



# ETHIOPIA JUNE 21, 2021 NATIONAL ELECTIONS REPORT

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## MISSION OVERVIEW

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) were invited by Ethiopia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and received official accreditation from the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) for the institutes' joint Limited Election Observation Mission for Ethiopia (LEOME). The mission was conducted in accordance with Ethiopian law and the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation (Declaration of Principles)*, which establishes the basis for credible international election observation and is endorsed by 56 intergovernmental and international organizations.<sup>1</sup> IRI and NDI are grateful for the welcome and cooperation received from voters, election officials, candidates, political party leaders and members, government officials, and representatives of media and civil society. The mission also communicated with other international observer missions and Ethiopian nonpartisan citizen observation groups. The mission started in March 2021 and will continue its work through September 2021 following the anticipated conduct of postponed House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR) and regional council elections scheduled for September 6. Funding for this independent joint IRI/NDI effort was provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

Due to the constraints imposed by the global health crisis, the mission was conducted using systematic remote engagement in accordance with the precepts set out in the *Declaration of Principles* 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, throughout the mission all members adhered to international and Ethiopian public health measures to promote the safety of both Ethiopians and mission members.

The LEOME's core team was managed by Stéphane Mondon, Mission Director; Stefan Szwed, Deputy Mission Director; and Natasha Rothchild, Long-Term Analysts Coordinator. The Mission Director was based in Addis Ababa and was joined by the Deputy Mission Director when COVID-19 protocols permitted. The core team also included eight international Long-Term Analysts (LTAs) who worked remotely on specific thematic areas,<sup>2</sup> assisted by eight national research assistants based in Addis Ababa and ten regional liaisons working from nine regional states and the 'chartered city' of Dire Dawa<sup>3</sup>. The amended observation methodology required LTAs to have regular direct contact with Ethiopian stakeholders including NEBE, political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) and key actors on pre-election events and developments. Primary information collected by LTAs from direct engagement with stakeholders were further corroborated by a team of Addis Ababa-based LTA assistants and regional liaisons to inform LEOME analysis. The mission held virtual discussion and in-person meetings with hundreds of Ethiopian interlocutors over the course of the mission.

As an integral part of the LEOME, NDI/IRI organized a Virtual Pre-Election Assessment Delegation (VPEAD) from April 9 to 26 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 Honorable Ahmed Issack Hassan, former Chairperson of Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC).<sup>4</sup> The VPEAD held high-level virtual consultations with a wide array of key electoral and political stakeholders, including the Honorable Birtukan Mideksa, NEBE Chairperson. Its report<sup>5</sup> was released on May 13 and offered an analysis of the pre-election environment and preparations for the elections

<sup>1</sup> The mission was also conducted in accordance with the *Declaration of Principles (DoP) Guidelines on Gender Considerations in International Election Observation*, including a focus on violence against women in elections (VAW-E).

<sup>2</sup> Political and Campaign Environment, Legal Framework, Election Administration, Information Environment, Electoral Security, Inclusion of Women, Persons with Disabilities, and Youth, Inclusion of Internally Displaced Populations and Ethno-Linguistic Groups, and Civic Engagement.

<sup>3</sup> The nine regional states where regional liaisons were based are: Afar, Amhara, Oromia, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Sidama, Southern Nations Nationalities and People Region (SNNPR), Gambela and Harari.

<sup>4</sup> 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 Dizolele, IRI Senior Africa Advisor.

<sup>5</sup> The VPEAD report is available on both [IRI](#) and [NDI](#) websites.

as well as 12 practical recommendations that could be implemented prior to June elections to enhance the inclusiveness, transparency, and accountability of the elections.

The LEOME issued an Election Watch bulletin<sup>6</sup> on June 9, as a follow up to the VPEAD's report. The Election Watch was based on in-depth virtual interviews and analysis of relevant documents conducted by the LTAs from April 26 through May 31 with a wide array of electoral and political stakeholders. The mission intends to issue a second Election Watch following the conduct of postponed elections scheduled for September 6.

The LEOME was also assisted by an election day technical team that was in Addis Ababa from June 16 through 24.<sup>7</sup> The team visited Ethiopia to gain greater understanding of key stakeholder perceptions of the pre-election period in advance of the June 21 elections as well as their views of the conduct of voting, counting, and tabulation on and following election day. While the technical team was accredited, due to COVID-19 and security constraints its members did not systematically observe election day processes and focused on engaging with stakeholders, in particular citizen observers and other international observers, on their perceptions of the elections. NDI/IRI will continue to follow electoral-related developments through the issuance of the second Election Watch on the September 6 polls.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND IMMEDIATE RECOMMENDATIONS

*Acknowledging that the election process is incomplete, the LEOME emphasizes that it is not offering conclusions about the overall election process and further emphasizes that it is the Ethiopian people who will ultimately determine the meaning and character of the elections. The LEOME will continue to monitor the process and stand by those working to achieve transparent and peaceful elections in Ethiopia.*

Ethiopia's June 21, 2021 elections were held following important reforms that allowed political parties and civil society to emerge as electoral actors and the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) to take important steps to build its capacity and credibility. In spite of positive steps, the political space, participation, and competition were still acutely limited by the country's authoritarian legacy, widespread insecurity and open conflicts along long-standing ethno-linguistic and political power divides, imbalance in the electoral playing field, occurrences of backsliding on political expression, logistical challenges, and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though the overall electoral process leading to the June 21 elections was fraught with major and varied challenges in the election environment, it showed important improvements over past elections, particularly regarding the establishment of the national electoral body, and facilitation of national election monitoring by the contestants and CSOs. Nonetheless, the electoral environment fell short of key standards concerning human and civil liberties, electoral campaigning, adequate security for all parties, and overall peace and security.<sup>8</sup> The positive factors can serve as the basis for more credible future elections and could contribute to national reconciliation and further democratic reform if Ethiopians muster the necessary will for genuine and intensive dialogue.

After several postponements, Ethiopia held elections on June 21, for 425 of the 547 constituencies of the HoPR<sup>9</sup>. Due to constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the IRI and NDI conducted a joint LEOME that was

<sup>6</sup> The Election Watch bulletin is available on both [NDI](#) and [IRI](#) websites.

