

Women and Elections: Interview with Ms. Halima Ismail, Chairperson of Somalia's National Independent Electoral Commission

Interview conducted by Razan Masad, UNDP Regional Electoral Support Project

ACE is excited to share an interview with Halima Ismail, the first woman Chairperson of Somalia's National Independent Electoral Commission and the only female chairperson in the Arab World. Ms. Ismail discusses how her career working with women and girls in civil society led to her election as the first president – and first female president – of the election commission in Somalia. She also provides insight into the challenges she faces as a woman in this field, as well as her vision for strengthening the role of women in the electoral process and improving election management in Somalia more broadly.

How did your career development start and ultimately lead you to the field that you are in?

My work in this field started with a simple idea; to have an active role in civil society at a time when my country needs it the most. After the civil war in Somalia in 1990, whose biggest victims were women and children, a group of Somali women gathered to form a women's development organization called the International Development Association (IDA) forming the women's agenda for the Republic of Somalia. My role as this organization's regional coordinator taught me the significance and impact that civil society can have, whether youth or women, but especially women in influencing our society. I then joined [United Nations] operations in Somalia, where I served as a political officer to assist in the reconciliation processes and to build regional and local

councils based on women's participation in political leadership and decision-making processes.

How did your involvement in the political and electoral field start?

The political situation in Somalia between 1993 and 1997 caused the UN operations in the Somali Republic to withdraw, and the unsafe conditions forced me to leave Somalia and move to the United States of America. However, I soon felt the need to return and focus my energy on standing with my community and my country. With determination for change, I first started working with the province of Lahud in central Somalia, a region that had been marginalized and financially neglected by international organizations over the years. I raised funds to be allocated to girls' education, social cohesion, and meeting the basic needs of the governorate. [Because of] my work in the development of communities in Lahud, as well as the trust of the citizens that I had gained throughout the processes, I was appointed as chairperson of the committee responsible for the formation of the central regional state and was a member in the high-level discussions on the formation of the new government in the Republic of Somalia. This was the beginning of my experience in political and therefore later electoral processes.

How did this work lead to the establishment of the National

Dear readers,

The ACE team is considering how to improve the ACE website to provide you with the most relevant content and pleasant user experience. Please take a few minutes to complete this short [survey](#) in order to inform our approach. Results from this survey will also be discussed at the upcoming ACE Steering Board meeting, which will bring all ACE partners together at Elections Canada in late June. The May 2017 edition of the ACE Newsletter further highlights:

- The latest questions and discussions on the Practitioners' Network
- Updates to the ACE Encyclopaedia
- New Publications and resources from ACE partner organizations

The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network promotes credible and transparent electoral processes with an emphasis on sustainability, professionalism, and trust in the electoral process. ACE offers a wide range of services related to electoral knowledge, assistance, and capacity development.

Thank you for reading May's newsletter and for your involvement with ACE. We look forward to your contributions to the Network!

Best regards,

The ACE Electoral Knowledge Network

Independent Electoral Commission, and how were you selected as its president?

While Somalia was undertaking a political transition, the [Constitution was amended in 2012]. The amendment to the law declared that a national committee for electoral matters should be established and nine commissioners appointed to lead it. The Somali parliament then announced a subsequent law to outline how the commissioners were to be chosen. At the time, I had applied to work in the Commission, which my active role in civil society pushed me to do. Of 367 candidates, I was chosen as one of the 9 commissioners. An election was then held amongst the 9 commissioners for a president for the commission, and to my surprise, I was chosen. And so here I was, the first ever Somali woman to be elected as the first president of the election commission in Somalia.

In what context was the commission established? And what is your vision for its work in the future management of elections in Somalia?

At the time of the establishment of the commission, no elections had been held in Somalia since 1969, due to the army's seizure of power for 21 years and the subsequent civil war which lasted a devastating 25 years. This situation in the country made the establishment of a national body that can manage elections in the country an even more important and pressing priority. The establishment of a body that can hold free and fair elections for the first time in nearly 50 years was now a must. My vision for the commission is first and foremost to fulfill its objective to hold such elections successfully. I aim to establish the infrastructure needed for this, and to gain the confidence of Somali citizens in the electoral process.

What were some challenges you faced as a woman in your field?

Being a woman in Arab society is in itself a challenge. It was very difficult for the Somali society, with many customs and traditions, to accept me, a woman, as a

head of the election commission. In the past, the norms in Somali society have limited the role of women to being mothers and housewives, which prevents women here from achieving what they set out to do. There were many instances where intimidation was used against me and other women in this field. However, I rejected the traditional "role of women" and the mold set for us by society, and persisted to complete my mission.

If you were to give advice to girls and women in the Arab world who want to pursue a career in politics or elections, what would it be?

One of the most important factors that contributed to my success in this work, and continues to do so, is the support from my female colleagues. It is extremely important for women out there not to be the obstacle standing in the way of another woman's success, but rather enable and encourage it. Women must stand side by side, especially in our Arab societies. In addition, women should not be intimidated to challenge existing customs and traditions and not allow them to stop them from reaching their goals.

Finally, what role does the NIEC play in promoting women's participation in the electoral processes in Somalia?

