



**IRI-NDI VIRTUAL PRE-ELECTION
ASSESSMENT DELEGATION FOR THE
2021 ETHIOPIAN ELECTIONS**

MAY 13, 2021



IRI-NDI Virtual Pre-Election Assessment Delegation for the 2021 Ethiopian Elections

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INTRODUCTION

On June 5, 2021, Ethiopia is scheduled to hold elections for the House of Peoples' Representatives, the first following sweeping political changes and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sixth since the return to civilian rule. In response to an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia and subsequent accreditation as election observers and in accordance with the laws and directives of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) are jointly conducting an International Election Assessment Mission for Ethiopia (IEAME), an adapted international observation methodology.

IEAME Methodology: The IEAME is employing an adaptation of international election observation methodology. The goal of the IEAME is to provide the citizens of Ethiopia and the international community with an impartial and accurate assessment of the election environment and offer constructive recommendations based on international and regional standards for democratic elections and consistent with Ethiopian law. Due to the constraints imposed by the global health crisis, the IEAME is being conducted primarily using systematic remote engagement in accordance with the precepts set out in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation for independent impartial assessments and regional instruments to which Ethiopia is a signatory, including the African Union (AU) Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa. Further, in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the IEAME is adhering to international and Ethiopian public health measures. Funding for this joint NDI/IRI effort is provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

As a critical element of this methodology, IRI/NDI organized a virtual pre-election assessment delegation (VPEAD) from April 9 to 26 and offer the following analysis of the pre-election environment and preparations for Ethiopia's June elections. This analysis provides a snapshot in time based on in-depth virtual interviews with a wide array of key electoral and political stakeholders, including senior representatives of the NEBE, government agencies, political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), the media, citizen election observers, and the diplomatic community, as well as drawing upon both Institutes' expertise and relationships in Ethiopia.

The VPEAD was led by: Ambassador Johnnie Carson, NDI Board Member and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; the Honorable Constance Berry Newman, IRI Board Member and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; and the Honorable Ahmed Issack Hassan, former Chairperson of Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). The delegation also included election and regional experts: Shari Bryan, NDI Vice President; Gregory Kearns, IRI Africa Division Director; Gemima Neves Barlow, NDI Deputy Regional Director for Southern and East Africa; and Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, IRI Senior Africa Advisor. The VPEAD was supported by Stéphane Mondon, the IEAME Mission Director and Stefan Szwed, Deputy Mission Director. In addition to the VPEAD, the IEAM includes the Mission Director, Deputy Director, remotely located long-term thematic analysts (LTAs) with local assistants, an LTA Coordinator, and dedicated headquarters teams at both IRI and NDI. A small technical team will join efforts in Addis Ababa over the immediate election period, and all will contribute to the IEAM final report following the elections.

All of the VPEAD's consultations were conducted on a strictly nonpartisan basis and without interference in the election process. In the spirit of international cooperation, the NDI/IRI offer this pre-election analysis in the hopes of contributing to Ethiopian efforts at strengthening democratic institutions and effective election practices and improving citizen engagement and accountability in Ethiopia. The delegates are deeply grateful to all those who met with them and generously shared their views. As an expression of popular sovereignty, it will be the Ethiopian people who ultimately assess the character of their elections and take advantage of any openings to engender further meaningful political change. IRI and NDI will continue to assess the overall electoral process through to its conclusion.

SUMMARY FINDINGS AND PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Ethiopia's 2021 elections, scheduled for June 5, could be an opportunity for building on recent reforms and developing more inclusive, transparent and accountable governance in the country. However, significant difficulties, including widespread insecurity and ethnic conflicts, delays in National Electoral Board of Ethiopia's (NEBE's) candidate and voter registration procedures, poor cooperation from some state governments, boycotts and threats of boycotts by several political parties with broad constituencies, as well as the COVID-19 public health crisis, threaten the ability of voters and parties to participate in the process and, thereby, the potential for credible elections. Serious and concerted efforts prior to Election Day by all stakeholders are necessary to hold meaningful elections and lay the groundwork for national reconciliation and democratic progress beyond the elections.

Reforms introduced since 2018 have resulted in widespread political and social changes, including greater freedoms for citizens, CSOs, political parties and the media. Changes to election and political party related laws, have addressed a number of restrictive elements of the legal framework. The appointment of Chairperson Birtukan Mideksa, a highly respected opposition leader and former judge, has enhanced respect for the NEBE across the political spectrum, while changes to the NEBE's governing legislation have enhanced its organizational independence. Under her leadership the NEBE has commenced on the long process of building its capacity to conduct credible elections and earning public confidence. Her appointment and that of the Supreme Court president as well as the election of the federal president, demonstrate the vital role women can play in political life. Further, long repressed civil society is re-emerging and engaging in voter and civic education as well as independent impartial observation of the electoral process. More broadly, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has begun to address human rights violations. These trends are important, as they represent a break with the past and should be further encouraged.

At the same time, the electoral environment presents significant and acute challenges. Widely criticized elections in 2005, 2010 and 2015, and related political repression, have seriously hindered the capacities of not only the NEBE, but also political parties and CSOs, which affects their present efforts. The country faces multiple security crises related to long standing ethnic tensions resulting in instability or open conflict in many parts of Ethiopia. The security situation undermines the public's ability to freely and actively participate in elections and has resulted in some parties withdrawing from the process. Due to

open conflict, elections will not take place in the Tigray regional state. The arrest of several prominent Oromo political leaders has resulted in political party boycotts in Ethiopia's most populous regional state. Insecurity particularly affects the ability of women, persons with disabilities (PWDs) and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to engage in electoral processes. While there is greater media freedom, traditional media remains dominated by pro-government voices and disinformation disseminated by individuals from across the political spectrum undermines the ability of voters to obtain accurate information. Hate speech has also undermined the electoral environment. Despite notable high-level appointments, women and other groups remain largely marginalized in the election process. Ethiopia's serious COVID-19 situation adds additional obstacles for credible elections and protecting public health in the process. These factors threaten electoral integrity and have already negatively impacted candidate nominations and voter registration processes.

