



**IRI/NDI LIMITED ELECTION OBSERVATION
MISSION FOR ETHIOPIA (LEOME) 2021**

ELECTION WATCH

JUNE 9, 2021



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INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia will hold elections for the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR) and regional councils on June 21. The International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) are conducting a joint limited election observation mission 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 mission is being conducted 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.

This Election Watch is a follow-up to the NDI/IRI Virtual Pre-Election Assessment Delegation (VPEAD) report released May 13 that offered analysis of the pre-election environment and preparations for the elections. The press release and report can be found on [NDI](#) and [IRI](#) web sites respectively. This update is based on in-depth virtual interviews conducted from April 26 through May 31, 2021, with a wide array of key electoral and political stakeholders, including senior representatives of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), government agencies, political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), media, citizen election observers and the diplomatic community, as well as drawing upon both Institutes' expertise and relationships in Ethiopia. In light of the mission's virtual methodology, the scope of our observations is limited, and our reports do not draw conclusions on the overall election process.

The joint IRI/NDI delegation noted that "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."

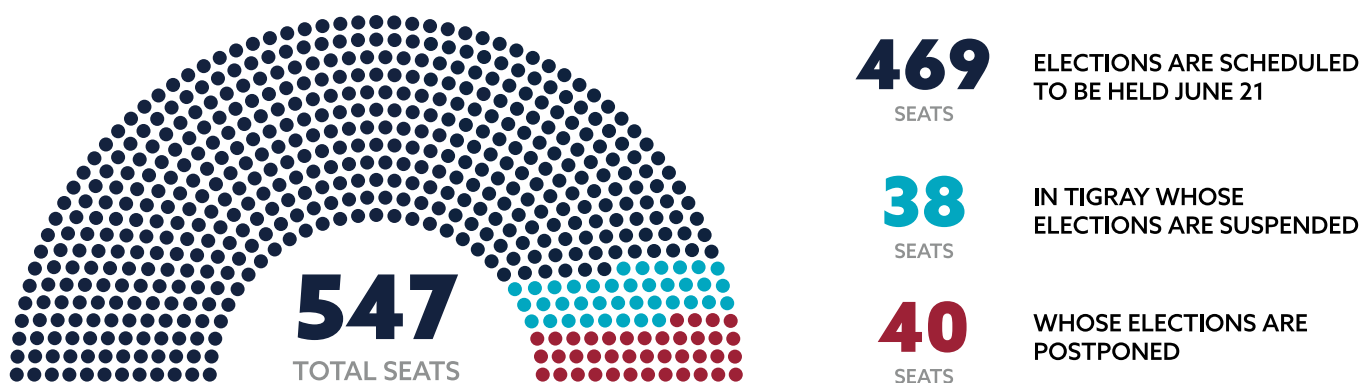
Political Update

The June 21 elections for the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR)¹ will be Ethiopia's sixth since the return to civilian rule, but the first after the democratic opening ushered in 2018. During the past three years, the political reform agenda has encouraged optimism about the country's democratic future. However, significant new and existing challenges have come to test the potential for credible elections and the country's democratic trajectory.

Originally scheduled for 2020, the long-anticipated elections were postponed amidst the COVID-19 pandemic leading to military conflict and the suspension of election in Tigray. On May 20, following consultations with stakeholders, NEBE announced that the election date would be further delayed to June 21.² The NEBE has also determined that, in addition to Tigray where elections have been suspended, voting would be postponed in some 40 constituencies due to insecurity, logistical difficulties and voter registration delays. These include Benishangul - Gumuz, Somali, Oromia, Amhara, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' (SNNP) regional states. Some stakeholders anticipate that other constituencies may join the list. The NEBE has not confirmed when it expects voting to take place in these constituencies.

More broadly, many interlocutors told the mission that they are looking to the future in hope of a national dialogue that would halt open conflicts and bring different sides of the Ethiopian political community together to peacefully search for solutions to their differences. The election process is described by some mission interlocutors as a litmus test for the country's democracy: its commitment to holding periodic and credible elections as outlined in the African Union's [Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa](#) and several other international instruments to which Ethiopia is a signatory.

