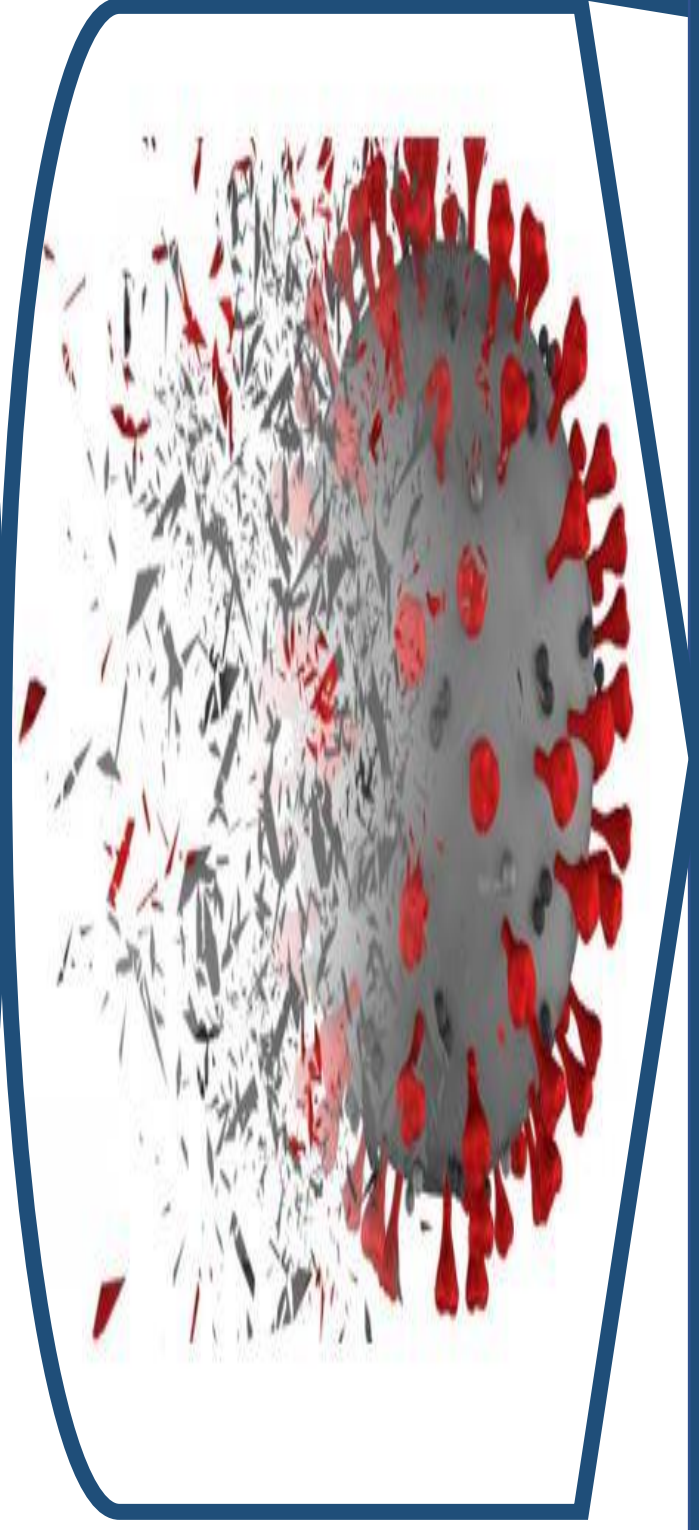


The Oversight Role of the Somalia Parliament on Government Policy Response for Covid-19 Pandemic



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Abstract

Since 1991, Somalia has been wracked by civil war, terrorists, poverty, and political instability, but after two decades, new lawmakers have been selected under the provisional federal constitution of Somalia. Following the establishment of the House of the People of Somalia federal parliament, the legislatures have undertaken their responsibilities to strengthen accountability and oversight to improve the government's response to the needs of Somali citizens.

Parliamentary scrutiny is a necessary component of democracy. This prevents the executive branch from abusing its power during the unprecedented challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it serves as a tool to hold the government accountable for its activities, ensuring that policies are implemented and resources available are spent in line with the law and budget approved by the legislature.