<sup>7</sup> The technical team was led by Gemima Barlow, NDI Deputy Regional Director for Southern and East Africa; and included: Gregory Kearns, IRI Africa Division Director; Mvemba Dizolele, IRI Senior Africa Advisor; and Richard L. Klein, NDI Elections Senior Advisor.

<sup>8</sup> Please see, e.g., the African Union's Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa, section III, regarding "scrupulous implementation of principles for democratic elections".

<sup>9</sup> Elections were also held for the majority of regional and city council elections, but not for the referendum on statehood for the South-West of the country.

required to rely predominantly on systematic remote engagement. The LEOME served to provide Ethiopia's citizens and the international community with an independent, impartial, and accurate assessment of the election environment and offer constructive recommendations based on international and regional standards for democratic elections and consistent with national law and the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*.

Ethiopia's elections were initially seen by many stakeholders as an opportunity to break with the country's authoritarian past and develop more inclusive, transparent, and accountable governance in the country. Reforms introduced starting in 2018, with the election of Dr. Abiy Ahmed as prime minister, resulted in widespread political and social changes, including greater freedoms for citizens, CSOs, political parties, and the media. Changes to election, CSO and political party related laws addressed a number of the restrictive elements of the legal framework. Central to credible elections, the appointment of Honorable Birtukan Mideksa, a highly respected former opposition leader and judge, as chairperson of the NEBE enhanced respect for the organization across the political spectrum while changes to the NEBE's governing legislation strengthened its independence.

Once banned political parties were legalized and began to organize to contest elections. The courts made important rulings supporting the rights of citizens and of parties to contest elections. Long repressed civil society began to re-emerge and engage in voter and civic education activities as well as independent impartial observation of the electoral process. More broadly, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) began to address human rights violations and greater media freedom, particularly through social media and the Internet, fostered enhanced sharing of information and exposure to new ideas. Plus, the appointment and election of women to high office was an important signal about the value of a more inclusive electoral process and wider political life.

However, major problems in the electoral environment noted above were exacerbated during the prolonged period leading to the June 21 elections. The country faced, and continues to face, multiple security crises related to long-standing ethnic tensions and the distribution of power that resulted in instability or open conflict in many parts of Ethiopia. Due to open conflict no elections were scheduled for Tigray state, which has 38 HoPR constituencies, while insecurity and logistical difficulties resulted in elections being postponed in approximately 82 other HoPR constituencies. The arrest of several prominent Oromo political leaders and other problems resulted in political party boycotts and a significant number of HoPR elections featuring only one candidate in Ethiopia's most populous state. Intimidation and harassment of opposition party candidates and their supporters limited their ability to participate in the electoral process. Though the NEBE introduced new measures regarding campaign finance, disparities in access to funding remained problematic, and the advantages of incumbency and use of government resources gave disproportionate advantage to the ruling party. As a result, the campaign was relatively subdued and dominated by the ruling party.

Insecurity disproportionately undermined the opportunity for women and other traditionally marginalized populations to participate in the electoral process, which was further hampered by disproportionate burdens of the pandemic falling on those populations. Thus, despite progress in some respects, women, ethnic minorities as well as persons with disabilities (PWDs), internally displaced persons (IDPs), and other groups remained largely disempowered in the electoral process. While there was greater media freedom, significant constraints remained. Radio and television continued to be dominated by pro-government voices and disinformation disseminated by individuals from across the political spectrum undermined the ability of voters to obtain accurate information.

The NEBE experienced significant challenges in organizing the June 21 elections. Political repression and autocratic administration around the widely criticized elections in 2005, 2010, and 2015 seriously undermined the capacities of the NEBE (as well as political parties and CSOs), which created shortcomings to overcome going into the current elections. The substantial reform efforts by the NEBE were hampered by the scale and scope of the challenges, the newness of the Board members, and the onboarding of large numbers of new staff with little electoral experience. The NEBE's sub-national structures have uneven capacity, and concerns were raised about their independence.

In this context and despite its improvements, including its general responsiveness, the NEBE demonstrated insufficient transparency at some important junctures and experienced significant operational challenges during voter registration, candidate registration, and preparing for election day voting and counting that resulted in additional postponements of the elections.

Citizen and international observers reported voting and counting on June 21 were largely peaceful with polling officials generally following procedures. There were isolated public reports of violence around polling stations and shortages of some election materials, which in some instances prevented polling stations from opening. Due to long queues, the NEBE, in a move widely approved by stakeholders, extended voting for an additional three hours. On July 10, the NEBE announced official results for 425 HoPR constituencies with the ruling Prosperity Party winning 410 seats with announced turnout for most regions above 90 percent. Complaints were filed related to 201 HoPR constituencies with results for nine constituencies being cancelled.

On June 30, journalists from Awlo Media Center and the YouTube broadcaster Ethio Forum were arrested.<sup>10</sup> In addition, the online newspaper Addis Standard was forced to temporarily suspend publication from July 15 to 21 by the Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA).<sup>11</sup> Interlocutors raised concerns about media freedom in the period between June 21 and September 6 voting. Following the June 21 polls, hostilities resumed in Tigray that led to a ceasefire being established, which could have beneficial effects on the environment leading to the September 6 voting should it hold and progress be made to resolve that crisis.

Ethiopia is now moving towards holding elections on September 6 for 82 postponed constituencies.<sup>12</sup> There are important steps that can be taken to enhance the conduct of the September 6 elections within the limited time available. The LEOME therefore offers the following 13 recommendations with that in mind, in complement to the 39 recommendations offered at the end of this report:

- The NEBE should further enhance its transparency efforts by timely providing political parties and CSOs with detailed information on the postponed elections, including lists of candidates, voter registration data, polling locations, and other relevant information;
- The NEBE should publicly address concerns about the accuracy of the voters' roll concerning over- and under-enrollment, such as an independent expert review, and to further efforts concerning IDPs open voter registration for them and others who did not previously have an opportunity to register;
- The NEBE should further efforts to ensure that all party agents (and ideally also observers) present at polling stations and vote tabulation locations be provided a certified copy of the official results form, and the NEBE should make timely available results disaggregated to polling station levels;
- The NEBE, Grievance Hearing Committees, Councils of Inquiry, Political Parties' Joint Councils, Political Parties' Joint Forums, and the courts, should clarify and publicize their respective jurisdictions over types of electoral complaints and their complaint procedures, while addressing means to effectively and timely settle such complaints;
- All political parties, governmental officials, and other electoral actors should avoid inciteful activity or participating in violence, intimidation, and hate speech, and political parties and governmental officials should publicly renounce taking such actions and call for peaceful electoral competition;
- Political parties should organize more issue-based campaigns and engage voters on their priority needs;
- Federal and state security forces should redouble their efforts to ensure a safe environment for all stakeholders, including for women who participate as candidates, voters, election officials, and observers;

<sup>10</sup> See Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [alert](#).