House of Peoples' Representatives Seats



¹ Regional council elections are held concurrently with the elections for HoPR.

² In addition, the NEBE announced city council elections for the chartered cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa would be held at the same time as the HoPR and regional council elections rather than one week later as originally planned.

Legal Framework and Electoral Dispute Resolution

Interlocutors express general satisfaction with legal reforms that began in 2018 regulating the conduct of elections with several noting the contributions made by the Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council.³ Some essential NEBE directives, required to provide detailed guidance on the implementation of the new electoral law, are not yet in place, however.⁴

The HoPR has not enacted the judicial Regulation on the Rules of Procedure and Evidence for the Adjudication of Electoral Matters by Courts. This instrument was drafted to ensure the expeditious and effective adjudication of electoral disputes by the courts, excluding electoral matters from the standard rules of civil procedure, which could otherwise have permitted cases to have a duration of in excess of a year. Some mission interlocutors levelled criticism at the Attorney General's Office and the prosecution services, with allegations of attempts to delay some trials, evidenced by frequent technical applications and adjournment requests.⁵

During the last week of May, rulings by the Cassation Bench of the Supreme Court overturned two NEBE decisions. In the first case, the Court ordered the NEBE to register four Balderas for Genuine Democracy political party candidates who were previously denied registration because of their imprisonment – the four candidates' initial appeal was unsuccessful. The party has since returned to court seeking the enforcement of the Cassation decision, with compliance legally mandatory and inescapable. In the second case, the Court denied the NEBE appeal of a previous ruling ordering it to facilitate voting in the Harari National Assembly election by Hararis living outside the state's borders, in accordance with the regional constitution.

Despite ongoing efforts to improve their performance, other elements of the election dispute resolution system are not fully functional. The reformed Grievance Hearing Committees within the election administration do not operate at the polling station level, and, in many areas, also not at the constituency or regional level either. The Political Parties' Joint Council and Forums are active in some parts of the country, but with sporadic success and without consistency of outcome.⁶ Positively, an ad hoc ten-member Inquiry Council was established by NEBE following complaints about voter registration in the Somali state. However, similar complaints are not addressed in this manner in other parts of the country.

3 The new legislation initiated by the Advisory Council includes the Organizations of Civil Society Proclamation, the Proclamation to Provide for the Prevention and Suppression of the Crime of Terrorism; the revised Ethiopian Human Rights Commission Proclamation; and the Media Proclamation.

4 Directives yet to be finalized and approved by NEBE include those on voting and counting; election dispute resolution; and mobile polling stations.

5 Eskinder Nega, President of the Balderas for Genuine Democracy party, and Jawar Mohammed, member of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), both first appeared in court, in separate cases, on July 2, 2020. Pre-trial applications relating to concealment of witness identity in both cases have continued before the courts until now, with repeated adjournments.

6 The Joint Council of Political Parties is established by political parties under the Electoral Proclamation to help with the enforcement of the law and to serve as an alternative dispute resolution mechanism.

Election Administration

The NEBE enjoys public confidence overall and most mission interlocutors recognize the extraordinary circumstances under which the electoral process is being conducted -- their confidence does not always extend to NEBE's regional offices, however.

Although the candidate registration process ended more than two months ago, the NEBE has not yet published the list of candidates per constituency. In the second half of May, it updated the overall figures to reflect candidate withdrawals and other changes: in total, 9,470 candidates are standing for both the HoPR and regional council elections. Some interlocutors expect the elections in many HoPR constituencies to be non-competitive, particularly in Oromia.

On May 15, the NEBE updated the number of currently registered voters to 36,245,444, reflecting additional registrations during the extended voter registration period. In the absence of a recent census, the estimates of eligible voters in Ethiopia per constituency remain imprecise. Discrepancies in the share of registered voters per constituency and the fact that absolute numbers of voters registered in some constituencies are in excess of the projected eligible voters, raise some concerns about equality of the vote, particularly as redistricting and boundary delineation last took place in 1995. On May 20, NEBE also announced that, in addition to the existing 138,655 poll workers, it plans to hire another 106,345 to also serve as poll workers. According to NEBE, on June 11 poll workers will start a four-level cascade training on election day procedures. The NEBE estimates that over 9,000 vehicles are needed to distribute election day materials which will be delivered in three stages from June 16 to June 18. Materials will first travel to 20 urban centers, then on to the constituencies and, according to information published by NEBE on May 15, ultimately to polling stations. Had elections been held in all constituencies, except those in Tigray, the NEBE anticipated a total of 49,407 polling stations. The actual number of polling stations on election day will be less given that currently elections for 40 constituencies have been postponed. The NEBE requested the regional state governments to help facilitate the transportation of materials, having also acknowledged their improved cooperation. The imminent onset of the rainy season in late June is perceived as a formidable challenge, with the most detrimental effects likely in the western, southern and southwestern parts of Ethiopia.