Nonetheless, there is still the opportunity for these elections to be a positive step and to potentially serve as the foundation for more credible processes in the future. The delegation heard from those who support the elections going ahead as announced and those who oppose it. Irrespective of the timing of the elections, concerted efforts to improve the electoral environment are needed. Even with the limited time until election day, there are important actions Ethiopians can take and the international community can support to help ensure that the 2021 elections and future elections move the country forward. In the hopes of contributing positively to Ethiopians' efforts to advance democratic development, the joint IRI/NDI delegation offers 12 priority recommendations that key stakeholders can take to make the June 5 elections more inclusive, transparent, and accountable.

Priority Recommendations

Electoral Context

Federal and state security forces need to ensure a safe environment for voters and all stakeholders.

Widespread insecurity is undermining the ability of Ethiopians to engage in the electoral process and threatens to undermine voting on election day. Federal and state security forces should work in coordination and in consultation with the NEBE to formulate a deployment plan to ensure a safe environment throughout the process and across the country for all stakeholders, including voters, election officials, candidates and their supporters, civic and voter educators and observers. Federal and state security forces should publicly commit to carrying out their duties in a non-partisan manner and to not interfere in the elections.

All political parties should refrain from violence, intimidation and hate speech, and publicly call for peace. While there are deep tensions in Ethiopian society, all citizens deserve the opportunity to safely participate in the democratic process regardless of their political affiliation. All parties, those participating in the elections and those declining, should publicly denounce violence and call for peace in the country.

The NEBE and political parties need to engage in enhanced dialogue to reduce tensions. To address concerns of electoral violence, intimidation and hate speech, the NEBE should regularly convene the Joint Council of Political Parties (JCPP) as a platform for resolving issues peacefully. Parties should publicly commit to the Electoral Code of Conduct and hold to account their members and supporters who contravene the Code.

COVID-19 preventive measures need to be systematically adhered to ensure Ethiopians can participate safely in the process. The COVID-19 pandemic remains serious in Ethiopia and may worsen during the lead up to the elections due to popular gatherings. While the public health officials and the NEBE developed safety protocols for use during voter registration, it is not clear if there is widespread adherence to these, particularly in rural areas. Clear guidelines for social distancing should be enforced during political party campaign events and at polling stations; wearing of masks should be required at the polls, and soap/sanitizer should be distributed for required use at polling stations.

Federal and state authorities, the NEBE and all stakeholders should take measures to enhance women's electoral participation. In recognition that violence and insecurity, constraints thrust on families by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as social and cultural barriers, challenge the electoral participation of women from all sectors of society, governmental and electoral actors should include gender experts in developing measures to address electoral challenges, make public statements and take robust measures to encourage women to register, vote, become electoral officials, candidates, election observers, and otherwise engage in the elections.

Election Preparations

Federal and state governments should coordinate and provide the NEBE with all required support and resources to enhance preparations for the elections. Substantial concerns remain about the NEBE having adequate support and resources to conduct the elections. In the spirit of democratic elections and national and subnational cooperation, Federal and regional state authorities should make every effort to assist the NEBE and its regional and constituency offices in organizing and administering all aspects of the election process. In all instances, authorities should act impartially and in ways that foster wide voter confidence in the election process.

Concerted efforts should be made to ensure all eligible Ethiopians, including IDPs, have a meaningful opportunity to register and to vote. The NEBE has experienced significant challenges opening all polling stations for voter registration. The NEBE is mandated to provide for registration and voting by IDPs. However, limited cooperation from regional governments has inhibited the ability of the NEBE to establish polling stations in IDP areas and to register IDPs to vote. Both federal and regional governments must provide access to ensure all eligible Ethiopians, including IDPs can fully participate in the elections.

NEBE should provide political parties and CSOs with detailed information on voter registration. There is suspicion of national and regional registration figures in part due to the dramatic increase in registration rates. The NEBE is encouraged to go beyond the requirements of the law and enhance public trust by providing political parties and CSOs with more detailed registration information broken down by date and district ("woreda") and disaggregated by gender and age as well as potentially providing copies of the voters' lists in electronic form in accordance with principles of the Open Election Data Initiative (openelectiondata.net).

Civil society voter education initiatives should be enhanced for marginalized communities impacted by insecurity and where access to information is under threat. To ensure that all Ethiopians have the opportunity to participate in the elections, enhanced voter education efforts are required. Voter education

is urgently needed in communities where voter registration has been delayed and in areas of insecurity. Specific efforts should be made to include women, young people, PWDs, IDPs and other marginalized groups.

Media should make a concerted effort to provide balanced election coverage and strengthen fact-checking systems to combat disinformation. All parties, including those choosing not to participate, should receive equitable coverage from state-controlled media. Private media, similarly, should strive to offer a diversity of political perspectives. Media organizations and journalists should redouble efforts to verify sources and strengthen fact checking mechanisms to expose disinformation in social and traditional media to ensure citizens receive accurate information on the electoral process and the candidates.

Election Day and Immediate Post Election

Observers need unfettered freedom to observe and share their findings with the public. Accreditation procedures and guidelines for observers are unduly bureaucratic and restrictive. Independent non-partisan observers, particularly citizen observers from Ethiopian civil society, play a critical role in building public confidence in elections by both safeguarding the process and publicly sharing their findings. The NEBE should streamline and expedite accreditation procedures and allow observers to publicly share their findings in a timely manner.

The NEBE should ensure the results tabulation process is inclusive, transparent and accountable. Widespread distrust of past election results requires that vote tallies from polling stations be securely and quickly transmitted for tabulation. To enhance public confidence, the NEBE should explain to the public and all stakeholders how the results tabulation process will function. All systems should be tested well before Election Day and the findings shared with stakeholders. To enhance public confidence in the results, all polling station results should be published electronically on the NEBE's website and in a timely manner.