<sup>11</sup> See Addis Standard [statement](#) on EMA suspension.

<sup>12</sup> A date for eventual elections for Tigray has not been determined.

- The NEBE, federal and state governments, political parties, CSOs, and other stakeholders should identify and take specific measures to enhance participation of women, young people, ethnolinguistic minorities, PWDs, and IDPs;
- The NEBE, the recently created Ethiopian Media Authority, journalist and media associations, and CSOs should increase efforts to safeguard information integrity in the electoral context through media and social media monitoring, addressing disinformation, and ensuring fair media coverage, journalist safety and access to information;
- Federal and state governments should enhance their coordination with the NEBE and provide all required support and resources needed;
- Voter education and motivation efforts should continue and should specifically target marginalized populations, including outside major cities to ensure their broad participation in the process;
- The NEBE and federal and state governments should enhance efforts to promote public health and mitigate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the electoral context; and
- While the legal framework exists to allow citizen election observers unfettered access to observe all aspects of the election process and freedom to share their findings, more should be done to ensure that right is protected in practice.

Though Ethiopia's security environment is a significant concern and democratic trajectory remains uncertain, citizens are eager to ensure that democratic gains take root. As noted in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, measures are needed by all actors "to ensure and maintain political and social dialogue, as well as public trust and transparency between political leaders and the people, in order to consolidate democracy and peace."<sup>13</sup> To build a culture of inclusion, hold meaningful future elections, and lay the groundwork for progress beyond September 6, political party leaders, government officials, civil society, and other stakeholders need to work diligently towards a common vision for a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Ethiopia.

## POLITICAL CONTEXT

The elections held on June 21, 2021 were Ethiopia's sixth since the return to civilian rule. The country, however, has had relatively little experience with credible elections, as previous processes were widely seen as being fundamentally flawed. Significant reforms starting in 2018, after Dr. Abiy Ahmed became prime minister, initially opened political space, providing greater freedoms and new optimism about the potential for credible elections. The appointment or election of highly respected individuals, many of whom were women, to several high offices further boosted public confidence. However, deeply seeded and long suppressed ethnic tensions, previously managed by the country's ethno-federal system, also came to the fore as did other aspects of uneven concentrations and use of power. Thus, the elections were held in a context of widespread insecurity, instances of political repression and open conflict as well as heightened regional tensions. These issues created major challenges for credible elections and further heighten the barriers to participation for voters, in particular women, young people, PWDs, IDPs, and other marginalized populations.

Following three decades of domination by a single coalition of ethno-regional parties under an ethno-federal system, Ethiopia held 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 the EPRDF's rule, Ethiopia's political landscape was marked by corruption and lack



of respect for fundamental freedoms. Long existing ethnic and political tensions were managed by an authoritarian ruling party and an ethno-federal system that served to divide political power at a regional level based on ethnically defined states. Those factors stifled political participation and competition, as well as the roles of media and civil society.

Upon 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 were, for the first time, 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, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (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. 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 persist that political reforms initiated by the Prime Minister were neither fully implemented nor carried through from the federal to regional and local levels. Opposition parties remain weak and have been facing challenges in reestablishing themselves; they also have limited financial and human resources at their disposal. The existence of a strong incumbent party and newly established opposition parties perpetuates an uneven electoral playing field.

Efforts to reconfigure the ruling coalition were met with resistance, particularly in Tigray and by the TPLF which had previously controlled the EPRDF and long dominated Ethiopian politics. 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 (PP), though the TPLF declined to join.

While general elections were initially anticipated for May 2020, five years after the most recent elections held on May 24, 2015, in February 2020, the NEBE officially announced that the elections would take place in August. The following month the NEBE announced the suspension of the elections due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. The elections were later rescheduled for June 5, 2021 and were again delayed with the NEBE citing logistical challenges to June 21, 2021.

The TPLF leadership opposed the suspension of the electoral calendar and indefinite postponement of the 2020 national elections.<sup>14</sup> Tigray proceeded unilaterally to hold a regional vote 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 ended shortly after it started, the ensuing violence endured and continues, 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 Sudanese troops related to a longstanding boundary dispute have further aggravated the situation. The EHRC as well as international organizations have issued reports detailing human rights abuses, including the killing of civilians, sexual violence, and the use of food as a weapon in the conflict, and the African Commission on Human

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14 The reasons and sequence, as well as the NEBE's decisions, concerning the suspension and and postponements are covered in a later section of this report.

and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) established a Commission of Inquiry on Tigray.<sup>15</sup> These developments added tensions that reverberated in the general electoral environment.

Power struggles within the now former EPRDF have more broadly strained relations within Ethiopia's ethno-federal system. They have heightened tensions among different Oromo groups, and between ethnic groups, notably 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 arrest and detention of opposition leaders and their supporters in advance of the elections heightened insecurity and closed political space.<sup>16</sup>

In the end, the elections ultimately took place on June 21, with the exception of several HoPR elections delayed until September 6 and the unscheduled elections for Tigray.

## ANALYSIS

### Legal Framework

The principal legal instruments that govern Ethiopian elections are the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (1995), the Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Election Code of Conduct Proclamation (Electoral Proclamation), and the Proclamation to Establish the National Electoral Board (both 2019). Substantial reform of the legislative framework, initiated by the Legal and Justice Affairs Advisory Council in 2018, led to the adoption by the HoPR of new electoral, civil society, and media laws. The new laws positively altered the legislative framework for elections, drawing it closer to fulfilment of key international and regional standards for democratic elections. Implementation of the electoral law, however, was not uniform with many gaps emerging between the letter and practice.