36,245,444
REGISTERED VOTERS
(AS OF MAY 15)



46,088
POSSIBLE POLLING
STATIONS



245,000
PROJECTED POLL
WORKERS

Political Parties and Campaign Environment

Although the campaign officially started in February, it has become really visible only during the last month. The Prosperity Party (PP), and to a much lesser extent the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZEMA), are the most visible contestants, with their campaign visuals observed in the capital and reported in other major cities and alongside main roads. Most parties state that face-to-face meetings with voters are their preferred method of campaigning. Concerns about a level playing field are widespread, with many mission interlocutors and some media highlighting allegations of misuse of state resources by the governing party.

Direct state subsidies to political parties contesting the elections were distributed in two tranches, totaling some 98 million ETB (\$2.25 million USD). Starting on April 19, a quarter of the overall funding was distributed evenly among all participants. The contestants' share of the remaining three-quarters, which was paid starting in the last week of May, was contingent on the number of candidates they fielded, including the number of women and persons with disabilities among them, as well as the number of women in their executive positions. The PP received the largest share of the total (23.2 million ETB or \$530,000 USD), while the runner-up EZEMA received approximately half of that amount. Several parties told the mission that the late distribution of funds was detrimental to their ability to plan and execute a successful campaign. No state subsidy has been provided to candidates contesting the elections independently, despite their legal entitlement. Existing campaign funding transparency measures are minimal, comprising a reporting requirement only on expenses covered by the state subsidy and annual audits of political party finances.

The right to campaign freely is undermined by the precarious security situation in some constituencies. At the same time, political parties representing the opposition have raised complaints about the intimidation and harassment of their supporters and candidates. During a May 27 press conference, EZEMA reported that its candidates and members faced detention and mistreatment in several constituencies in the Amhara and SNNP regions. The National Movement of Amhara (NAMA) told the mission that its candidates faced arrest in Benishangul-Gumuz and Dire Dawa. Enat also claimed publicly on May 26 that its adherents face harassment and threats in several regions, including Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz and Dire Dawa.



46 OF 53
POLITICAL PARTIES FIELDING CANDIDATES
FOR HoPR & REGIONAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS



9,470
HoPR & REGIONAL
COUNCIL CANDIDATES

Election Security

The overall security situation and ongoing tensions in several regions predominate election stakeholders' list of concerns ahead of the June 21 elections. Mission interlocutors cite an increasing number and intensity of security incidents, several of which targeted the elections directly. According to reports, at least 20 electoral posts were attacked since the start of the process, including in Oromia Special Zone and Gondar Zone of Amhara region. The mission was told about wide scale intimidation, coercion, undue arrests and ill-treatment of candidates, voters attempting to register, local election officials and elders in Somali, SNNP, Oromia, Benishangul-Gumuz and Amhara regions, as well as in Dire Dawa. While peace efforts to curb and counter violence exist, limited resources and overlapping authority among federal and regional or other security providers constrain the effectiveness of measures and do not always assuage public fears. The engagement of regional level security actors provides some reassurance but raises questions about their neutrality. The lack of a detailed mandate for the forces may sow confusion and facilitate political manipulation. The specter of a highly securitized election process heightens concerns that voters in some areas may be deterred from participation. By the same token, most mission interlocutors do not expect security challenges or violence to escalate significantly before, on or directly after election day.

