

# Guidelines for Professional Election Reporting



GUIDELINES FOR  
JOURNALISTS COVERING  
THE SOMALILAND ELECTIONS 2021

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## COVERING THE SOMALILAND ELECTIONS 2021 – BE PROFESSIONAL



Nothing is more important for a journalist than covering national elections. Your country's future development is at stake: Which path does Somaliland want to take?

As journalists we must do our utmost to serve the people of our country and to inform and engage them to ensure that they understand what the elections are about.

Fair elections, where every community in the country feel they are represented, are key to any peaceful and democratic development..

As journalists we have a responsibility that goes beyond our responsibility towards the owners of our media outlet. We have a **responsibility to advance and support a democratic development building on freedom of expression**. And at the core of freedom of expression is always **truthful reporting**, where **even the most powerful forces of the country must be subject to critical coverage**.

In Somaliland and other countries affected by war and conflict citizens might believe that the media are mouthpieces for government and other powerful fractions of society. It is up to the individual journalist to show that he or she is trustworthy, and that he or she can be **fair and balanced** in the election coverage.

**Journalists are protected by rights  
guaranteed by Article 32 of the  
Somaliland Constitution**

But remember that **journalists are protected by rights guaranteed by Article 32 of the Somaliland Constitution, Somaliland Press Law No.27/2004** and in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ratified by 154 countries. These rights are guaranteed by major regional conventions on human rights in Africa, the Americas and Europe.

The agreements recognize **journalists' right to seek information, to receive it and to disseminate it freely without government interference.** Government officials may not harass, intimidate or hinder journalists in the exercise of their responsibilities by any means whatsoever. Governments may not censor journalists or use their resources to unfairly influence them. This we should remember if we as journalists feel pressured by public authorities.

These guidelines will hopefully make it easier for Somaliland journalists to make the right decisions if in doubt about their role and responsibilities as well as the appropriate journalistic tools to use during the Somaliland elections.

**The guidelines do not express one truth. Journalism is not an exact science. In journalism you can always debate what is right and what is wrong, but worldwide journalists basically adhere to the same professional and ethical principles.**

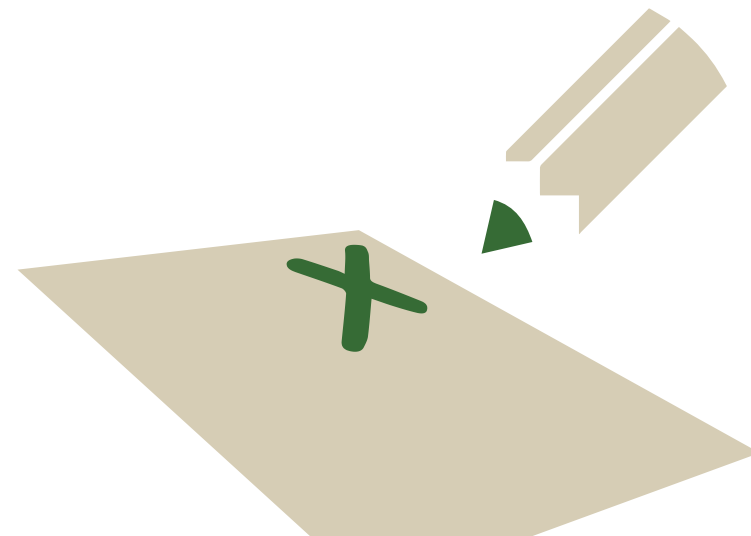
The Somaliland constitution defines a political system that is based on a democratic multi-party structure, in which the head of state, parliament and local councils will be directly elected by the public through a secret ballot.

Somaliland is divided into 6 electoral regions and 23 electoral districts.

The constitution limits the number of parties able to contest the national elections to three which are KULMIYE party, WADANI party and UCID party. Each party nominates 82 candidates to run for House of Representatives and 249 candidates to run for Local Council seats.

The National Electoral Commission (NEC) has conducted a new nationwide voter registration of the voters in 2020/2021 for voters which were not registered in the previous registration and also for voters that have come of age since then after which the NEC has conducted the voter card distribution.

The election will be a one person one vote election in which the registered voters will then cast their ballot and elect the members of the House of Representatives and the Local Councils.



## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE JOURNALIST

When covering an election it is of immense importance to be clear about the role and responsibilities of the journalists and the media.

