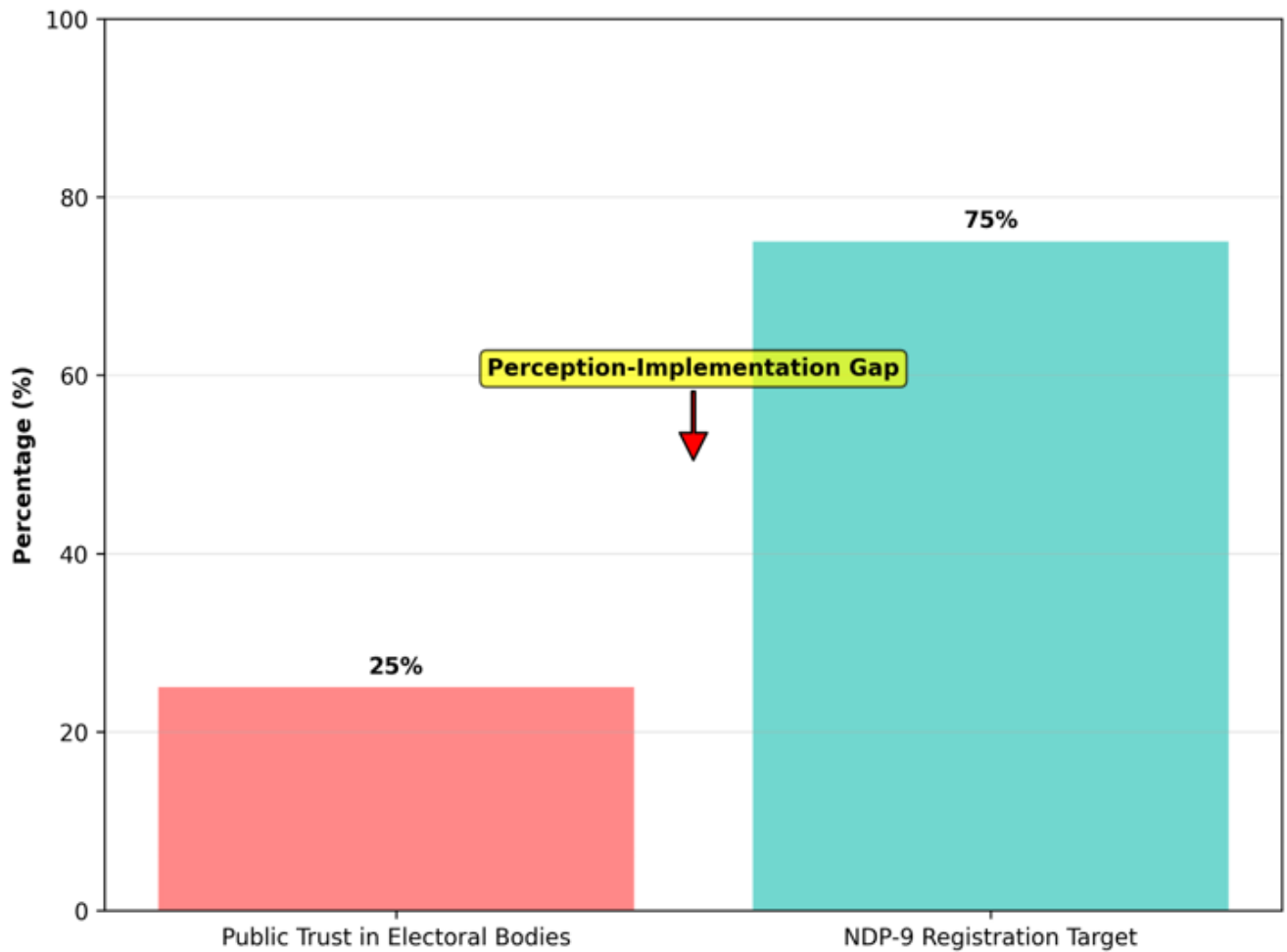


Figure 1.
Public trust vs. government electoral targets.