COVID-19 and the Electoral Process

Application of and adherence to health protocols has been uneven overall. Instances of participants at campaign events not wearing masks have been depicted in the media and reported by some interlocutors. Following the postponement of elections, authorities amended the legal framework to ensure a safe voting process. In February, NEBE issued Directive No. 9/2021 on Compliance with COVID-19 Mitigation Measures during Elections that provides guidance for election officials and stakeholders on steps to be adopted at all stages of the process. NEBE staff, candidates, party or candidate agents, election observers, voter education providers, journalists and all relevant participants must follow health protocols including wearing masks or other face coverings during all election related activities.⁷ The Directive also contains provisions to limit overcrowding of polling units on election day by observers, party or candidate agents and media representatives. Vulnerable persons such as individuals over 60 years of age, pregnant women, persons with disabilities and those suffering from conditions rendering them susceptible to COVID-19, have been accorded special voter registration and voting provisions. Non-compliance with the above requirements may lead to denial of access to any election premises and can result in prosecution under public health and criminal law provisions. An amendment was also made to the Electoral Proclamation in February, and approved by the HoPR, which waived the signature collection requirement for candidates nominated by political parties. It also reduced by half the required number of signatures that must be submitted by independent candidates to 2,500 and those with disabilities to 1,500.

⁷ Directive No.12/2021 on Rules of Procedure and Code of Conduct for Security Personnel Assigned to Electoral Facilities and Activities enumerates specific actions for and obligations of election security providers and their personnel. Most instructions pertain to election day.

Inclusion of Marginalized Populations

Based on NEBE figures, women account for some 21 percent of all candidates standing in both the HoPR and regional council elections (1,976 of 9,470). During the most recent elections in 2015, women constituted close to 29 percent of all candidates – the decrease in the share of women candidates is especially striking given that the number of candidates overall increased by a half. There are only five women among the 143 independent candidates, and several parties did not nominate any women. With over 40 percent of its candidates being women, the PP has the most gender balanced pool of candidates. Some parties report having wanted to register more women candidates, but claim that the security situation and specific challenges confronting women opposition candidates discouraged many from running. The mission received several reports of opposition women candidates facing threats or coming under pressure to withdraw or change their political affiliation.



1,976 (21%)
WOMEN HoPR & REGIONAL
COUNCIL CANDIDATES

While many interlocutors noted positive changes in the legal framework as well as a shift in public discourse about persons with disabilities, there was limited progress towards implementing these changes and making the election process only marginally more accessible to them. The urgent need to provide a wider range of voter education and campaign materials in braille or audio-visual formats and ensure access to buildings remains. Of note, 95 candidates nominated by political parties self-identify as persons with disabilities.

Given the start of the academic recess in early June, the latest postponement of the elections will allow many students to vote in their home constituency. At the same time, interlocutors stress that young voters remain apathetic overall, with insufficient efforts by stakeholders to increase their participation. Concerns were also raised about youth participation in Oromia where it is anticipated that there will be a number of constituencies uncontested with only one candidate vying for the seat.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported as of January 2021 there are approximately 2 million internally displaced persons in Ethiopia.⁸ The NEBE informed the mission of plans to establish special polling stations on IDP sites in Somali, Oromia, Afar and SNNP regional states, as well as possibly in Dire Dawa, in accordance with Directive 13/2020. These sites are projected to serve voters displaced by past conflicts. Logistical and security challenges are said to stand in the way of NEBE addressing the needs of more recent IDPs spawned by ongoing intercommunal conflicts in Amhara, Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz. According to the NEBE, the lack of comprehensive information about the IDPs, including with regard to their linguistic needs, is frustrating its efforts.

⁸ <https://dtm.iom.int/ethiopia>

At least two regional political parties have lodged complaints with the NEBE in which they challenge the right of their competitors with nationwide coverage to contest the Special Constituency seats, which they claim are reserved for parties founded by ethnolinguistic minorities.⁹ Meanwhile, a language barrier and limited efforts to translate relevant election materials into languages other than Amharic and the other four recently added official tongues, are cited by stakeholders as impediments to participation by some ethnolinguistic communities, particularly in SNNP.¹⁰ Voters living in remote rural areas are thought to be particularly disadvantaged.