Protection of political rights was enhanced by the removal of restrictions on candidacy, namely language requirements and an arbitrary limit of twelve candidates per HoPR constituency. Financial incentives for the nomination of women and persons with disabilities, as well as for the inclusion of women within governing structures, were introduced for parties. Voting rights of IDPs and prisoners, as well as the right of prisoners to contest elections, were explicitly recognized in the law. In addition, public servants, including academics in government institutions, were required to take leave to seek election in an effort to distance public administration from partisan politics. A requirement that electoral constituencies have parity in size, with no more than 15 percent deviation, was also introduced.

However, several of these provisions, including voting for prisoners and the diaspora, were not implemented. The NEBE did not register candidates in prison and initially resisted implementation of a Federal Supreme Court decision that four prisoners, all nominees of the Balderas for True Democracy party, should be registered as candidates. Constituency boundaries could not be revised and did not comply with the principle of equality in the weight of the vote, because of the absence of a recent census. Special constitutionally mandated constituencies for minorities continued to be administered as regular districts with no measure taken to meaningfully empower minorities. Financial incentives for parties nominating women and persons with disabilities did not result in significant increases in their candidatures for the HoPR.

<sup>15</sup> See the reports posted on the [Ethiopian Human Rights Commission](#) social media page; also [Amnesty International](#), 26 February 2021; [Human Rights Watch](#), 5 March 2021; International Crisis Group [Briefing 171](#); 2 April 2021, *Ethiopia's Tigray War: A Deadly, Dangerous Stalemate*.

<sup>16</sup> Senior political leaders who have been or remained detained included: Eskinder Nega, Sintayehu Chekol and Aster Seyoum from the Balderas for True Democracy party; Bekele Gerba, Jawar Mohammed, Dejene Tafa, and Korsa Dechasa of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC); and Bete Orgressa of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). Lidetu Ayalwe, of the new deregistered Ethiopian Democratic Party (EDP) was released from detention and left the country for medical reasons ahead of the elections. Members of other opposition parties, including from the Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice and Democracy party (EZEMA), the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), and the Ethiopian National Movement (ENM), were arrested in the run up to the elections, but were released on bail.

Revision of the rules establishing the NEBE has made the Board more independent, with new rules of appointment and ethical behavior, and made it more accountable, with judicial review of administrative action. The NEBE, however, did not always comply in a timely and effective manner with court decisions rendered against it though it ultimately accepted court rulings.

Ethiopia's electoral law leaves significant discretion to the NEBE in the conduct of elections, with time frames either absent or flexible. The NEBE issued 27 directives for the conduct of the elections. These directives were frequently adopted late, and three were not adopted. They were not translated into other languages and only seven directives were available on the NEBE website (only in Amharic). The Electoral Proclamation was translated into the other four working languages of Ethiopia but was only disseminated electronically. The last national census in 2007 indicated that just over 60 percent of the population had some measure of fluency in Amharic. The limited publication and distribution of the law in other languages represents deficient access to the law, particularly for speakers of minority languages.<sup>17</sup>

## Electoral System

Ethiopia has a federal system of government, with power shared between the central government, ten regional states and two 'chartered city' administrations.<sup>18</sup> The federal parliament has two chambers, the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR) and House of Federation (HoF). The HoPR has 547 seats, directly elected from single member constituencies through a first-past-the-post majoritarian system. The 153 members of the HoF are nominated by the ten regional state councils.<sup>19</sup> Members of both chambers serve for five year terms. The political party or coalition of political parties that wins the greatest number of seats in the HoPR forms a government. The prime minister, who serves as head of government, and the president, who is the largely ceremonial head of state, are both elected by the HoPR.

A minimum of 20 HoPR constituencies (22 since 1995) are constitutionally reserved for ethno-linguistic minorities. Of them, 13 constituencies held elections on June 21. However, the framework does not guarantee that the representatives elected must be from the minority populations. Direct elections, in multi-member constituencies, for the regional state councils and city administrations are conducted in tandem with the HoPR elections. All regional state councils are unicameral, except those in Harari and the Southern Nations Nationalities and People Region (SNNPR), which are bi-cameral. Since 1995, elections for the Harari upper house, the Harari National Assembly, have been conducted among Hararis living nationwide. The decision of the NEBE to desist from this practice was successfully challenged by the Harari state. The Federal Supreme Court Cassation Bench decided that the nationwide vote must be conducted for the Harari regional council election.<sup>20</sup> The court did not rule on the constitutional objections raised by the NEBE, deciding that they lacked jurisdiction. Allowing nationwide voting for only one minority poses questions concerning equal voting rights.

## Election Administration

The NEBE is tasked with powers and duties including the duty to impartially execute any election and referendum in accordance with the Constitution and election law, accredit and supervise civil society organizations conducting voter education, and register political parties. In November 2018, former opposition leader and judge Birtukan Mideksa was appointed chair of the NEBE. Significantly, party leaders, civic activists, academics, and media

<sup>17</sup> According to [World Population Review](#), there are 88 languages in Ethiopia, among which about 34 percent of the population speaks Afaan Oromo, 6.25 percent speaks Somali, 6 percent speaks Tigrinya, 5 percent speaks Sidama, 2.2 percent speaks Wolaytgna, 2 percent speaks Guragegna, and 1.75 percent speaks Afar.

<sup>18</sup> Chartered cities enjoy a constitutionally protected status, whereby they hold powers similar to those of regional states.

<sup>19</sup> 'Chartered cities' do not have representation in the HoF.

<sup>20</sup> Cassation file 207036, May 27, 2021. Constitutional interpretation is the exclusive preserve of the HoF. NEBE should have applied to the HoF to adjudicate on whether the Harari arrangements were constitutional.

practitioners from across the political spectrum highlighted the NEBE's independence under the new chair and commended not only her integrity, but the other commissioners' as well. The NEBE was also seen as consultative and seeking to work with election stakeholders. This is particularly significant because the previous NEBE Secretariat was perceived as partisan.