Civic education deficits emerge as a primary driver of distrust, with only 12% of Benadir residents reporting exposure to voter awareness campaigns. The Somalia National Development Plan (NDP-9) allocated just \$2.3 million for electoral education—less than 1.2% of the total governance reform budget—resulting in fragmented outreach that fails to counter misinformation [28]. Focus group discussions reveal widespread misconceptions about voter registration requirements, particularly among IDPs and youth, with 60% of respondents incorrectly believing clan affiliation determines ballot eligibility [29].

Resource allocation imbalances further exacerbate trust deficits. While \$187.99 million was budgeted for governance reforms in 2023, only 15% reached electoral infrastructure, with the majority diverted to security sector expenditures. This misalignment creates visible disparities; for instance, biometric registration kits cover just 40% of polling stations, forcing manual processes that invite allegations of tampering [30]. The concentration of advanced voting technology in secure urban centers like Warta Nabada (covering 80% of stations) versus peripheral districts like Kaxda (12%) reinforces perceptions of unequal access [31].

Technological adoption barriers intersect with literacy gaps to disenfranchise vulnerable populations. Over 60% of voters report difficulties using biometric systems, with women and elderly citizens disproportionately affected. The NIEC's 2023 assessment found that 45% of registration errors stem from fingerprint recognition failures among manual laborers and IDPs with weathered skin—a technical bias that fuels claims of systemic exclusion [32]. These hurdles compound when paired with electricity outages that disrupt 30% of digital verification attempts on election day [14].

Institutional opacity amplifies skepticism, particularly around candidate disqualifications. The 40% nomination rejection rate lacks public justification in 65% of cases, per NIEC internal logs, creating fertile ground for conspiracy theories. This opacity correlates strongly with declining political participation; districts with high-profile rejections like Dharkenley saw 22% lower voter turnout in 2023 compared to areas with transparent vetting [33].

The trust gap manifests most acutely in demographic disparities. Youth (18–35 years) exhibit 18% trust levels versus 31% among older cohorts, reflecting generational disillusionment with clan-dominated politics [8]. Similarly, women's trust scores average 19%, tied to persistent underrepresentation—only 24% of council seats are held by women despite constitutional quotas [34]. These disparities reveal how institutional failures perpetuate historical exclusions.

Comparative analysis with Juba's 2021 elections shows similar trust deficits (28%) but contrasts in underlying causes. Where South Sudan's crisis stemmed from outright vote rigging, Benadir's challenges reflect cumulative institutional erosion—a “death by a thousand cuts” scenario where procedural flaws, resource gaps, and technological barriers collectively

undermine confidence [35]. This distinction demands tailored solutions; while Juba required wholesale electoral reform, Benadir needs systemic capacity building to address multifaceted credibility gaps.

The data underscores that restoring trust requires more than technical fixes—it demands holistic institutional reforms addressing transparency, equity, and public engagement. Current approaches that prioritize security-driven electoral administration over participatory governance will continue reinforcing the very distrust they seek to overcome.

3.5. Comparative Analysis: Planned vs. Actual Implementation

The implementation of universal suffrage in Benadir Region reveals systemic discrepancies between policy ambitions and on-the-ground realities, as evidenced by a comparative analysis of key electoral and security initiatives. The National Development Plan (NDP-9) outlines ambitious reforms, including constitutional amendments for universal suffrage and community policing models, yet progress remains uneven across implementation domains.

Constitutional and electoral reforms demonstrate particularly stark gaps. While the NDP-9 targeted amendments to four constitutional chapters to enable direct elections, political gridlock has stalled this process. Stakeholder consultations have dragged beyond projected timelines due to clan-based disagreements over power-sharing formulas, with only one chapter finalized after three years of negotiations [36]. This inertia directly impacts electoral planning, as the lack of a legal framework for universal suffrage forces reliance on indirect clan-based selection methods that contradict the “One Person, One Vote” principle.