Article 69 of Somalia's provisional constitution stipulates that the Somalia Federal Parliament oversees the executive to ensure laws and policy are implemented.

This article focuses on the oversight role of Somalia's parliament in government policy response during this pandemic crisis.

The paper mainly focuses on recording oversight, official reports, and plenary meetings from the parliament, which were used to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic from July 2020. This study employed descriptive research methods, and the existing recent literature was reviewed.

Keyword: *Oversight, Somalia, Parliament, Covid-19 pandemic*

Introduction

Oversight is the cornerstone of parliamentary functions and scrutinizing the operation of the executive branch and exercising control over the implementation of the law, government policy, and how the budget is spent to improve government performance and accountability (World Bank Institute, 2007). This oversight is very important for a critical issue in the government policy response to COVID-19 to mitigate the challenges and crises created by the unprecedented pandemic of Coronavirus. However, Somalia's Federal Parliament has paid scant attention to the oversight of parliament during this pandemic crisis because of the integration of legislatures and councils of ministers.

Governments around the world have taken different measures to mitigate the virus by imposing lockdowns, wearing facemasks, prohibiting public gatherings, and closing schools, universities, and markets. (Agency & Cooperation, 2020). In this regard, the Somali government has adapted similar measures to curb the coronavirus and has issued decrees such as lockdown, closure of schools and universities, prohibiting public gatherings, closing borders, and restricting flights (Crises24, 2020). This led to the concentration of power, unemployment, poverty, losing jobs of many informal workers, increasing and rising inequality, increased corruption funding allocated to the Coronavirus, and violations of fundamental human rights.

Furthermore, the Somalia federal parliament has to maintain check and balance and exercise oversight to prevent power abuse and embezzling of public funds designated for curbing the virus.

It has been argued that the dysfunctional House of the People of Somalia federal parliament, the lack of political ideology, clan-power sharing, individual interests, and the lack of competency of some members of

parliament erodes effective oversight, accountability, integrity, and transparency.

The study focuses on the Somali parliament's oversight role in the government policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research utilized the official reports and oversight meetings held by the parliament in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate the importance of parliamentary oversight in tackling the pandemic's major challenges which impact the lives of citizens as well as how oversight holds the executive accountable for its response to the pandemic. This research paper attempts to investigate the following research questions: how is effective oversight essential for the government's policy response to COVID-19 during this critical challenge where the parliament faces a lockdown; how important it is for government operations to be conducted through oversight functions for integrity, transparency, and accountability to reduce the socio-economic impact faced by citizens; and how the role of oversight was strengthened by adopting the new reality caused by the pandemic. The study focuses on recording oversight activities and the report of parliamentary committee scrutiny about the COVID-19 pandemic, which took place from July 2020.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of oversight is a mechanism for ensuring that government tasks are carried out in conformity with parliament-approved laws and regulations, as well as for constraining the executive's power. Regarding, this critical situation caused by the pandemic COVID-19, parliamentary oversight is required to scrutinize how the government's regulations and decrees such as those on lockdowns, bans on public gatherings, and school and university closures impact the lives of the citizens and it induce poverty, loss of jobs, and the concentration of power in the hands of the

executive, as well as violations of human rights.

The paper seeks to investigate how effective parliamentary oversight is critical for a government policy response to the pandemic. It further examines how effective oversight is essential for shaping government policy to curb COVID-19 and how important it is for government operations to be conducted through oversight functions in a transparent and accountable manner. Finally, how oversight ensures that the crisis's burden on citizens' lives is reduced.

Government Policy Response.

On March 16, 2020, the Somalia Ministry of Health declared the first case of COVID-19 disease that had been detected in Somalia. The pandemic not only affects Somalia's fragile health system and has socio-economic implications, but also exacerbates inequality, poverty, and access to daily food and essential health needs. However, the Somalia government has implemented government policy responsive to COVID-19 to curb the spread of the pandemic, which are the following:

1. Lockdown

The Somalia government confirmed the first case of a Covid-19 infected Somali student who had come back from China (Maruf, 2020). Therefore, the government urgently announced the lockdown from 08:00 p.m. to 05:00 a.m. local time in Mogadishu. The nightly restrictions imposed by the government have had direct and indirect effects on vulnerable people who work at night and internally displaced people (IDPs). Besides, there are numerous street vendors and nightly workers in hotels, supermarkets, restaurants, and coffee shops who become jobless and do not get compensation, free food, or cash transfers from the government.