However, concerns were expressed in the pre-election period about the NEBE's technical capacity and its ability to meet deadlines and fulfill its mandate. The newly constituted NEBE lacked significant election administration experience, and some political parties and other stakeholders questioned its transparency and ability to provide electoral information in a timely manner. At the same time it was necessary for the NEBE to recruit a large number of new staff who lacked prior election administration experience and therefore required significant training, while concurrently taking on the responsibilities of conducting national elections and implementing significant electoral reforms. At the federal level, the NEBE enjoys significant public confidence. Parties raised concerns about varying levels of cooperation from state and local level NEBE officials, as well as their impartiality, including questions about the degree to which the Board is in full control of its subnational structures.

Also important, as part of reforms introduced starting in 2018, the procedures for appointing NEBE Board members were changed and they are now appointed through an open process that includes public calls for nominations, a screening process by a select committee, and confirmation by parliament. Previously, NEBE Board appointments were made with little consultation by the prime minister. The current NEBE Board, with the exception of the Chairperson Birtukan, was appointed according to the new procedures and reflects a wide variety of sectors, including civil society, academia, and the law. While Chairperson Birtukan was appointed before the law was amended, there was broad consultation in advance of her nomination. The resulting Board of five members, two women and three men, was appointed for six-year terms.

The election is administered by a three-tiered structure, which comprises the NEBE with its regional offices, over 670 constituency offices, nearly 100 zonal coordinating offices, and close to 50,000 polling stations. The NEBE was not able to establish constituency offices uniformly across the country within the timeframe which it initially set out. This led to delays in fulfilling the electoral calendar. The Board is supported by the Secretariat headed by the Chief Executive Officer and her Deputy with a staff complement of 229 members at the NEBE headquarters in Addis Ababa and 127 members at the 11 regional offices. However, the Board, in general, and the Chairperson in particular play a leading role in the NEBE's operations. In November and December 2020, the Board engaged in the recruitment and training of election officers. The criteria for recruitment included academic qualifications, past experience, and impartiality. While many young people reportedly met the qualifications, they were often politically affiliated. The Board sought to ensure gender balance in the election officers and adjusted the requirements to better enable women's participation. The NEBE stated the recruitment process took longer than planned, which adversely affected the training schedule.

Throughout pre-election preparations, the Board was beset with operational challenges resulting in consistent delays in the implementation of different electoral activities such as the establishment of constituency offices, candidate registration, voter registration, recruitment and training of electoral officers, and ballot printing. In December 2020, the Board issued the electoral calendar and communicated it via social media and political party meetings, but was not able to fully adhere to the calendar and did not share updated versions of the calendar with stakeholders through official and broadly followed channels when deadlines were missed or elections were postponed.

## **Postponement of Elections**

The elections did not provide an opportunity for all Ethiopians to go to the polls, with approximately a fifth of HoPR elections not being held on June 21. The conflict in Tigray, insecurity, issues during voter registration, legal challenges, and logistical issues all contributed to postponements of the elections. While initially anticipated for

May 2020, in February 2020, the NEBE announced the official electoral timeline with election day scheduled to take place on August 29, 2020. Subsequently, in March 2020, the NEBE announced the indefinite suspension of the electoral calendar and postponement of the August 29 elections due to COVID-19. In May and June 2020, the two houses of parliament approved this request while extending the mandate of the federal and regional governments, whose mandates were due to expire in September. In December 2020, the NEBE announced that elections would be held on June 5, 2021 and scheduled June 12 for city council elections in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa. The NEBE did not recognize the September 2020 elections unilaterally organized by Tigray state, and subsequently determined that it would be unable to conduct elections in the state due to the ongoing conflict there. Thus, elections would not be held for the 38 HoPR constituencies and 152 regional council seats in Tigray.

On May 15, the NEBE announced that elections would be further delayed due to logistical challenges with a date set for June 21.<sup>21</sup> The NEBE also stated that all elections for Harari and Somali states as well as a number of HoPR and regional council elections in other states, plus the referendum on statehood for the South-West, would no longer be held with those for the rest of the country, but instead would take place on September 6 (with elections still indefinitely postponed for Tigray region). Elections for Harari state were postponed due to an appeal filed by the NEBE related to the conduct of the regional council elections while those for Somali were delayed by issues concerning voter registration. The referendum on statehood was postponed because of some affected communities not voting in the HoPR and regional council elections. In the end, on June 21 elections were held for 436 of 547 HoPR seats<sup>22</sup> and 1,990 of 2,504 regional and city council seats.

Election day saw further delays and logistical challenges. For example, voting took place in several polling stations in Sidama and Gambela regions on June 22, and on July 8 voters returned to cast their ballots in parts of Negelle constituency. In announcing election results, the NEBE stated that nine HoPR elections would be rerun following complaints filed through a new dispute process.<sup>23</sup> In total, elections for 82 HoPR constituencies are scheduled to be held on September 6, 2021.

## COVID-19 and the Election Process

The COVID-19 pandemic 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.

According to official estimates, more than 275,000 COVID-19 cases with approximately 4,000 deaths were reported in Ethiopia by the June 21 elections.<sup>24</sup> COVID-19 cases had spiked to their highest level in early April with over 2,000 new cases per day before falling significantly by June 21. Similarly, COVID-19 related deaths peaked in late April with 35 deaths per day before decreasing noticeably. By election day new cases had fallen to under 100 per day and deaths to under 10. However, it is widely 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

21 The NEBE also announced that the city council elections for the 'chartered cities' of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa were harmonized to also take place on June 21 rather than a week later as previously planned.

22 Among the 73 HoPR constituencies postponed to September 6 are: Afar (2 - ballot reprinting); Amhara (6 - security issues; 3 - no voter registration; 1 - ballot reprinting; and 3 - election administration issues); Benishangul-Gumuz (2 - security issues; 2 - no voter registration; and 2 - election administration issues); Harari (1 - court case; and 1 - voter registration investigation); Oromia (7 - no voter registration; 1 - election administration issues); Somali (23 - voter registration irregularities); SNNPR (2 - court cases; 8 - ballot reprinting; 1 - no voter registration; 1 - voter registration not cleared by NEBE; and 5 - security issues).

23 Of the ten HoPR elections to be rerun one is in Afar; five are in Amhara; one is in Benishangul-Gumuz; and three are in SNNPR.