One of our most important goals at the commission is to strengthen the role of women in the electoral process, both as decision makers and as voters. While it is true that there is a long way ahead, I am optimistic and believe greatly in the capacity of civil society in Somalia. We are currently working on mainstreaming gender in all aspects of our work, in order to create a secure and accessible environment for women to participate in the electoral process. We want to enable women's voices to be heard, as they are without doubt a vital part of their country's future. Finally, I would like to add that the commission is currently working on establishing a quota of 30% for women in parliament.

Practitioners' Network

Since February, **680 members** logged on to the Practitioners' Network and shared their experiences, knowledge and expertise through **64**

contributions to questions asked by their peers. Recent questions include: [Intra-party democracy and elections in Latin and South America](#), [Demographic voter information collected by EMBs](#), [Enforcing codes of conduct](#), [Limits to universal suffrage](#), [Case studies of risk factors for electoral violence](#), and ["Zombie" election monitors](#).

[Consolidated replies](#) are published summaries of the discussions on the Practitioners' Network. The following page highlights some recently published consolidated replies, including: [Election security planning for police officers](#), [Professionalization of electoral civil service](#), [Preventing and mitigating electoral violence](#), [External Relations Staffing Best Practices](#), [International Search for Ballot Boxes](#), and [International observer reports and election disputes](#). Dozens of questions have been consolidated already, so be sure to look [here](#) for a full overview.

Join the Network!

- Are you an election practitioner with expertise and experience?
- Are you not yet a member of the ACE Practitioners' Network?

If so, submit an application to be a member of the Practitioners' Network now: www.aceproject.org/apply.

Recently Consolidated Questions

I am seeking examples of laws or policies in different countries regarding the admissibility of an international observer group's report as evidence in court regarding the disputed election. It is my understanding that some countries accept the results of international observer reports the corroborating evidence in deciding election disputes in court, while others do not. For example, in **Ghana** in 2012, the incumbent party cited the [conclusions of international observer groups' reports as evidence](#) that the elections were free and fair, but the court dismissed the evidence as inadmissible.

[External Relations Staffing Best Practices](#)

Is there a best practice in terms of external relations staffing at election commissions? (i.e. is there a standard organigram or a checklist of roles or responsibilities to be taken into account?)

[Professionalization of electoral civil service](#)

I just graduated with a degree in Political Science from the University of Buenos Aires. I am researching national reforms to the Electoral Civil Service. I am looking for cases of professionalization

of the electoral civil service in Latin America. The archetypal case for me is the National Electoral Institute (INE, formerly IFE) in Mexico, and I would like to know if there are similar cases, even if they were a failure. I want to thank you in advance for any information on the topic or for contact details of a professional with experience in this.

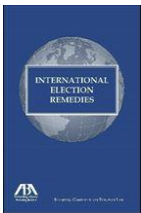
[Election security planning for police officers](#)

I am trying to organise training programs related to election security planning for police officers. The mandate of our organisation is to support ongoing Peacekeeping missions with advisory and technical assistance on range of police matters, as supporting local police in election security has often been the task of UN Police officers. We want to organise a training program that covers the entire spectrum of the election process and potential security concerns. Targets of the training will be police planning and operational officers in field missions that will be responsible for developing and implementing election security plans. The training should take place as early as possible within the next three months. Could practitioners provide examples of training programs that are already developed or any training providers that could customize the training needs for my organisation?

ACE Encyclopaedia: The Latest Updates

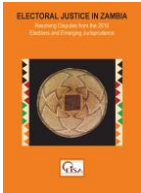
If you would like to see a particular topic addressed in an ACE Focus On or translated into Spanish, French, or Arabic please send your suggestions to facilitators@aceproject.org.

Recent Publications by ACE Partners



[International Election Remedies](#) (contributions from IFES and The Carter Center)

Derived from the fundamental human rights of political participation and universal suffrage, the right to an effective remedy is well established in international law. This publication of the American Bar Association's (ABA) Standing Committee on Election Law explores a range of considerations in understanding the right to an effective remedy in election disputes, including international standards, what actually makes a remedy effective in cases of fraud and malpractice, and the need to balance timeliness and due process in resolving disputes. Election experts from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and The Carter Center contributed several chapters to this publication, released in November 2016.



[Electoral Justice in Zambia: Resolving Disputes from the 2016 Elections and Emerging Jurisprudence](#) (EISA)

This research report was commissioned by the Electoral Institute of Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) following the 11 August 2016 general elections in Zambia with the aim of contributing to stronger election dispute resolution mechanisms in the country. The report documents, reviews and analyses the courts' decisions of the 2016 election petitions, and examines emerging jurisprudence. It also provides recommendations for electoral justice in Zambia.



[Report on the Forum for Electoral Management Bodies in the Arab States](#) (UNDP)

The Forum for Electoral Management Bodies in the Arab States, which took place in Cairo from 9-11 May 2016, was the first of its kind event which brought together officials and representatives of electoral management bodies in the Arab States. The event was a partnership between the League of Arab States, the United Nations Department of Political Affairs (Electoral Assistance Division) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).



[Electoral Risk Management Tool Version 7](#) (International IDEA)

The Electoral Risk Management Tool (ERMTTool) is designed to empower people to ensure peaceful and credible elections. Intended users are electoral management bodies, security sector agencies, civil society and other state and non-state actors. The ERMTTool aims to build the user's capacity to understand, analyze, and mitigate electoral risks. To learn more about the ERMTTool please visit International IDEA's website.