Beyond these short-term recommendations, significant longer-term efforts will be needed after the elections to enhance the legal framework, strengthen the NEBE, foster representative political parties, promote vibrant civil society, ensure the full participation of women, youth, PWDs, IDPs, and other marginalized communities, and provide balanced and accurate traditional and social media. Further, credible elections and democratic transformation in Ethiopia are ultimately dependent upon addressing the country's political and security challenges. In this regard, an inclusive process to meaningfully address historical grievances, and to promote justice and national reconciliation will be necessary to heal the deep-seated societal divisions and ethnic tensions that threaten the country's unity.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Elections now scheduled for June 5, 2021, will be Ethiopia's sixth since the return to civilian rule. The country, however, has relatively little experience with credible elections and nascent electoral institutions, as recent elections, were widely seen as deeply flawed. Sweeping reforms starting in 2018 following Abiy Ahmed becoming prime minister have opened political space, providing greater freedoms and new optimism about the potential for credible elections. The appointment or election of highly respected individuals to several of the highest offices of the land, many who are women, further boosted confidence. However, deeply seeded and long suppressed ethnic tensions have also come to the fore. Thus, the elections will be held in a context of widespread insecurity, instances of political repression and open conflict as well as heightened regional tensions. These issues create major challenges for credible elections and further heighten the barriers to participation for voters, in particular women, youth, PWDs, IDPs, and other marginalized groups.

Following three decades of domination by a single coalition of ethno-regional parties, Ethiopia is poised to hold its first national elections since the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) disbanded in 2019. The EPRDF was once a four-party coalition composed of the Tigrayan Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF), the Amhara National Democratic Movement (later Amhara Democratic Party), the Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organization (later Oromo Democratic Party), and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement. Under its rule, Ethiopia's political landscape was marked by ethnic conflict, corruption and lack of respect for fundamental freedoms. Those factors stifled political participation and competition, as well as the roles of media and civil society.

Since assuming office in April 2018, the government led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has enacted several positive reforms aimed at opening political and civic spaces for citizens to exercise the fundamental freedoms of expression, association and assembly, while also making efforts to reshape the relationship between the federal government and regional states. Many civil society organizations that were once relegated to social service delivery have, for the first time, been allowed to participate in elections as rightful stakeholders in Ethiopia's democratic development. To that end, several human rights activists were appointed to key positions in public institutions, including the Supreme Court, EHRC and the NEBE.

Implementation of the reform agenda was accompanied by the release of some political prisoners, which also set the stage for exiled activists and opposition actors to return to Ethiopia to organize themselves in advance of the national elections that were initially planned for August 2020 but were postponed until 2021 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. The return and release of some political opposition allowed for the emergence of new political parties at the national and regional levels and gave renewed hope for competitive elections and Ethiopia's democratic future more broadly.

However, concerns have been raised that political reforms initiated by the Prime Minister have not fully been implemented nor carried through from the federal to regional and local levels. Opposition parties remain weak and have been facing challenges in reestablishing themselves and have limited financial and human resources. The existence of a strong incumbent party and newly established opposition parties creates an uneven electoral playing field.

Efforts to reconfigure the ruling coalition were met with resistance by political elites, particularly those in the TPLF which has long dominated Ethiopian politics and has controlled the EPRDF. The changes triggered conflict between proponents of the pro-reform pan-Ethiopian nationalist vision and defenders of Ethiopia's ethnic federalist system. The EPRDF restructuring eventually led to the creation of a new party, the Prosperity Party, though the TPLF declined to join. In March 2020, the TPLF leadership opposed the suspension of the electoral calendar and indefinite postponement of the 2020 national elections. Tigray proceeded unilaterally to hold regional elections in September 2020, exacerbating political disagreements and culminating in the declaration of a state of emergency in the region. On November 4, 2020, the federal government deployed troops to Tigray and announced a "military law and order operation." Although the government declared its military response over shortly after it started, the ensuing violence has lasted several months, resulting in the estimated internal displacement of over a million Tigrayans and a threat to regional stability. The involvement of Eritrean troops in support of the Federal Government and clashes between Ethiopian and Sunaese troops related to a longstanding boundary dispute. As a result of the conflict, elections will not be held in Tigray.

The advent of the Prosperity Party has also stirred tensions among different Oromo groups, and between Amhara and Tigray regional leaders. Tensions have manifested themselves in different forms throughout Ethiopia, including armed territorial conflict, mass protests and election boycotts or abstentions by several opposition political parties. The arrests and detention of opposition leaders and reportedly large numbers of supporters may alienate voters in Oromia and challenge the competitiveness of the elections in some constituencies. According to several interlocutors, the ongoing hostilities in the Tigray region, including the engagement of external actors, have served to fuel other regional demands that are together threatening to further destabilize the Ethiopian political community.

ELECTION SECURITY AND VIOLENCE

Ethiopia is facing multiple security crises, and persistent insecurity is hindering the administration of the elections and threatening to undermine their overall integrity. The drivers of violence are multifaceted, reflecting Ethiopia's deeply rooted ethnic divisions. The insecurity from violence and the threat of it have specific and disproportionately negative effects on the electoral participation of women, minorities, young people, IDPs, and other marginalized populations and poses grave concerns about potential human and political rights violations.

The Tigray conflict, chronic instability in Benishangul-Gumuz, and growing violence in western Oromia and eastern Amhara are contributing to the deterioration of the security environment. This is especially true in the Afar-Somali border and in parts of Amhara where, in many areas, military command posts have been erected and an official state of emergency has been declared. In this highly militarized environment, Election Day will be a test of the state's ability to maintain peace amidst growing political unrest and violence. At the same time, heightened security presence poses an additional challenge in ensuring an environment that is free and conducive to fair competition and a level-playing field. The arrests and detention of several senior-level political leaders from opposition parties and reports of detentions of possibly thousands of their supporters are further exacerbating tensions, impacting competitiveness, and the level of participation of Ethiopian citizens in the electoral process.