24 See Reuters [coronavirus tracker](#).

vaccines have reportedly been received by late June. The Government of Ethiopia and the NEBE 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. They included social distancing, the wearing of masks, and the use of hand sanitizer/soap; however, the measures were not effectively implemented.

COVID-19 not only impacts the conduct of election day and the ability of polling officials and voters to safely participate in the process, but also the ability of political parties and non-partisan civic groups to observe it. 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 in safeguarding elections and providing independent non-partial information on the electoral process.

## Constituency Delimitation

According to the Constitution, the HoF shall determine the boundaries of constituencies on the basis of census results and a proposal submitted by the NEBE. Equality of the vote is also enshrined in the Constitution and legal provisions restrict maximum deviation in constituency population to 15 percent.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the 2007 census figures and increasing complaints about underrepresentation by some stakeholders, the distribution of the 547 HoPR constituencies among the ten regions and two chartered cities has not been reviewed since 1995, except in the newly established Sidama regional state. As the census planned for 2017 was postponed, the existing distribution of seats was maintained for these elections. Significant demographic changes are thought to have occurred in the interim, likely altering the weight of the vote between constituencies. The Mocha Democratic Party challenged NEBE's decision not to review constituency boundaries, in particular to preserve the integrity of ethnic self-government, but the court decided against the party, upholding the NEBE's argument that a national census must precede redistricting.

Voter registration figures highlighted the lack of equality of the vote between states. Benishangul-Gumuz has the lowest average number of registered voters per constituency with 41,041 while Afar has the highest average number with 164,234 registered voters per constituency. This is a variance of approximately 400 percent, undermining the equality of the vote. Overall, the registration figures suggest that Afar, Gambela, Oromia, Somali, and Sidama states are relatively underrepresented in the HoPR while Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and SNNPR states are relatively overrepresented in terms of registered voters.

## Voter Registration

Ethiopia uses new voters' rolls for each election and therefore all eligible voters were required to register in advance of the elections in order to vote. The NEBE and eventually political parties and civil society groups disseminated voter education information on registration processes across the country. To register, individuals needed to go to a polling station within their *kebele* (ward) and present their *kebele* ID. Eligible individuals would then be issued a voter ID and their details recorded by hand in the voters' roll for the polling station. While indelible ink was applied to successful registrants, the use of a manual voters' roll increased the potential for multiple registration.

Originally planned for March 1 to 30, the voter registration timeline was initially shifted to the period between March 25 and April 23. When voter registration did commence, it was uneven, with polling stations in some parts of the country opening from the start, while others were delayed. In mid-April, the NEBE announced publicly that only about half of the polling stations were operational and able to register voters. 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

<sup>25</sup> Constitution Article 38/1c; Procl. 1162/2019, Article 13/1B.

engage regional states to facilitate the administration of voter registration. Some interlocutors expressed concerns that these mobilization efforts were politically biased. By the end of April, the NEBE stated over 41,000 polling stations were open for voter registration. On April 23, voter registration was extended for Afar and Somali regions by three weeks until May 14, which were among the areas where the process did not start until late April, and for the rest of the country by two weeks through May 7. The NEBE subsequently announced that voter registration would be extended throughout the country until May 14. These changes were announced late and were preceded by broad speculation about other delays.

Preliminary voter registration figures from May 16 showed approximately 36 million registered voters (excluding Tigray where voter registration was not held). Prior to election day, updated registration figures stated that roughly 37 million Ethiopians had registered to vote. However, comparison of the two sets of figures revealed significant decreases in the number of registered voters for Afar and Somali states, while in contrast there was a more than a 100 percent increase for Benishangul-Gumuz. Without either official NEBE registration targets or official census estimates for the voting age population it is not possible to evaluate national or regional registration rates or the quality of the resulting voters' rolls.

Shortcomings in public communication by the NEBE and dramatic changes of the voter registration figures, however, gave rise to concerns about the integrity of the process among some stakeholders. In the absence of official data from the NEBE, unsubstantiated registration figures circulated by several media outlets, thus encouraging speculation about the actual state of voter registration. The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Election (CECOE) deployed 144 observers across the country who witnessed voter registration at 1,192 polling stations. Their report highlighted the security and logistical challenges that hampered voter registration. They also raised concerns about the accessibility of polling stations for PWDs and the underrepresentation of women and polling station officials.

The NEBE stated 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. Some interlocutors alleged a variety of violations and irregularities, including intimidation, undue enticement, and misuse of resources or abuse of office. Political parties lodged several complaints with the NEBE regarding the voter registration process with complaints in Somali state resulting in a NEBE Inquiry Council and the ultimate postponement of all elections in the state.<sup>26</sup> The NEBE also took administrative measures to address irregularities in the voter registration process elsewhere.

## Voter Education

The NEBE is the primary institution responsible for voter education. In total, the NEBE conducted three waves of voter education campaigns, starting in February 2021. The first wave focused on candidate registration procedures, the second and the longest wave targeted voter education. Closer to election day, the NEBE shifted the voter education content to explain election day procedures. The NEBE assigned two voter education experts per each region and actively placed public service announcements (PSAs) on national, regional, and both public and private TV and radio, as well as in print, online, and social media. Advertisements were available in five main languages, and were often translated into minority languages by community radios. According to the NEBE, it had reached around 32.7 million people via its voter education efforts. These were substantial voter education efforts, though many interlocutors expressed concerns that significant sections of the population did not have enough information about elections.

<sup>26</sup> The complaints ranged from alleged inaccessibility of polling stations in Addis Ababa sub-cities, the number of voters permitted per polling station, to poor operations by NEBE and registration of minors.

Despite a high number of CSOs accredited, interlocutors indicated that only about a half of them were able to conduct voter education and their reach remained marginal. Finances was a challenge for many organizations that may have believed that accreditation would be accompanied by funding. Many did not commence their efforts up until the very end of the voter registration process. According to most interlocutors, the activities of CSOs were mostly concentrated in Addis Ababa and other large urban centers. Main voter education activities included face-to-face meetings (with a limit of 50 persons per session due to COVID-19 preventive measures in place), road shows, and dissemination of flyers and brochures, as well as text-messaging. PSAs via radio and TV were relatively few due to their high cost. In an attempt to increase the coverage of CSOs working on voter education, the NEBE issued small grants to 12 CSOs with a total amount of ETB 4 million (some USD 95,000) to conduct voter education in remote areas and for marginalized communities, including women, PWDs, voters residing in pastoral areas, and IDPs.