Every journalist covering an election has a big personal and professional responsibility to ensure that he or she acts professionally and in accordance with international standards.

There is so much at stake in an election that some politicians and people with vested interests will not shy away from bribery and telling lies. **Some will want to buy journalistic services and pay for coverage - a way to disguise political advertisement as journalism.**

But **as journalists we need to act independently of the politicians and cannot be paid for any election stories we produce.** This will compromise our credibility and professionalism.

Even though a media outlet is affiliated with a certain political party we as journalists must still strive **to be fair towards all parties** and not let political opinions and interests of the media owner(s) influence the news production and coverage. This is fundamental journalistic ethics.

However, reporters working for strictly controlled media outlets will usually be under severe pressure to produce stories that advance the opinions of their owners. These reporters are balancing on a sharp edge.

Ideally, our coverage follows the recommendations of a wide range of human rights organizations stating that **an election coverage "should encourage and facilitate a pluralistic expression of opinions"** and make sure that no privileged treatment is given to public or any other authorities.

Our role is to help the citizens understand the key issues of the election in order to make the best possible decisions on whom to vote for. And to inform them about the political actors: About their visions, their policies and the effect of their politics. And on a more personal

level: Who is the political candidate? Does the candidate have a good track record? Is the candidate trustworthy or corrupt?

### CONSIDER THIS QUESTION WHEN DECIDING YOUR PROFESSIONAL ROLE AS A JOURNALIST:

**Does your media have any democratic responsibility or responsibility to help ensure a stable development in Somaliland?**

If you can answer yes to this question then remember that your role as a journalist covering an election is like this:

- ★ **Educate:** To educate and inform the Somaliland citizens to understand the election process and what is at stake for your country.
- ★ **Accuracy:** To report accurately, balanced and without bias.
- ★ **Intermediary:** To act as an intermediary between politicians and electoral colleges and ensure that they listen to each other.
- ★ **Citizens:** To ensure that the Somaliland citizens feel that their interests are covered in the election campaign.



## PLANNING THE ELECTION COVERAGE



**Planning is important** if you want high quality election coverage and do more than just running after the latest press conferences and announcements. Planning your election coverage is a set of many important actions you can take before and during the election campaign:

### SET UP GOALS FOR YOUR COVERAGE

If you are a reporter and part of a news team in a media outlet, then start your planning of the election coverage by setting up goals for the way you want to cover the elections. Develop the goals carefully and in close co-operation between editors and reporters. Write down the goals and make them available for everybody in the organisation.

**Setting up goals** is an important process, because they **make editors and reporters think about how they should plan and carry out the best possible coverage** instead of just waiting for the events to take place.

The goals can also be used as a guideline for the direction of your coverage when you – in the heat of the intense election campaign – tend to forget the general view. Once a week you and your colleagues should take a look at the goals you have set up to make sure that your coverage is on the right track.

### SELECTING ISSUES OF CONCERN FOR THE CITIZENS

Remember that **the word 'politics' comes from the Greek word 'politicos', which means 'for the people'**. So, any political election is about which politicians the citizens want as their leaders. This means that **any election is for the citizens and not for the politicians representing them.**

Therefore, a professional election coverage for any journalist should be to find out what the needs of the citizens are: **Which are the issues of greatest concern to the citizens?** Obviously they need to be well informed about the electoral process.

But an election is more than just reporting on these important formalities. Have any surveys shown the primary concerns of the citizens, or do the reporters sense it from their daily contacts? Make

a list of daily life issues of great importance to the Somaliland citizens, which you will cover and ask the political representatives, what they will do about.

Do these daily life issues have anything to do with the electoral process, somebody might ask? Yes, **politics is also about the lives of the citizens: Their safety, health, economic situation, housing, water supplies, schools, etc.**

You can chose to produce election stories based on your own professional ideas of these issues of concern to the citizens. This means that you do not only have to wait for a press conference or a press release. You should also be professionally pro-active.

### REMEMBER TO PRODUCE CONTENT FOR YOUR DIGITAL MEDIA

Remember to plan for more than your original media platform: Newspaper, TV, radio or website. You should also – if you at all have the resources – **create content for some of the digital and mobile devices** used by your audience be it Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram or other platforms. Or the mobile phone. Often it does not take much extra time to deliver something cool for these platforms.