Though some political parties signed a Code of Conduct in 2020 pledging to refrain from violence and intimidation, weak enforcement mechanisms disincentivize compliance. In the pre-election period, two candidates running for the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA) and National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) in Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz were assassinated. In Oromia, one registration center and another building, believed to be an election office, were burned. The delegation also heard reports that in Amhara demonstrators destroyed posters and banners of the Prosperity Party and also heard several reports that some parties faced obstructions to opening constituency offices, while some political actors also faced arrests, including women candidates in the Southern Nations.

Interlocutors with whom the delegation met also cited the lack of coordination between the Ethiopian Government and regional security forces which raises serious concerns about the state's ability to provide security to all voting locations and maintain peace and order during and after election day. The higher number of polling locations and the increase in eligible voters are stretching the ability of security agencies to adequately cover polling centers. This is especially true in contested areas between Afar and Somali regions and in the Metekel and Gumuz areas of Benishangul, where the potential for violence runs high and where military operations have displaced hundreds of thousands. The significant presence of IDPs poses an additional challenge for the NEBE, which has struggled to ensure their enfranchisement.

Government resources to mitigate and prevent violence exist, including the national elections security taskforce, which includes the federal police, national intelligence and security services, Minister of Defense, personnel from the Prime Minister's office, and NEBE officials. Laws and structures are in place to address electoral-related violence, but application of the law remains a work in progress.

There are several civil society organizations working to mitigate election-related violence. However, most lack sufficient resources, access, and experience to have substantial impact. The participation of civil society in a joint Electoral Violence Prevention Platform (JEPP) that includes an election violence early response (EVER) system to collect timely information on potential security threats is perceived as a positive step, but communication and cooperation with the security agencies remain key to further enhancing transparency and building trust and public confidence in security institutions. The latter's ability to maintain peace and order, while at the same time demonstrating political neutrality, are indispensable for ensuring a free and fair environment before, during, and after the elections.

On election day, the country's security environment will undoubtedly be a factor that determines the extent to which the elections are perceived as credible, and it remains to be seen whether the federal government and regional authorities will adequately coordinate and communicate ahead of Election Day to address public concerns. Election Day and the period immediately following, present a critical juncture for the country's security actors to publicly demonstrate a commitment to strict political impartiality and to developing responsive strategies that are proportional to citizens' security needs while not obstructing the right to exercise their franchise on election day.

COVID-19 AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on Ethiopia's elections in terms of its timing, public safety during the process, and the role of stakeholders. It is critical that an environment is established in which voters, candidates and their supporters, election officials, civil society activists and observers can all safely participate in electoral processes. At the same time, efforts to combat the pandemic and ensure public safety must be balanced against fundamental freedoms required for democratic elections and take into account realities of the local context. Further, steps must be taken to ensure COVID-19 safety measures do not provide advantage to any political party or candidate.

In total, more than 200,000 COVID-19 cases with approximately 3,000 deaths have been reported in Ethiopia. At the time of the VPEAD, COVID-19 cases had spiked to the highest level since the onset of the pandemic with 2,121 new cases reported on April 8. COVID-19 related deaths peaked shortly afterwards on April 19 with 35 deaths. While both new cases and deaths have noticeably decreased since then, it is possible that they will rise again following observance of Orthodox Easter and Eid al-Fitr holidays during the first half of May. In addition, it is believed that COVID-19 data may underestimate both cases and deaths due to challenges obtaining accurate medical data in the country. While Ethiopia hopes to vaccinate 20 percent of its population of approximately 110 million people by the end of 2021, only 2.2 million COVID-19 vaccines have reportedly been received. Thus, the elections are likely to take place with relatively large numbers of people potentially infected and relatively few vaccinated.

Ethiopia's elections were initially expected to be held in 2020, five years after the last elections in accordance with the length of term for national and regional office holders. However, the date of the elections was postponed more than once. Consequently, the election was rescheduled for June 5, 2021. The final postponement attributed to the health crisis, in August 2020, led to elections being rescheduled for June 5, 2021 and to events that resulted in the HoPR elections for Tigray no longer being held.

The Government of Ethiopia and the NEBE have both established protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and protect the safety of voters, election officials, candidates and their supporters, and CSO activities. These include measures for social distancing, the wearing of masks and the use of hand sanitizer/soap. Anecdotal reports shared with the VPEAD suggest limited provision of masks and hand sanitizer/soap or adherence to these measures at polling stations during voter registration particularly in rural areas where there is little acknowledgement of the pandemic. Similarly, it was reported to the delegation that neither the wearing of masks nor social distancing are being followed at campaign events.

These are worrying signs for the conduct of Election Day and the ability of not just voters, but all polling officials, party representatives as well as observers to safely participate in the process. Further, the challenges of international travel to Ethiopia during the pandemic (as well as the security situation) increases the barriers for international observers and heightens the already critical role of citizen observers safeguarding the process and providing independent non-partial information on the conduct of the elections.

ELECTORAL FRAMEWORK AND ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Legal Framework

Ethiopia's elections are guided by the 1995 Constitution, the 2019 Ethiopian Electoral and Political Parties Registration and Code of Conduct Proclamation (Electoral Proclamation), the 2019 Establishment of the NEBE Proclamation as well as other legislative acts.¹ Ethiopia accedes to several principal universal and regional standards for democratic elections. At the global level, these include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The regional instruments applicable to Ethiopia include the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. Ethiopia has also endorsed the AU Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa.

In 2018, Ethiopia began a review of the legal framework and regulatory environment for elections including the legal mechanisms to ensure the independence of the NEBE. The Proclamation on the Establishment of the NEBE included, among other items, a new appointment procedure for NEBE members, security of tenure, remuneration scales, and an independent budget. NEBE member appointments were lengthened to six years to disentangle the appointment process from political bias on which it had previously depended. The Chairperson of the NEBE was appointed in November 2019 and enjoys an unprecedented level of support among national stakeholders.