Civic Space and Citizen Engagement

On the whole, civil society welcomes the opening of civic space which has followed the enactment of Civil Societies Proclamation No. 1113/2019. On May 21, NEBE announced that additional nine CSOs were registered to observe the elections, for a total of 45 different organizations. The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society, which groups 175 CSOs from all over the country and represents the largest independent citizen observer effort, has plans to field 3,000 observers to cover approximately ten percent of the polling stations overall.

Civil society interlocutors assess positively their relations with the election administration, but stress that delays in receiving accreditation did not allow them to observe key stages of the process, including voter registration, which has been subject to wide criticism. On May 26, the CSO Code of Conduct endorsed by the General Assembly of Civil Society Forum was adopted by its member organizations, binding them to a self-regulatory mechanism that aims to foster political impartiality and non-interference. According to many mission interlocutors, limited resources and the lack of technical capacities following years of closed political space have curtailed the effectiveness of CSOs. Although some 167 CSOs were accredited by NEBE to conduct voter and civic education activities across the country, their reach remains limited due to geographic, security and financial constraints. At the same time, several groups expressed hope that the postponement of elections will allow them to reach a greater number of voters.

Media and the Information Environment

Most interlocutors acknowledged improvements in the legal framework regulating the media and a growing diversity of media professionals overall. The new media proclamation No. 1238/2021 published in early April was described as a positive step and many stakeholders expect it to usher in greater independence of the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA). At the same time, these anticipated changes will have a limited effect on the media coverage of the political campaign period that officially ends on June 16.

The media landscape is dominated by several state-run and private outlets, both on the federal and regional levels, that espouse a pro-government editorial line. Shrinking revenues are thought to increase pressure on private outlets, many of which compete for orders from state-run enterprises that account for a significant share of the advertising market.

⁹ The complaints were both submitted in March. While valid in principle, the Electoral Proclamation does not recognize the reservations claimed by the parties. NEBE has not released any information on the matter.

¹⁰ Recently added official languages were Afaan Oromo, Afar, Somali and Tigrigna.

Safety of journalists remains a serious concern: two journalists have lost their lives since January and media interlocutors report that a number of their colleagues have been arrested.¹¹ Reports of intimidation, pressure on and harassment of journalists are said to have increased since November 2020. Many journalists and media outlets are responding to these developments with self-censorship. Representatives of independent media also claim that their access to government information is shrinking, thus limiting their ability to report and editorialize.

The EMA and NEBE allocated more than 1,400 hours of free airtime to the 46 competing political parties and 143 independent candidates. Limited technical capacity among some political parties has meant that almost a quarter of the free airtime has gone unused. Media outlets have organized election desks to receive and review political party material before it is broadcast -- several reported having requested contestants edit their content. Several outlets, including the state Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation, Fana Broadcasting Corporate, Ahadu TV, Amhara Media Corporation and EthioTube, continue to organize contestant debates. Concerns have been raised about equitable access to these events: the governing PP was invited to all nine debates aired on Fana TV, while EZEMA joined four and other opposition parties featured in no more than two each.

The mission's systematic review of social media pages shows that online campaigning by political parties increased during the last month before elections. The Prime Minister's personal Facebook page has the largest following, and the PP has the highest overall user engagement figures. Opposition parties, including EZEMA, Balderas for Genuine Democracy and the Freedom and Equality party, are also receiving attention, albeit more modest. The NEBE has increasingly used social media platforms to disseminate the latest information about the state of preparations for the elections. Disinformation is thought to be a growing problem, but only a few independent fact-checking initiatives are conducted in the country.

¹¹ Ethiopia media widely reported on the deaths of journalists Dawit Kebede Araya (Tigray TV) and Sisay Fida (OBN).

About IRI

The International Republican Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing freedom and democracy worldwide. IRI enables political parties to become more issue-based and responsive, helps citizens to participate in government planning, and works to increase the role of marginalized groups in the political process. Since 1983, IRI has monitored 206 elections in 60 countries through international observation missions and assessments. For more information, visit www.iri.org.

About NDI

NDI is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works in partnership around the world to strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms and values to secure a better quality of life for all. NDI envisions a world where democracy and freedom prevail, with dignity for all. Over the past 38 years, NDI has conducted more than 250 election observation missions in 70 countries. For more information, visit www.ndi.org.

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