**Digital media is brilliant in activating and engage your audience** in dialogue. With these media it is a lot easier to communicate between you as a journalist and your audience.



★ **Website:** Does your media outlet run a website? Make a plan of how to interact and cross promote content between your website and your main media outlet.



★ **Blogging:** Can you produce blogs, transmit live events etc. for your website or your Facebook page?

★ **Mobile:** Consider if you can deliver fast content on the mobile phone, which is being used by many people.



★ **Social media:** Consider if you can use social media like Facebook and Twitter and other social media not only to deliver election content but also to engage with your audience, keep a dialogue with them, answering their questions etc.



## GET AN OVERVIEW OF THE ANNOUNCED EVENTS

In the next phase of your planning you should try to get an overview of announced election events as part of your planning. **Decide what you will be covering.** If you have the resources, ask a secretary or a student to gather all possible information about the announced political events and **make a daily event-list**, which should be ready early in the morning so that you can plan, using the list, how to use the resources at the editorial meeting in the morning.

## PREPARING YOURSELF FOR THE COVERAGE OF THE CRUCIAL ELECTION DAYS

Covering the crucial election days is always very hectic, and you and your colleagues should make careful plans of how to approach it. Stick to your plans unless something unusual occurs.

When reporting in a state like Somaliland dominated by conflict you should carefully **report on the logistics of voting and remember to follow the vote counting process.** Have a plan that includes interviews with ordinary citizens, both men and women, as well as the influential elders from different areas or regions, and check the views of election monitors. Also **keep an eye on security** forces or gatherings of crowds of people.

## If there are problems with the election process you must investigate and report in order to hold relevant people and authorities accountable

### THE IMPORTANT DAYS AFTER THE ELECTION

Finally, do not forget to think about the days after the election. It is a common error in planning the coverage of an election that you either forget or do not have the energy to **plan the extremely important days after the elections.** But this is an important time as the process of naming the cabinet of the new government.

You should of course pay full attention to the process leading to a new government.

Truth!

## JOURNALISTIC CREDIBILITY: ALWAYS SEEK THE TRUTH AND BE FAIR AND BALANCED

This is what it is all about. Respect for truth and for **the right of the public to truth.** According to the International Federation of Journalists this is the first duty of the journalist.

And **with truth comes reliable reporting.** You must honestly collect and publish news and **report in accordance with facts. Do not suppress important information.** Your audience must trust your reporting. If they do not trust your reporting why should they bother to waste time on you.

The competent election coverage explores and presents **a variety of opinions.** In doing so, we can create the basis of a qualified discussion. And this is the core of any election: Discussion of the challenges our country and its communities are facing, and what the political candidates can do to overcome these challenges. This we must try our best to reflect in our election coverage.

The goal of any professional journalist should be to do a **fair, balanced and impartial coverage.** This should be the solid foundation on which all election coverage is based.

According to the International Federation of Journalists: "The journalist shall at all times defend ... the right of fair comment and criticism." Your reporting will lose credibility if it is just a platform for one-sided attacks on political opponents. **An attacked part must always and without any exception be given the opportunity comment on the attack.**

And remember that any good journalist lets the audience sense that he has an important story to tell. Your audience must feel the importance of the election story. **Modern journalism is critical and engaged – but always based on a high professional level of fairness.**

Seeking balance in your coverage does not necessarily mean that each source should have exactly the same amount of space in each of your stories. Usually the dominant parties will get the largest attention. The more powerful the more attention. However, care must be taken



not to neglect or downplay certain groups of society like minorities or other groups that usually do not have a voice in public.

When you look back and evaluate your election coverage you should be able to say that each important player as well as the public and those without a voice have been heard.



### HOW TO BE FAIR AND BALANCED?

These recommendations on how to be fair and balanced during an election campaign were agreed on by a panel of African election reporting specialists gathered by International Media Support in Ghana in 2012:

- ★ **Honesty:** Be honest. Tell the truth or what you strongly believe is the truth.
- ★ **Balance:** All political sides, politicians as well as citizens, should have access to your media outlet. Avoid covering only one side of the political parties. Keep the balance and reflect a diversity of opinion.
- ★ **Fairness:** Treat every political candidate fair and always remember to give anybody who is attacked or criticized by others the opportunity to comment. Fairness is to loyally disseminate the main points of the candidates, but don't just hold the microphone. It is also your duty to ask critical questions on behalf of the citizens and challenge the opinions of the candidate. Not necessarily because you mistrust the candidate, but to help the candidate qualify his arguments to make it easier for the citizens to understand these arguments.
- ★ **Impartiality:** Try what ever you can to be impartial. Report election news in the language of the candidates unless they use inflammatory language, and separate facts from comments you quote. Remember to clearly emphasize comments with quotation-marks and the name of the person behind the comment.