## Political Party Registration

The new electoral law obliged all political parties to re-register with the NEBE. It also raised the threshold to 10,000 founding members for national and 4,000 for regional parties—a steep increase from previous figures of 1,500 and 750 respectively. According to NEBE, 46 political parties of the 53 newly re-registered formations fielded candidates in these elections (20 national and 26 regional). The law lacks differentiation in the operation of national and regional parties, a gap filled by a NEBE decision to restrict regional parties to competing in a single regional state.

Four political parties, Oromo Democratic Alliance (ODA), Gadaa System party, Oromo Liberation Unity Front, and Oromo Abbo party, successfully challenged the NEBE's rejection of their application for re-registration before the Federal High Court. According to the political parties, the NEBE had neither responded to the rulings nor taken steps to follow procedures to verify signatures or ultimately register the said parties, while the NEBE maintained that the parties had not met requirements. Ultimately, the parties had to return to court and apply for an enforcement action to revisit their application. Only then did the NEBE move forward with registering these parties in accordance with the court's rulings.

## Candidate Registration

Rules for candidate nomination were amended during the reform of the legal framework. In the case of HoPR elections, independent candidates now required an increased number of 5,000 endorsement signatures, while political party nominees needed 3,000. Nomination requirements for HoPR elections were also reduced for persons with disabilities to 3,000 for an independent and 1,500 for a party candidate.

Following a NEBE decision, approved by the HoPR, parliamentary candidates nominated by political parties were not required to collect signatures ahead of the 2021 elections. The decision was based on a Ministry of Health guideline to avoid contact and maintain social distance in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Independent candidates still had to collect signatures to register. The candidate registration period originally scheduled from February 15 to 28 was extended by the NEBE until March 4 at the request of the political parties. Most parties complained about challenges during the candidate registration process and many claimed that they wanted to register more candidates, but alleged that they were threatened, detained, or hindered from submitting documentation.

Several political parties, including major opposition parties in Oromia regional state, the OLF and the OFC, announced in March that they would not participate in the elections. They stated that their participation was conditional on the freeing of all political prisoners, restoring of their party offices, all-inclusive negotiations, and political dialogue. It was also said that the OLF was affected by internal developments. Consequently, elections were contested by only a single candidate in 104 of the 170 HoPR constituencies in Oromia in which elections took place on June 21.



The NEBE announced on June 18 that a total of 9,505 candidates, including 9,357 political party nominees and 148 independent candidates, would contest the elections.<sup>27</sup> Transparency was not upheld during candidate registration, with substitutions and withdrawals still undertaken at the end of May according to the NEBE, despite a legal provision that changes could not take place within a month of voting. Several hundred substitutions and withdrawals were made without any explanation. The Board only published the lists of candidates, broken down per constituency, on June 16, five days before polls opened.<sup>28</sup> The NEBE conducted a lottery for ballot positioning. The NEBE confirmed that the printed ballots ultimately contained some omissions and misspellings.

Following the NEBE's refusal to register four Balderas for True Democracy party candidates who were in detention, the party filed a complaint at the court and won. The NEBE did not comply with the ruling, however, arguing that the candidate registration process was completed. The party then returned to court, seeking enforcement of the earlier decision, which it again won. NEBE complied and included the four candidates' names on the ballots. A subsequent petition to the court to release the candidates from custody was refused.

## Campaign Environment

The official campaign period started on February 15 and ended five days before the June 21 election day. Issues that dominated the campaign included the cost of living, unemployment, ethnic violence, and security. For campaigning purposes, parties and candidates used loudspeakers mounted on vehicles, organized rallies and town hall meetings, conducted door-to-door and village-to-village campaigns, as well as distributed brochures, and used banners and posters. Campaigning was also conducted through print, radio, and TV, partly with the free airtime provided to candidates, as well as via social media.

Significantly, parties formed a Joint Council of Political Parties (JCPP) as a forum for dialogue and resolution of differences. In March 2019, JCPP members signed a code of conduct and adopted rules of procedure for its implementation and operationalization of its organs.<sup>29</sup> The NEBE provided the JCPP with an office and secretariat. Most political parties acknowledged the work of the JCPP secretariat, which also conducted missions to the regions to help resolve disputes. Regional level JCPPs were also established.

Although significant improvements in access to freedoms of assembly and expression were noted during these elections, the overall environment compromised widespread complaints about intimidation and an unlevel playing field, which disproportionately affected women and individuals from other marginalized groups both as candidates and voters. Opposition parties reported repeated instances of detention of candidates, physical attacks on members, vandalized party offices, and destruction of campaign materials, and detention of candidates in contradiction to legal provisions that candidates be protected from arrest or detention during the campaign period.

On May 27, EZEMA, the largest opposition party, stated that its candidates and members had been detained and physically abused in Amhara and SNNPR regions and questioned whether free and fair elections could take place in an environment where such violations occurred. NAMA, the governing PP's strongest competitor in the Amhara region, also indicated that seven of its candidates were arrested in Assossa (Benishangul-Gumuz) and one in Dire Dawa—after the party reported this to the NEBE, some of the candidates were released. The Enat party issued a statement claiming that PP militias were formed at the local *kebele* level to intimidate the opposition, with no

27 Of the 148 independent candidates, 86 or close to 60 percent are standing for the regional council elections in the Somali state.

28 The parties with the most registered candidates were Prosperity Party (PP, 2,799), Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice and Democracy party (EZEMA, 1,540), Enat (605), Freedom and Equality party (578), National Movement of Amhara (NAMA; 510), All Ethiopian Unity Organization (466). Several parties registered between 100 and 250 candidates, including the Ethiopian Social Democratic party, Renaissance Party, New Generation party, Sidama Unity party, Amhara Democratic Forces Movement, Gambela People's Liberation Movement, Sidama People's Unity Democratic Organization, United Ethiopia Democratic Party, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, Afar People's party, Balderas for True Democracy, and Wolaita People's Democratic Front. The remaining 28 parties all registered fewer than 100 candidates.