Through these elections Ethiopians will determine the members of the national legislature, including indirectly the prime minister and president, and the elections will cover regional and city councils. The federal legislature comprises two houses - the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR) and the House of Federation (HoF) - with members of both serving five-year terms and only members of the HoPR directly elected. The HoPR currently has 547 seats with 525 elected from single member constituencies on a first-past-the-post basis and 22 reserved for minority communities. Elections for HoPR constituency-based seats are scheduled to be held on June 5, 2021. However, due to conflict, elections will not be held for the 38 HoPR seats in Tigray region. Both the president, a largely ceremonial position, and the prime minister are elected by the members of the HoPR. The HoF currently has 153 seats distributed across the now 10 regions of the country (Sidama was added as a new region following a referendum in 2019). Members of the HoF are indirectly elected by the regional councils. Elections for the regional councils will take place concurrently with the HoPR elections in all regional states except in Tigray. The chartered cities, Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, are slated to elect their administrative councils on June 12 (though voters in both cities are scheduled to vote for their members of the HoPR on June 5). Chartered cities do not have representation in the HoF.

¹ Other laws regulating aspects of the electoral process include the 2019 Civil Society Organizations Proclamation, pertaining to civic education and citizen observation; the Mass Media and Access to Information Proclamation (as recently amended) and the 2020 Hate Speech and Disinformation Prevention and Suppression Proclamation, pertaining to freedom of expression; as well as criminal and anti-terrorism laws applied in the context of regulating political freedoms. These laws are supplemented by subsidiary legislation, including at least 15 directives issued by the NEBE under the new Proclamation, with others still to be finalized.

The system of election dispute resolution includes the NEBE, judiciary, as well as ad hoc lay and political party committees established for the election. Electoral law confers extensive powers on the NEBE to deal with complaints and appeals related to all stages of the electoral process, as well as disputes between members of political parties and allegations of violations of electoral law. Grievance hearing committees that comprise members of the public, with ex officio polling staff members, are created at the level of the polling stations, constituency and regional state, with a mandate to resolve electoral disputes by consent. Appeals are possible up through the hierarchy of committees, as well as to NEBE and the courts. Political Parties Joint Forums, at a local level, and the Political Parties Joint Council, at the federal level, also offer an option to address disputes between political parties. The courts, at both regional and federal level, sitting as election benches, have extensive powers to adjudicate election disputes.

There is significant overlap between the various mechanisms available to resolve electoral disputes, which risks uncertainty for stakeholders in knowing where to address their complaints and in monitoring fairness and uniformity of outcome. There is also a risk that some elements of election dispute resolution may not become operational at the local level, particularly the grievance hearing committees, due to an absence of polling stations in all locations and difficulties in recruiting staff and qualified law members for committees.

Many stakeholders viewed the new election law and a reformed NEBE as factors that are conducive to a process that more fully respects key international standards for democratic elections. According to many interlocutors, however, the initial postponements of the elections and subsequent failures to meet timelines of the electoral calendar may diminish the electorate's confidence in the process.

Election Administration

In November 2018, former opposition leader and judge Birtukan Mideksa was appointed chair of the NEBE. Party leaders, civic activists, academics, and media practitioners from across the political spectrum all stressed to the delegation the NEBE's independence under the new chair and commended not only her integrity, but the other commissioners' as well. However, concerns were expressed about the NEBE's technical capacity and its ability to meet deadlines and fulfill its mandate. Widely criticized elections in 2005, 2010 and 2015 negatively affected the NEBE's reputation. In response, the NEBE has recruited many new staff. However, the majority of them lack prior election administration experience and therefore require training, whilst concurrently taking on the responsibilities of conducting national elections. The "learning by doing" ethos, though commendable, may have further increased the complexity of administering the June elections.

The election is administered by a three-tiered structure, which by law comprises the NEBE with its regional offices, as well as approximately 673 constituency offices and 49,407 polling stations (the NEBE plan also includes 99 zonal coordinating offices). The newly constituted NEBE includes five permanent board members and a secretariat. The NEBE was not able to establish constituency offices uniformly around the country within the timeframe which it initially set out. This has led to several delays in fulfilling the electoral calendar, some of which were not communicated publicly.

The voter registration process, which in Ethiopia is active and must be completed ahead of each election, has also been beset by delays. Originally planned for March 1 to 30, the timeline was shifted to the period between March 25 and April 23. The NEBE, on April 23, extended voter registration by three weeks until May 14 for Afar and Somali regional states, which were among the areas where the process did not start until late April, and in other parts of the country by two weeks through May 7. The NEBE subsequently announced that voter registration would be extended by another week until May 14. These changes were announced late and were preceded by broad speculation about other delays, including with regard to the election date(s) themselves. In mid-April, the NEBE announced publicly that only about half of the polling stations were operational and able to register voters. Concerns were raised by some interlocutors that voters in rural communities would be poorly served – others pointed to youth or first-time voters as being especially disaffected.

The initial low number of registered voters prompted the NEBE and some political parties to step up efforts to educate and/or mobilize voters to register in the second half of April. According to media reports, the federal government also moved to proactively engage regional states to facilitate the administration of voter registration. Some interlocutors expressed concerns that these mobilization efforts favored voters more likely to elect the incumbent political force. By the end of April, the NEBE informed the VPEAD that some 41,000 voter registration centers were operating and expected this number to continue increasing in the ensuing days.

Shortcomings in public communication of the voter registration figures and an apparently sudden surge in the number of registered voters, which according to the NEBE exceeded 20 million by April 23, gave rise to concerns about the integrity of the process among some of the interlocutors who spoke to the delegation. In light of limited public outreach from the NEBE and absence of citizen observation of the process, the numbers circulated by several media outlets and representatives of regional authorities could not be verified, thus encouraging speculation about the actual state of voter registration and, according to some interlocutors, which serves to undermine the voters' confidence in the elections. Further, lack of publicly available disaggregated data gave rise to questions about the inclusiveness of voter registration efforts and stirred some concerns about the likely representativeness of the new legislature. In addition, the alleged start of ballot printing before the voter lists were finalized raised concerns for some interlocutors about the sufficiency of safeguards in place to protect against irregularities on election day.