### HOW TO BE FAIR AND BALANCED?

- ★ **Facts-based:** Do not report rumours, check allegations etc. Don't be too selective with the facts and only present one side of the facts.
- ★ **Neutrality:** Take a distance from the story and forget your personal opinions and feelings, be non-partisan and don't openly identify yourself with any politicians. Naturally you can vote as a journalist and have political sympathies, but you must have a professional attitude and not ignore election stories that are important for all or some of the voters. Also remember to leave out your own opinions from your election news coverage.
- ★ **Responsibility:** Think of the possible consequences of your reporting. Will your reporting ignite hatred? Will your reporting damage ordinary citizens who are just expressing their views? If this is the case then skip your report.

## FOLLOW THE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

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The professional journalist knows and respects **international standards of professional journalism**, which are based on the ideal that the journalist always and without any exceptions will seek the truth in his or her reporting and not act as an instrument for somebody with specific political goals. Even though the journalist works for a media organization with political aims, which many journalists do worldwide, he or she is expected to **act professionally and to report truthfully**.

## Act professionally and report truthfully

In deciding if and how to cover an election story truth is one priority, **news criteria** another consideration.

## USE THESE NEWS CRITERIA TO ASSESS IF AN ELECTION NEWS STORY SHOULD BE PUBLISHED

When you cover the election campaign you should keep the following news criteria in mind, when you consider if an election story is worth doing. If the election news you consider to produce do not score high on at least two of these news criteria then do not produce it.

### ★ IMPORTANCE

Don't just run after anything that moves. Be careful in your selection. Aim primarily at doing election stories that are important and of fundamental significance to Somaliland. On the other hand, take care that you not only produce stories of high importance as defined by the government and the ruling class. Connect the important daily life issues of the ordinary citizens with your election reporting.

### ★ RELEVANCE

People can often best relate to election stories with direct relevance to their daily life like stories on their personal safety, health, water and sanitation, schools etc. These issues are considered of high relevance.

### ★ SENSATION

Sensational stories are usually of great interest to your audience, but remember to distinguish between empty sensations like e.g. the private life of politicians and substantial sensations like events and developments of great importance.

### ★ IDENTIFICATION

It is often easier for voters to understand complicated election news if you can tell these stories through ordinary people and how they are affected by the election news. This makes it easier for your audience to identify themselves with the theme of the election story.

### ★ CONSTRUCTIVE

In Somaliland there is a big need for so-called constructive election news. News that report on constructive and successful solutions to problems in Somaliland and about people who have made an effort to change things to the better. Simply election news that can inspire other Somalis to seek constructive and positive solutions.

## ASK QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGE THE POLITICIANS

- ★ Remember that you are representing the citizens and ask questions on their behalf
- ★ Challenge the politicians on substantive issues by asking them simple questions like:



*"How will you do that?"*

*"Why is this necessary?"*

*"How will you finance this?"*

- ★ Listen carefully to the answers from the politicians and follow up with new questions.

## USE INDEPENDENT EXPERTS TO SUPPLEMENT THE POLITICAL SOURCES

- ★ Experts from e.g. universities and research institutions can answer possible questions raised by a political statement.
- ★ Experts can put your news story into perspective.
- ★ Experts can assess if a political statement is true, realistic, legal etc.
- ★ Experts can balance your news story.

*But be careful when calling an expert: The expert should be as independent as possible and not have any known political or private agendas.*





## PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS ARE NOT JUST STENOGRAPHERS – THEY REPORT

- ★ Don't just hold the microphone for the politicians and don't just repeat all the words of the candidates – you are not a stenographer. You select and edit the news according to news value and relevance to your users
- ★ Report details of where the report was given, what the reactions are from the citizens and what the reactions are of the main opponents and independent experts

## FIND YOUR OWN NEWS

- ★ Although much election news come from press releases and press conferences, you should not just rely on officials to give you news – find it yourself.
- ★ You should also find stories that reveal how the government operates or fails to operate in the interests of the citizens.