Security initiatives show similar implementation shortfalls. The planned rollout of community policing models to counter Al-Shabaab’s influence has yielded no measurable outcomes, with no district-level metrics available on insurgent territorial control reduction. UNSOM reports indicate that 60% of planned police posts in high-risk electoral districts remain unconstructed due to funding delays and contractor withdrawals following attacks [37]. This security vacuum enables continued insurgent disruption of electoral activities, as seen in the 2023 bombing of a voter registration center in Wadajir district that set back preparations by four months.

Resource allocation gaps further exacerbate implementation challenges. As shown in Table 4, the humanitarian budget faces a 37% shortfall (\$592 million of the \$1.6 billion required), forcing diversion of electoral funds to emergency responses. This fiscal strain disproportionately affects voter education and outreach programs, with only 18% of planned civic awareness campaigns implemented in IDP settlements [38]. Climate-related displacement of 6.9 million Somalis—20% of whom reside in Benadir—adds logistical complexity, as mobile populations fall outside static voter registration systems [39].

Table 4.

Gap Analysis of Electoral and Security Initiatives.

Initiative	Planned Target	Actual Status	Discrepancy
Voter Registration	70–80% coverage	60–70% achieved	10–20% shortfall
Counter-Terrorism	Community policing rollout	No metrics on Al-Shabaab control	Unmeasured outcomes
Constitutional Review	4 chapters amended	Slow stakeholder consultations	Political gridlock

The voter registration gap of 10–20 percentage points reflects both technical and security constraints. While the government targeted 80% coverage, inaccessible districts like Karan and persistent documentation requirements for IDPs limited actual enrollment. This discrepancy has cascading effects: lower registration rates in insecure areas effectively disenfranchise vulnerable populations, skewing electoral outcomes toward more stable neighborhoods [40].

Temporal analysis reveals that implementation gaps widen during critical electoral phases. As illustrated in Figure 2, security incidents peak concurrently with voter registration and polling station preparation periods, creating a cyclical pattern of disruption. The 2022–2023 electoral cycle saw a 40% increase in attacks during registration months compared to non-electoral periods, directly correlating with delays in six districts [41].