2. Assigning one hospital to treat COVID patients

The pandemic coincided with a time when there were budget constraints, the collapse of the public health system, a lack of medical professionals, and inadequate health system, and weak institutions (Braam et al., 2021). As the consequence, the government set up only Martine hospital to diagnose and treat cases related to the COVID-19 cases in the capital and southern regions, and there are other main challenges, including a shortage of ventilators and the absence of oxygen supplies at the onset of the pandemic (Migration, 2020)

3. Establishment of the National COVID-19 Task Force

The government has established a national COVID-19 Task Force to curb the spread of pandemics (International, 2021). And also, the ministry of health has set up a free call center where medical professionals provide health advice on a hotline to citizens. On the other hand, the government allocated approximately \$5 million to battling this virus, which is tiny in comparison to the pandemic's impact on people's lives and socio-economic loss (Braam et al., 2021).

4. Closing universities, schools, and public gatherings

The other main measures of Somalia's COVID-19 response were to close schools, universities, and public gatherings (UN OCHA, 2020). In addition, Somali authorities suspended local and international flights, and the ministry of health conducted public awareness through the media, TVs, and telemediation companies.

The oversight of the House of the People
COVID-19 poses a potential challenge to the functions of parliament, such as oversight, committee inquiry, and legislation (Lucia, 2020). In this paper, we focus on how Somalia's parliamentary oversight mitigates this crisis during the unprecedented pandemic because the parliamentary

oversight is a cornerstone tool to ensure the adequate balance of health regulation related to human rights restrictions and the executive branch's concentration of power. The current pandemic crisis necessitates effective parliamentary oversight to avoid the violation of civilians by security forces during the lockdown. Additionally, Somalia police forces shot dead two people, including a woman in Mogadishu, while enforcing a coronavirus lockdown. (Aljazeera English, 2020). In this regard, the Somalia Parliament is required to play a critical role in maintaining check and balance, preventing the executive from concentrating power through the oversight function, and ensuring the most vulnerable groups have access to emergency health care and other measures of protection, as well as mitigating the impact of income loss on vulnerable people caused by the pandemic.

Oversight is necessary to alleviate the burden placed on people by the pandemic through scrutinizing the government's response to COVID-19. In addition, the Somalia Provisional Constitution stipulates that the Somalia Parliament be held accountable for the executive and independent commissions (The Federal Republic of Somalia, 2012).

The lockdown heavily affected daily workers and poor people because most Somali employees work in the informal economy. Equally, autorickshaw drivers, restaurant and hotel workers, street vendors, and supermarket workers faced a loss of income to maintain their consumption level, limited access to health care, and information due to the government's policy response to COVID-19. Although the Somalia economy is very weak because the government has received financial aid, medicine, and medical equipment from donor countries, the government has failed effectively to deal with pandemic crises due to corruption and mismanagement (Danish Immigration Service, 2020).

However, the parliament's plenary meetings were suspended, and the parliament has been unable to continue functioning due to the pandemic, but the legislature is required to adapt to other alternative mechanisms such as the Zoom and Microsoft team platform to pursue its oversight by amending rules of procedure temporarily to exercise its oversight function to alleviate this pandemic crisis faced by Somalia's people, including vulnerable people, as 70% of Somali people are living in extreme poverty (Bureau, 2021). This method has been adopted by many Latin American countries, such as Brazil and Chile, which use that applications. (Lucia, 2020). COVID-19 has a massive effect on Somalia's informal economy, which is dependent on remittances, imports, livestock exported, and agriculture. It also exacerbated vulnerable people, including internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UN OCHA, 2020).

The fall in remittances mainly affects people's purchasing power, and COVID-19 exacerbates economic stagnation and cripples Somalia's federal and state revenue. Furthermore, most of Somalia's workers are informal, such as teachers, university lecturers, restaurant and hotel workers, and due to COVID-19, 29 percent of household heads lost their main source of income, because of the closing of some essential sources of income (Bureau, 2021). The Somalia parliament has underperformed to exert pressure on the government through its oversight role by ensuring free food delivery and cash transfers to daily wage workers and others who have been left without jobs as a result of the government's lockdown.