## MAKE POLITICAL NEWS UNDERSTANDABLE

- ★ Do not just copy paste press releases from the political players taking over their news angle and use of language
- ★ Find the relevant news angle and lead on that
- ★ If possible lead on the possible consequences of the political news
- ★ Tell the news story in a concrete and easily understandable language without any linguistic influence from the source behind the news story

# HANDLING HATE SPEECH AND INFLAMMATORY LANGUAGE

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Inflammatory language is one of the most common causes of conflict. Just one wrong word or image can lit the fire and create chaos. Language and images are very powerful tools and should be handled carefully and with great awareness.

Think before speaking or writing – and use one of the most important journalistic rules: **Listen to sources and political candidates openly and without prejudice.** This also includes listening for the meaning behind the words. Conflicts often arise because one part does not feel that they are heard.

## OUR WORDS CAN KILL – BE CAREFUL

As a journalist you will have to be very sensitive and careful with your language and **never deliberately try to offend or harm anybody.**

**Images can often have an even stronger impact than words.** Be careful when publishing cartoons and images making fun of someone – especially if the satire is about religion, ethnicity or nationality.

Part of the misuse of inflammatory language is **hate speech**, which vilifies a person or a group on the basis of race, colour, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, or other characteristics. Hate speech usually covers comments which are directed against a person or a particular group of persons.

The recent history of Africa has seen several terrifying examples of hate speech in the media that have ignited brutal violence, but every journalist has a responsibility. And don't use the bad excuse that you were just quoting someone. **If a source uses inflammatory language you must very carefully and in a dialogue with your editor consider if you should convey this message or not.**

## OUR RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION DOES NOT ALLOW US TO SAY ANYTHING

As journalists we sometimes suffer from the misunderstanding that the right to freedom of expression is the freedom to state anything either in our own words or in the words of the sources that we quote. But **unlike the right to freedom of thought the right to freedom of expression is not an absolute right**. The exercise of this freedom carries with it certain **duties and responsibilities** and is subject to restrictions concerning the protection of the rights of others.

This means that any decent journalist will **not spread messages inciting, promoting or justifying hatred** based on religious, ethnic or racial intolerance.

As journalists we should be aware that such hateful expressions may have a greater and more damaging impact when disseminated through the media.

## Journalistic codes of ethics will always recommend the journalists not to disseminate hate speech

It is important to be aware of the distinction between the responsibility of the author of expressions of "hate speech" and that of the media for their dissemination of hate speech.

**Journalistic codes of ethics will always recommend the journalists not to disseminate hate speech** and not to use inflammatory language. But if the journalist – in the interest of the general public – deems it necessary to disseminate hateful statements he or she is strongly urged not to let these statements stand alone and always to seek comments and reactions that will balance the picture or as a minimum to confront the sender of the hateful statements with critical questions.

## WHAT TO DO PROFESSIONALLY WHEN YOU RUN INTO HATE SPEECH?

The recommendations below on how to handle hate speech and inflammatory language during an election campaign were agreed on by a panel of African election reporting specialists gathered by International Media Support in Ghana in 2012:

- ★ **Hate speech:** Avoid negative campaigns against certain groups and minorities in society, and avoid inflammatory metaphors negatively describing groups of society.
- ★ **Insulting:** Do not use offensive wording and avoid insulting signs and symbols. If you quote a strong statement from a politician, who is insulting a political opponent do not publish it before you get a comment from the attacked part - and be careful to clearly mark the quote.
- ★ **Inflammatory images and audio:** Avoid inflammatory videos, pictures, cartoons, audio etc.
- ★ **Uncivil language and behaviour:** Journalistic and private temper is fine, but be civilized: Don't shout and scream, and don't interrupt unnecessarily. Avoid name-calling.
- ★ **Attacks on minorities:** Avoid xenophobia and disseminating verbal attacks on ethnic minorities, foreign nationals, sexual minorities and other minority groups, who are easy targets by the majority. Avoid name-calling of another ethnic groups, stereotypes, bigotry and slurs.
- ★ **Gender:** Be aware of sexist and discriminatory language about women. Do not treat women differently from men.
- ★ **Spreading rumours:** Be careful not to spread rumours. Always check facts and if possible get two sources independent of each other to verify if something is true.

