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Somaliland's November elections are more than just a democratic exercise

Somaliland's upcoming presidential and legislative elections in November are crucial for its political stability and democratic reputation as it continues to assert its sovereignty despite limited international recognition. President Muse Bihi Abdi's bid for a second term could be a defining moment, especially given the recent challenges and political tensions. These elections mark the fourth time Somaliland has held a presidential election by universal suffrage, a significant achievement highlighting its commitment to democratic practices in the region.

With peaceful transfers of power and competitive multiparty participation, Somaliland's electoral history sets it apart from many parts of East Africa. This election could reinforce its position as a model of stability in the Horn of Africa, offering its 4.5 million citizens a voice in choosing their leadership and shaping their nation's future. The international community will likely observe these elections closely, even without formal recognition, as they carry implications for Somaliland's continued push for statehood and stability.

Somaliland's elections are indeed pivotal, especially given the challenges the self-declared state has faced both domestically and internationally. President Muse Bihi Abdi, running for re-election, has faced scrutiny and criticism amid rising political tensions, economic pressures, and growing external challenges. These elections, coming after a long delay, offer an opportunity to reinforce Somaliland's democratic ideals, which have distinguished it within the Horn of Africa and the broader East African region.

Key Elements of the 2024 Elections:

1. Since declaring independence from Somalia in 1991, Somaliland has gradually built an independent political system based on democratic values. This election follows three previous presidential elections in 2003, 2010, and 2017, each held by universal suffrage, establishing a precedent of inclusive and relatively peaceful political transitions that set Somaliland apart in East Africa.

2. President Muse Bihi Abdi's Kulmiye party faces strong opposition, primarily from the Wadani party, led by Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi (commonly known as Irro), and the UCID party, known for its focus on security and national sovereignty. The opposition party argues for reforms and greater inclusivity with the Wadani party. The election could become a tight race, as both the Kulmiye and Wadani parties have mobilized significantly, appealing to young voters and citizens who desire a more responsive government.

3. Nearly 75% of Somaliland's parliament comprises younger members, reflecting a growing youth influence in politics. However, there are concerns over the experience and conduct of these younger representatives, an issue that has surfaced in recent debates on the qualifications of MPs. This demographic shift may impact election results, with parties actively courting young voters who make up a large portion of the electorate. Many youth are vocal advocates for reform and

improved governance, pressuring parties to address issues like unemployment, economic growth, and social services.

4. Somaliland's lack of international recognition, it does not have access to certain financial and technical support that other countries rely on for elections. This lack of resources has put additional pressure on its electoral infrastructure. Security is also a concern, as external actors, including some factions within Somalia, have exerted pressure to undermine Somaliland's electoral process. Allegations of foreign-funded propaganda campaigns, particularly from Somalia and allied groups, have heightened tensions, as some seek to challenge Somaliland's statehood and democratic legitimacy.

5. The elections are set against a complex regional backdrop involving interests from Ethiopia, Somalia, and international players like Turkey and Qatar. Recent diplomatic tensions, especially over port agreements and border issues, have made it clear that the outcome of this election will have ramifications beyond Somaliland's borders. For instance, discussions around Ethiopia's potential access to the Red Sea and security concerns linked to the Berbera port agreement highlight the strategic importance of Somaliland's policies and alliances in the Horn of Africa.

6. Somaliland's democratic track record is critical for its international reputation. Observers, both local and foreign, hope these elections will be free and fair, further solidifying Somaliland's democratic standing**. If successful, this election could help Somaliland advance its case for international recognition, reinforcing that it functions as an independent, stable, and democratic state within a turbulent region.**

Somaliland's November elections are more than just a democratic exercise—they test its political maturity, stability, and resilience in the face of internal and external pressures. The outcome will shape the nation's political trajectory, its engagement with the international community, and its ongoing pursuit of formal recognition.