The NEBE has stated at several junctures that the delays were caused in part by: problems pertaining to the transportation of materials; poor cooperation by federal and some regional authorities, especially as concerns the registration of IDPs; difficulties attracting qualified staff to operate the high number of polling stations; and a deteriorating security situation in several regional states. These claims were widely corroborated by other interlocutors.

In addition, intimidation, including the arrest of opposition candidates, was listed by some interlocutors as reasons for a low interest in registering among voters in some areas. Among others, candidates were detained in Benishangul-Gumuz and Amhara. The imprisonment of opposition politicians in Oromia, which resulted in the boycott of the elections by at least two political parties, is said by some interlocutors to have diminished interest in participation in the elections in the country's most populous region. Many

interlocutors with whom the delegation met also cited voter apathy, in part driven by expectations that the incumbent political party is certain to emerge the winner, as well as security and economic hardship as heightened concerns that would overshadow the importance of the vote for many Ethiopians.

The NEBE launched voter education on registration and Election Day procedures through placement of public service announcements in five languages on broadcast and social media, though some interlocutors indicated strongly that the efforts did not meet the need. The NEBE produced materials for dissemination by civil society organizations. Voter education materials were also disseminated with some interlocutors requesting materials and messages be made available in more languages. While these voter education initiatives were perceived positively, some interlocutors noted the supply of materials was insufficient to meet the demand of Ethiopian voters in need of information about registration.

Most of the VPEAD's interlocutors, including political parties and civil society organizations, noted that the NEBE's limited ability to effectively administer the process and meet deadlines is in considerable part a function of circumstances outside its control. Some added that the NEBE is taking a consultative approach to decision-making and is actively seeking to enhance buy-in by the opposition and civil society communities.

At the same time, several interlocutors were critical of some NEBE decisions, including as pertains to the non-registration of candidates who are under arrest and delays in the disbursement of political and campaign financing, which is said to have been particularly detrimental to the smaller and less well-resourced opposition parties. Importantly, several opposition parties and independent candidates vowed to boycott the elections in Somali because of alleged staffing of election administration in the region with partisan civil servants.

Interlocutors raised with the VPEAD the issue of how election results will be transmitted from polling stations on election day. They noted that the NEBE needs to take steps to ensure that vote tallies will be transmitted in a fast, secure and transparent manner for parties, candidates and most importantly the public to have confidence in the official results. This issue is particularly salient given serious concerns of the results tabulation process for the 2005 elections and the widespread belief that the results for some constituencies do not reflect the ballots cast.

POLITICAL PARTIES AND CAMPAIGN PERIOD

The organization of political parties is guided by NEBE directive on the Obligations of Registered National and Regional Political Parties, which is based on the Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Election's Code of Conduct proclamation. As part of the recent political and legal reforms, Ethiopian political parties were required to formally re-register for the elections. The requisite signatures from founding members to form a national political party are 10,000, with no more than 40 percent coming from a single regional state. Regional parties must have 4,000 founding members, with more than 60 percent as permanent residents in the given regional state.

Several interlocutors with whom the IEAME met remarked that the signature requirement is too high in particular for smaller regional parties, given parties' limited resources. Some parties raised concerns about the integrity of the signature verification process. Among others the Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) and most regional parties in Oromia region were not registered by NEBE. Two parties, the Oromo Democratic Alliance (ODA) and the Gadaa system party successfully appealed NEBE's decision to the Federal High Court, a ruling confirmed recently by the Supreme Court, but too late for them to participate in the upcoming elections. In light of the above and the boycott of the elections by some opposition parties, several interlocutors expressed concerns about the competitiveness of the elections in some constituencies, and more broadly, whether voters would turnout to vote given the more limited choice or absence of their preferred options on the ballot.

The candidate registration process was set for February 15 to 28, but was extended on short notice until March 9. Some political parties complained that their individual candidates had to again submit signatures of at least 3,000 voters residing in their respective HoPR constituency. NEBE figures show more than 9,000 candidates representing 46 political parties and 125 independents had been registered, offering voters a choice, however, some parties complained that security and operational challenges did not allow them to field candidates in as many constituencies as they would have liked. As noted above, two key opposition parties in the Oromo region - Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) - declined to participate in the elections due to the detention and harassment of their party leaders and members. Several other political party leaders and members from among various parties across the country are still detained and were unable to register as candidates.

To date, the NEBE has failed to publish the candidate lists per constituency, thus raising concerns about transparency and fueling speculation about the competitiveness of some single-member constituency races, especially in Oromia region. On March 11, the NEBE announced that for both the HoPR and regional council elections, the Prosperity Party (PP) registered 2,432 candidates, EZEMA registered 1,385 candidates, Enat Party registered 573 candidates, and NAMA registered 491 candidates. NEBE provided no breakdown of federal/regional elections or gender.

In accordance with the NEBE timeline set in December 2020, the campaign period began on February 15. However, campaigning by political parties in some respects has been slow to start and has been impeded by the security situation. Many parties continue to hold rallies and conduct in-person activities without following health protocols set forth by the Ministry of Health, heightening the potential spread of contagion as Election Day nears. Insecurity, unrest and tension in several parts of the country, particularly Amhara, Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz, Somali and Afar regional states also cast doubt on political parties' ability to effectively campaign, representing a further blow toward genuinely competitive elections.

Ethiopia's political and electoral history has also affected the electoral playing field. While the EPRDF has disbanded, the structure of the ruling party and its control over the state have continued. In its place, the PP has enjoyed large advantages over any other party, and the PP's level of organization, resources and reach is unmatched. Some interlocutors with whom the delegation met allege the party has, at times, misused state resources such as public buildings and vehicles for campaign use, though these reports were anecdotal. With the exception of EZEMA, few parties have had the resources to field candidates on

a truly nationwide scale. It was reported that some state regional governors have frustrated campaigning by opposition parties in their states, which undermines the credibility of the process.