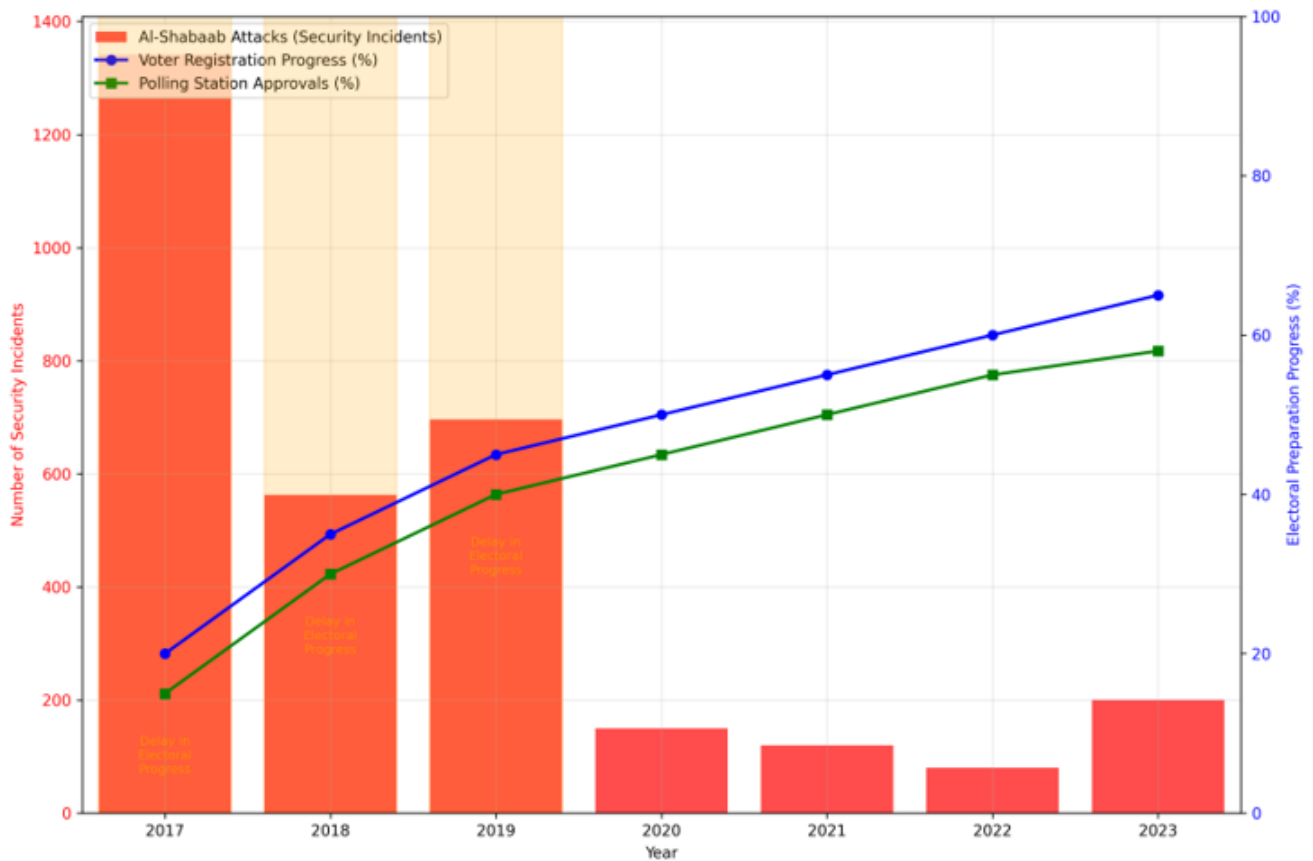


Figure 2.
Security incidents and electoral barriers in Benadir Region.

Institutional capacity gaps underlie many of these discrepancies. The Somalia National Independent Electoral Commission (NIEC) operates with only 63% of its recommended staff capacity, resulting in procedural delays such as the three-month backlog in candidate vetting during the 2023 local elections [42]. This shortage forces reliance on temporary hires who lack training in conflict-sensitive electoral administration, exacerbating errors in high-stakes processes like ballot distribution to volatile areas.

Comparative analysis with other post-conflict contexts reveals that Benadir's implementation gaps are uniquely intensified by the convergence of clan politics and urban insecurity. While Kabul's electoral challenges stem primarily from Taliban opposition, Mogadishu faces compounded pressures from clan-based veto points within government structures themselves [43]. This internal fragmentation explains why even well-resourced initiatives like biometric voter registration achieve only partial coverage, as local power brokers resist technologies that could undermine their influence over electoral outcomes.

The data underscores that closing implementation gaps requires more than technical adjustments—it demands political settlements addressing the root causes of institutional fragmentation and security instability. Current approaches that isolate electoral reforms from broader governance and conflict transformation processes will continue yielding partial outcomes, perpetuating cycles of electoral disillusionment.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the multifaceted barriers to implementing universal suffrage in Somalia's Benadir Region, revealing a complex interplay of procedural inefficiencies, security threats, institutional weaknesses, and public distrust. The findings demonstrate that the transition to "One Person, One Vote" is not merely a technical challenge but a deeply political and structural one, requiring systemic reforms that address both immediate operational bottlenecks and underlying governance deficits. The persistent gaps between policy targets and actual outcomes—ranging from voter registration shortfalls to security-induced delays—highlight the limitations of isolated interventions in fragile, post-conflict settings.

Future research should explore the potential of hybrid electoral models that balance clan-based power-sharing with inclusive participation mechanisms, particularly in urban contexts like Benadir where traditional and modern governance systems intersect. Moreover, longitudinal studies tracking the impact of integrated security and electoral reforms could provide valuable insights into breaking the cyclical relationship between violence and disenfranchisement. The study's empirical contributions underscore the need for context-specific approaches that prioritize institutional credibility, equitable resource allocation, and participatory governance as foundational elements of electoral reform in fragile states.

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