According to plenary meeting recordings since July 2020, after the parliament's 7th session was resumed, which was one of the last two sessions of the term of Somalia's tenth parliament, the House of People of Somalia federal parliament has failed to conduct oversight during this critical

situation created by the pandemic. Furthermore, the House of People did not raise and not included its agendas in plenary debates about the coronavirus pandemic's impact on all Somalia citizens' lives (House of People, 2020).

In contrast, the House of People established an ad-hoc committee named "the committee on food security and nutrition" which focused on the impact of the pandemic on food security, unemployment, education, and domestic trade. Their report relied entirely on public hearings from Somalia's economists, agricultural experts, and businesspeople. However, the report was not based on empirical data or quantitative or qualitative research (House of the People, 2020). Equally, the committee of economic, commerce, industry, and investment of the House of the People has issued a report that indicates \$8–10 million of government revenue has decreased and also \$2–3 million of money remittance from Somalia's diaspora was halted as a result of the pandemic's global impact, which increased poverty and inequality. Additionally, the committee stated in its report that there was a job loss among travel agency workers, the informal workers of hotels and restaurants, and a decline in Somalia's exports and imports without any empirical data (Committee of Economy and Commerce, 2020). Undoubtedly, the House of the People has paid little attention to scrutinizing the impact of inequality on access to health care related to the coronavirus pandemic, rate of death, embezzlement of funds allocated to the pandemic, and violation of fundamental rights, and this led to the power concentration of the executive as a consequence of the Somalia police forces killing two citizens during restrictions. In addition, it has not exerted pressure on the government thought oversight to expand the hospitals' treatment of the coronavirus because only Martine hospital was assigned to cure coronavirus

affected people in Mogadishu and southern regions.

Due to the absence of oversight by the House of the People that could alleviate the burden of the pandemic crisis, the pandemic has overburdened Somalia's fragile healthcare system, affected access to medical care, the lives of vulnerable citizens, education accessibility, and increased social inequality.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that the oversight role is very important for scrutinizing the operation of the executive branch and the implementation of law and public policy. This unprecedented challenge was created by the pandemic, which impacted the lives of people, including internally displaced people (IDPs). Furthermore, effective oversight promotes accountability, transparency, and good governance, limiting the power abuse of the executive branch, and enhancing the lives of people during this pandemic. Additionally, Somalia's legislature has not paid any consideration to an oversight during the critical challenges created by COVID-19 and prefers the parliament to concentrate on the political agendas, according to the parliamentary sessional report.

This paper is based on the sessional reports and plenary meetings of the House of the People of Somalia federal parliament. However, there is a lack of reliable data from the Somalian government about the casualties in terms of the death toll, economic loss, and unemployment rate caused by COVID-19. This research paper indicates that oversight is necessary to ensure the implementation of law and public policy, the performance of the government, good governance, and the protection of human rights, especially during the critical situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Recommendation

Based on the descriptive research methods and the recent literature that was reviewed, we recommend the following:

- To promote the parliamentary oversight because the oversight function makes sure that the government and its institutions use their power and resources wisely and properly in this difficult situation caused by the pandemic;
- The House of the People should initiate the legislation related to the pandemic and also amend the rules of the procedures for the functions of the parliament to be conducted by using online platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams' video;
- The parliament should reduce the quorum of plenary and committee meetings by amending the rules of procedures temporarily to carry out their national duties during a pandemic;
- Parliament must ensure that people, particularly the most vulnerable, have access to COVID-19-related health care, vaccine distribution, and an increase in the number of hospitals assigned to coronavirus across the country;
- Set up an ad hoc committee to monitor and evaluate pandemic-related operations as well as all the reports related to the COVID-19 must be presented to the committee;
- Strengthening oversight in the use of funds allocated for pandemic health care under the parliament-approved budget;
- To put pressure on the government to implement a tax exemption for essential foods, distribute protective equipment to vulnerable people, and provide financial assistance to all small businesses that suffered losses; and
- Parliament must pursue its mandate towards the government to maintain public confidence in the response to

socio-economic crises and to regularly communicate with the public through the media and social media.

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