

Somalia handed Hassan Sheikh Mohamud the presidency for a second time following Sunday's long-overdue election in the troubled Horn of Africa nation, which is confronting an Islamist insurgency and the threat of famine.

After a marathon poll involving 36 candidates that was broadcast live on state TV, parliamentary officials counted 214 votes in favour of former president Mohamud, far more than the number required to defeat incumbent Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed, better known as Farmajo.

Celebratory gunfire erupted in the capital Mogadishu, with many hoping that the vote will draw a line under a political crisis that has lasted well over a year, after Farmajo's term ended in February 2021 without an election.

Mohamud, who was previously president from 2012-2017, was sworn in shortly after the votes were counted and struck a conciliatory tone as he addressed the country.

"It is indeed commendable that the president is here standing by my side, we must move forward and never backwards, we have to heal any grievances," he said, referring to Farmajo, who hailed the successful completion of the long-awaited poll.

"I welcome my brother here, the new president Hassan Sheik Mohamud and wish him luck with the huge task... we will be in solidarity with him," Farmajo said.

Somalia's international partners had repeatedly warned that the election delays — caused by political infighting — were a dangerous distraction from the fight against Al-Shabaab insurgents who have been trying to overthrow the government for more than a decade.

In a reminder of the country's treacherous security situation, explosions were heard Sunday near Mogadishu's heavily-guarded airport complex where MPs were voting. Police said no casualties were reported in the blasts.

'A lost year'

Somalia has not held a one-person, one-vote election in 50 years. Instead, polls follow a complex indirect model, where state legislatures and clan delegates pick lawmakers for the national parliament, who in turn choose the president.

Samira Gaid, executive director of the Mogadishu-based Hiraal Institute think-tank, told AFP ahead of the election that familiar names would enjoy an advantage in the

polls.

“People will not go for a new face, they will definitely go for old faces, people that they recognise, people that they feel they’re more comfortable with,” she said.

The first Somali president to win a second term, Mohamud has promised to transform Somalia into “a peaceful country that is at peace with the world”.

He will inherit several challenges from his predecessor, including a devastating drought that threatens to drive millions into famine.

UN agencies have warned of a humanitarian catastrophe unless early action is taken, with emergency workers fearing a repeat of the devastating 2011 famine, which killed 260,000 people — half of them children under the age of six.

He will also need to repair the damage caused by months of political chaos and infighting, both at the executive level and between the central government and state authorities.

“It’s really been a lost year for Somalia,” said Omar Mahmood, an analyst at the International Crisis Group (ICG) think-tank.

“This long-awaited election has been divisive. Reconciliation is the most immediate challenge,” Mahmood told AFP.

Insurgents emboldened

The heavily indebted country is also at risk of losing access to a three-year \$400-million (380-million-euro) aid package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which is set to automatically expire by mid-May if a new administration is not in place by then.

The government has asked for a three-month extension until August 17, according to the IMF, which has not yet responded to the request.

Over 70 percent of Somalia’s population lives on less than \$1.90 a day.

The international community had long warned the Farmajo government that the political chaos had allowed Al-Shabaab to exploit the situation and carry out more frequent and large-scale attacks.

Twin suicide bombings in March killed 48 people in central Somalia, including two local lawmakers.

Earlier this month, an attack on an African Union (AU) base killed 10 Burundian peacekeepers, according to Burundi's army. It was the deadliest raid on AU forces in the country since 2015.

The Al-Qaeda-linked insurgents controlled Mogadishu until 2011 when they were pushed out by an African Union force, but still hold territory in the countryside.