The boycott of the elections by the OFC and OLF also represent a notable obstacle to competitive elections. Both parties remain critical players in the politics of the Oromia region, the most populous region in Ethiopia, thus raising questions as to the choice of political alternatives that voters in Oromia will face on election day. Many stakeholders suggest that the more limited choice may negatively affect turnout, while the boycott may inhibit voting because of fears of insecurity. In the second most populous Amhara region mass protests in some towns were reported and the security situation has declined in several zones over the past weeks. In the Amhara region NEBE has issued a warning to PP and NAMA for using inflammatory language. In the Somali region, Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), EZEMA, and Freedom and Equality Party (FEP), along with several independent candidates, suspended electoral activities from April 19 onward in order to draw attention to the criticized voter registration conduct of the NEBE. In addition, because the elections are not being held in Tigray, regional formations from that area will not participate in the elections, thus potentially limiting the choice for voters in other regions.

Campaign messaging addresses the cost of living and unemployment as well as ethnic violence and security and to a lesser extent party platforms and ideology. The clash between the old and new systems of political order is evident within campaign messaging. In particular, whether the existing constitution of Ethiopia based on the system of ethnic federalism should continue, or whether one based on a unitary state should be adopted.

INCLUSION OF MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS

There have been notable advances since 2018 in recognizing the importance of diversity and inclusion of marginalized groups in political life. High-level appointments by the government, changes to the legal framework and a change in rhetoric are all positive signs. However, these take place against persistent and pervasive norms that continue to limit the ability of women, youth, PWDs, IDPs, ethnolinguistic minorities, and other marginalized communities to fully participate in Ethiopian society generally and the electoral process in particular. Insecurity in the country disproportionately undermines the ability of marginalized groups to participate in elections and has increased impact on women inside each group. Further, implementation of measures to reduce the barriers to participation as well as positive steps to ensure representation of marginalized groups lag behind public statements.

Women's participation in elections occurs in a broader context of patriarchal gender norms and widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The appointments of women to high level political offices, including Ethiopia's president, president of the Supreme Court and chairperson of the NEBE, are widely seen as positive signs of more inclusive politics and the vital role women should play in political life. Women are relatively well represented at the national level at the NEBE, but lack sufficient representation at regional offices in leadership positions. While women's representation in the HoPR is above the regional average (38.8 percent compared to 24.1 percent), this is likely due to an informal quota system employed by the EPRDF.

While detailed information on candidates is not available, and the NEBE reported to the VPEAD that women candidatures will likely be on a par with the past, many interlocutors believe that the number of women candidates has declined and that women's representation in the HoPR will likely decrease. In this regard, parties did not report to the delegation that they mounted substantial efforts to reduce the barriers for women either as candidates or for leadership positions within their parties. Violence and insecurity were widely stated as a serious barrier to their participation in elections as voters and candidates. In response, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) is observing with a specific violence against women in elections (VAW-E) focus. EWLA recently relaunched its National Hotline for SGBV. The hotline, originally launched in 2008, had been suspended in part due to a restrictive political and legal environment.

As with the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa, Ethiopia is experiencing dramatic demographic changes resulting in a younger population². Ethiopia's national youth policy defines young people as ages 15 to 29 with census projections suggesting that young people ages 18 to 29 could comprise approximately 40 percent of the voting age population. The only experiences young voters in Ethiopia have with elections were ones that were widely criticized as not being inclusive, transparent or accountable. While new openness may encourage young people to participate in the process, they may also be the most vulnerable to disinformation from social media given their relatively high Internet use. Several parties recognized the importance of the youth vote, involving youth in election activities and have special initiatives specifically targeting young people. However, parties across the spectrum continue to fail to address issues of greatest interest to young voters, in particular unemployment. Past investments have created a more educated population drawn to urban centers in search for economic opportunities that are lacking. The inability of political parties to speak to these concerns increases the potential for youth disillusionment with the result of either not participating in politics or their being more at risk of engaging in ethnic related violence.

Persons with disabilities (PWDs) constitute approximately a sixth of the Ethiopian population. Their high number notwithstanding, PWDs have been relegated to playing a minor role in elections. While the new election law is available in braille, this is not the case for ballots or voter education materials. Several stakeholders told the VPEAD that parties fell short on inclusion of PWDs, even if some smaller regional forces have PWDs in leadership positions. PWD organizations stated that they provided the NEBE with a comprehensive set of recommendations to address the needs of PWDs in elections, but were informed that it would not be possible to consider them until the next elections. That voter registration is conducted at polling stations rather than some higher administrative division (such as ward or district level) potentially reduced the burden on PWDs to register by reducing the distance they would need to travel. However, widespread delays in voter registration, significant numbers of polling stations not opening at all and few updates on the process resulted in greater barriers for PWDs due to the challenges of traveling multiple times to different locations to register to vote.

According to the latest estimates, there are now well over two million IDPs in Ethiopia, of which 40 percent are over the age of 18 and are thus eligible to vote. The Kampala Convention, adopted in 2009 and entered into force in 2012, protects the rights of IDPs and was ratified by Ethiopia in February 2020. In response to the growing number of IDPs, the NEBE adopted a directive establishing special polling stations in areas inhabited by IDPs. According to interlocutors, however, the lack of engagement by federal and regional

² This phenomenon is commonly referred to as the "youth bulge."

authorities has hampered progress in establishing special polling stations or making them accessible for IDPs. There are serious concerns that the vast majority of IDP voters remain unregistered and will therefore not be eligible to vote on election day. Moreover, IDPs have thus far not been sufficiently addressed with civic and voter education efforts and are thus less likely to exercise their right to participate. The threat of violence during stages of the election process is thought to serve as an inhibiting factor for IDP participation in the elections.

As noted, Ethiopia has an ethno-federal system with more than 80 ethnolinguistic groups. This provides an enormous challenge for making the process inclusive for all ethnic groups. Until 2020 Amharic was Ethiopia's only federal official language. However, only a third of the population speaks Amharic as their first language. Afaan Oromo, Afar, Somali and Tigrigna have recently been added as official languages and the NEBE has made efforts to translate voter education materials into these languages. However, millions of Ethiopians do not speak any of these languages as their first language. Furthermore, many election related documents, such as the election law, are available only in Amharic. These limitations increase the barriers for ethnic minorities to fully participate in the elections.