Ethics is about the choices you make as a reporter.

Some of the most difficult ethical dilemmas in the media involve people's – and very often politician's – privacy. **You might have the legal right to publish a story, but do you also have the moral right?** This is the key question in ethical reporting. Ethics are about the choices you make as a reporter: Should you do the news story or should you let it go?

Ethical dilemmas are often particularly difficult in political reporting and especially in times of elections, where political opponents usually try to undermine the credibility of their opponents by smearing them and sometimes by digging up private stories from their past and – in some cases – fabricating false stories.

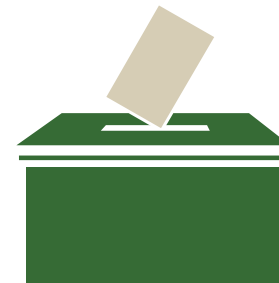
There is rarely one right decision. Editors and reporters using the same moral reasoning may come up with different decisions. But a fair guideline would be like this:

## Only publish private information about public officials and politicians if their private doings negatively affect their public duties

So you must be well aware of your own ethical standards: What will you publish, and what will you not publish? **Will you publish a story that you know is false or grossly exaggerated?** Hopefully not, because then you are an immoral cheater.

If your media outlet does not have any guidelines regulating the behaviour of the journalists during the election campaign it might be a good idea for the editors to formulate this:

- ★ Set guidelines on accepting payments and gifts from the candidates: As a general rule this should not be accepted.
- ★ Set restrictions on reporters' and editors' political activities: As a general rule journalists covering the elections should not be political activists, even though it should be their right to be member of a political party and to vote.



## SAFETY FOR SOMALILAND JOURNALISTS COVERING THE ELECTIONS

Journalists face escalated dangers and nothing is as sensitive as election.

Media independence and freedom crackdowns and arbitrary arrests might increase. There is a risk that 2021 elections will lead to further increase crackdowns, arbitrary arrests, and threats against journalists and media as well. Campaigns and arguments of the different political groups and candidates will lead to tensions might increase the risks for journalists.

### RISKS

Journalists who don't report according to the ethical standards and code of conducts- for example by using hate speech, or by favoring special candidates – might create enemies and put themselves, their media houses and their colleagues at risk.

### HOW TO REDUCE RISKS

#### ★ USE SAFETY MANUALS

Safety manuals have guidelines for minimizing risks. Currently there are no safety manuals that respond to the particular security challenges for journalists in Somaliland, but the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has translated their universal Journalist Security Guide to Somali language. See the link: [https://cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/cpj\\_security\\_guide-somali.pdf](https://cpj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/cpj_security_guide-somali.pdf)

#### ★ RISK ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

It is important that the media houses are equipped to assess risks in advance before assigning teams to the field. They also need to be able to act on incidents where their staff is exposed to risks.

#### ★ PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

Train journalists covering dangerous or risky assignments in order to equip them with skills such as first aid, basic rules to follow, use of communication systems, dressing behavior and offer psychological support when needed.

#### ★ CONSIDER GENDER

Establish special protection measures to address gender sensitive issues in order to be able to assign female reporters to the field, which can give a more equal coverage of women.

# GUIDELINES FOR JOURNALISTS COVERING THE SOMALILAND ELECTIONS 2021



## REPORTER, REMEMBER THIS



- ★ **Ethical standards:** Know the ethical standards and code of conduct for journalists. If not you risk biased or incorrect reporting that can put yourself, your media house and your colleagues at risk.
- ★ **Truth:** Always seek the truth or what you deep in your heart believe is the truth and report these truthful facts.
- ★ **Serve your fellow citizens:** Remind yourself that an election is about politics, and that this comes from the Greek word 'politicos', which means 'for the citizens'. Your election reporting should always be in the interest of the citizens.

*These guidelines were originally developed in 2017 by International Media Support (IMS) in consultation with Somaliland stakeholders. They were updated for this version in 2021 by IMS in consultation with Somaliland election experts and stakeholders.*

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Design: [www.kochfalk.dk](http://www.kochfalk.dk)*



IMS is an NGO working for global press freedom supporting local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity, and political transition.

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This publication was published with support from the European Union and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)