CIVIC SPACE AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Interlocutors noted the dismantling of the restrictive 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation in 2018 has opened new space for civil society to operate and provides unprecedented opportunities to engage both in voter and civic education and election observation. Over 190 civic organizations and networks have been accredited by NEBE to conduct voter education. The NEBE has accredited 36 CSOs to observe the national elections, including broad networks as well as organizations focused on specific issues such as gender, PWDs, and IDPs. The delegation noted with disappointment that circumstances led the European Union to reluctantly cancel its plans to deploy a limited election observation mission as the presence of additional international observers would have contributed to all stakeholders.

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) is a national network of over 160 organizations that is conducting voter education and citizen observation efforts across the country. Working with an Ethiopian communications firm, CECOE is undertaking a nationwide multi-lingual, multimedia "I VOTE" voter education campaign. With regards to citizen observation, CECOE observed the Sidama referendum in November 2019, has deployed observers to witness the voter registration process and intends on deploying observers across the country for the June elections. Women lawyers through EWLA are observing the process with a particular focus on violence against women in elections. The Federation of Ethiopian Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FEAPD), which brings PWD organizations, is observing the inclusion of PWDs in the electoral process, including during voter registration and on election day. They are also conducting voter education activities focused on PWDs in target areas.

While civic groups noted their enthusiasm to implement voter education and to observe the electoral process, all expressed apprehension that NEBE's frequent changes to the electoral calendar adversely impacted their planning. Groups also expressed concerns that the delay in issuing accreditation credentials in a timely and efficient manner prevented them from observing the candidate and voter registration processes in their entirety. At the same time, civic organizations also must confront the challenges of

insecurity as well as limited capacity due to space being closed until recently. Those factors add additional challenges to voter education and citizen election observation. Reflecting the sensitive situation in the country and the newness of Ethiopia's expanded civic space, the delegation noted that civil society often appeared hesitant to raise issues of concern with other stakeholders.

Many interlocutors noted the financial burden on CSOs to carry out voter education activities and the need for additional resources given years of compromised elections. They also expressed concerns that only the NEBE can produce voter education materials, especially in light of issues concerning the organization's capacity. This has resulted in challenges for producing materials in a timely fashion in a wide array of languages as well as adapting materials for persons with disabilities and segments of the population with fewer opportunities for formal education.

Credible nonpartisan organizations focused on monitoring the pre-, immediate-, and post-election environment have been hampered by their inability to observe the candidate registration process, campaign period, and the launching of voter registration due to NEBE's administrative accreditation bottlenecks and the increase in violence in several parts of the country. This leaves them with little recourse than to paint an incomplete picture of the electoral cycle.

MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

The media landscape and information environment in Ethiopia have drastically changed in the past three years. Benefiting from the reforms that have opened political space and expanded freedom of expression, the information environment extends beyond the traditional media, state-owned and private newspapers and radio stations, to include digital and social media platforms. Given the autocratic history of the country, access to these digital platforms is novel, but it is quickly increasing. Still, there is a limited number of professional media organizations.

The media atmosphere reflects the national mood. The country is highly polarized as citizens grapple with ethnic tensions, conflict between regions and with neighboring countries, and the upcoming elections. Media outlets are overly politicized and tend to side with the group or the cause they support, which can potentially undermine peace and security that are much needed at this time. In addition, the dominance of the state broadcaster and pro-government media undermines public access to a wide array of political opinions. Concerns about security and rising ethnic tensions have limited reporting, led to internet and mobile network shutdowns and resulted in threats against journalists. Most people get the news or information through traditional media. This is particularly true for rural populations who rely on the radio, a space that is dominated by federal and state-affiliated broadcasting organizations.

The International Telecommunications Union (ITU) reports that Internet literacy is low in Ethiopia - with 18.6 percent of the public accessing online information - and largely concentrated in urban centers. Facebook is the primary social media platform, but much of the content is in Amharic even in public institutions including the NEBE. While content on Twitter, where diaspora groups are particularly prominent, is predominantly in English, a growing percentage is in Amharic. In a country of more than 80 ethnic groups

speaking numerous languages, the lack of linguistic diversity on the Internet renders it difficult for large numbers of voters to use it as a source of information to aid informed electoral choices. The fact that political parties are not allocated adequate free airtime on state broadcasters' facilities and space in the state newspapers to discuss their programmatic platforms has also contributed to this lack of pluralistic information.

The capacity of nascent civic and electoral institutions to conduct national outreach compounds these deficiencies. Though the NEBE has utilized Facebook to circulate information about the electoral process, the account has few followers and sees limited engagement and shares, even for critical voter information like delays or extensions in the voter registration process. At the time of this assessment, political and civic actors had generally not taken an active role in amplifying the NEBE's content as well. In addition, routine Facebook posts by the NEBE itself are typically only available in Amharic, though they have disseminated official voter education materials online in not only Amharic, but also Afaan Oromo, Afar, Somali and Tigrigna.

The increased consumption of online and social media content in Ethiopia, in tandem with insufficient voter education, intensifying ethnolinguistic tensions, and high electoral stakes increases opportunities for mis- and disinformation around the electoral process. Disinformation and hate speech are on the rise as many political actors resort to spreading false information, which fuels distress and misleads the public. Though the formal social media accounts of political parties appear to be less engaged in inflammatory content, unofficial pages, groups of supporters, partisan media and activists online are generating or amplifying inciteful or misleading narratives that can influence the political discourse around the elections, exacerbate ethnic cleavages, and raise the risk of electoral violence. Even if they have less access to the Internet, disinformation that circulates through social media can disproportionately impact people living in rural areas since they may not have effective ways to verify the information they receive.

Ethiopian civil society groups are engaging in monitoring the social media sphere. The NEBE has condemned certain inappropriate behavior on social media, however, it lacks capacity to effectively monitor this phenomenon and to take proper actions.

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