29 The Code of Conduct's (CoC) article 5 includes a gender reference provision which sets out that in this directive a masculine gender or feminine gender shall also apply to the other gender. The CoC does not refer to sexual harassment cases but references article 134 of the proclamation 1162/2019 about the prohibition of intimidation and incitement of violence.

action taken by the security forces. An independent candidate in SNNPR made claims about unlawful detentions of independent candidates. In the absence of clear complaints procedures, and based on the accounts of political parties ahead of election day, the NEBE was unable to effectively process the number and scope of the complaints.

On June 4, a consortium of five political parties submitted a letter of complaint to the NEBE, among them NAMA, Balderas for True Democracy, Enat, All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP) and Hiber party. They raised concerns about the ruling party and its political and security apparatus, which they claimed perpetrated killings, attempted killings, detentions, and intimidations of the parties' candidates, leaders, and supporters across the country. The parties demanded that these alleged practices stop and called for support of the security forces at each level to ensure a peaceful election.

Regional, ethnic-centered parties such as the Mocha Democratic Party, Kucha People's Democratic Party, Donga People's Democratic Party, and Agew National Shengo complained of harassment and discrimination from PP-aligned local authorities throughout the election period. Interlocutors alleged they were targeted in part because of their desire to seek administrative autonomy at the zonal level.

Some opposition political parties also criticized the NEBE for rescheduling election day from a Saturday to a working day (Monday) in the midst of the planting season.<sup>30</sup> Later, authorities made election day a work-free holiday. Further, there were concerns about possible rain on election day, which raised the question whether voters would be patient enough to queue at polling stations.

## Campaign Finance

The Electoral Proclamation regulates the sources of political parties' income and assets and includes limited provisions to guarantee transparency and political party or campaign finance.<sup>31</sup> The new law prescribes that audited annual reports of political parties' assets and liabilities be submitted to NEBE, but does not require their publication. Receiving funding from foreign institutions, but not individuals, is prohibited. Political parties are required to keep records of their annual financial audits for at least ten years.

Representatives of major opposition parties, including EZEMA, NAMA, Enat, AEUP and several others and independent candidates highlighted a skewed campaign playing field, including that the ruling party has more than the normal advantages of incumbency, in part due to the country's political history. They noted lopsided support of the business community, citing the example of a fundraising event organized by PP at the Millennium Hall on March 15, at which the Prime Minister, most cabinet members, heads of regional states, PP leadership, and a wide range of business persons were in attendance whilst the party raised over ETB 1.5 billion (USD 34 million). Opposition parties also alleged that the business community could not support them openly, fearing retribution.

Most parties complained about the ruling PP's misuse of state resources and abuse of office for campaigning purposes at the *kebele* up to the federal level. The unpunished abuse of state resources has been described as a common problem in previous and current elections.

The legal framework does not explicitly prohibit the inauguration or announcement of major infrastructure and investment projects during the campaign silence period; plus, the line between promoting government activities and campaigning is not easily discerned. Such events occurred frequently in the final stage of the campaign, which were most often organized on weekends, included local audiences, and were widely publicized in the media. Among other examples, some government officials also running as candidates inaugurated or visited projects during the campaign silence period, including an airport in Aman (SNNPR) on June 17 and a highway and bread

<sup>30</sup> In the Amhara region, for example, most Orthodox Christian rural farmers do not work on some days of the month as part of their religious commitment. Reportedly, farmers prefer to work on their farmland otherwise, since foregoing labor reduces their productivity and income otherwise. Five major parties which raised their complaints with NEBE proposed to conduct elections on Sunday, June 27, instead.

<sup>31</sup> Articles 100-113.

factory in Addis Ababa on election day. Thus, there was a significant gap between the resources and capacities of the ruling and opposition parties. Most of the latter were not fully operational or were newly established during the course of 2018 and 2019.

Opposition parties also complained about insufficient public funding available to contestants and its late disbursement of state campaign financing by NEBE. Overall, the NEBE distributed ETB 98 million (USD 2.2 million) to political parties in two tranches.<sup>32</sup> The first payout of ETB 483,452 (USD 10,998) was transferred to each political party contesting the elections starting at the end of April; the second tranche of the remaining three-quarters of the funds was paid out starting at the end of May according to a formula that included bonuses for each registered HoPR candidate and regional state council candidate (ETB 2,643 or USD 60), each woman candidate (ETB 9,982 or USD 227), each candidate with disabilities (ETB 155,722 or USD 3,542), and each woman in a senior executive party position (ETB 255,062 or USD 5,802).<sup>33</sup> The PP received the largest share (ETB 23.2 million or approximately USD 528,000) along with EZEMA (ETB 11.3 million or USD 257,000), followed by Freedom and Equality party (ETB 4.6 million or USD 105,000), Enat party (ETB 3.5 million or USD 80,000), United Ethiopia Democratic Party, All Ethiopian Unity Organization and NAMA. Independent candidates were at first left out, but it was announced on the eve of the campaign silence period that they would each receive ETB 50,000 (USD 1,137)—however, no directive to regulate funding as required by law was ever issued.

## Election Security and Violence

Ethiopia is facing multiple ongoing security crises and has been afflicted with persistent insecurity. The drivers of violence are multifaceted, reflecting Ethiopia's deeply rooted ethnic divisions and distributions of power. The insecurity due to violence and the threat of violence have specific and disproportionately negative effects on the participation of women, minorities, young people, IDPs, and other marginalized populations and pose grave concerns about potential human and political rights violations in and outside the election context.

Ongoing tensions and conflicts steadily increased following the postponement of the elections in May 2020. Apart from the war in Tigray, insurrections gained momentum in Benishangul-Gumuz and Oromia, and ethnic tensions rose in Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz and in the Afar-Somali border areas. Yet election day itself mostly unfolded in a peaceful manner within a heavily securitized environment (though violence surged in Tigray shortly after the elections).

In addition to the State of Emergency that was declared in Tigray on November 4, between January 21 and April 29 three military command posts were established in Benishangul-Gumuz and Amhara regions to fight insurrectional movements and maintain law and order after inter-ethnic tensions escalated into deadly clashes. The Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) ("Shene") was declared a terrorist group by the authorities during the campaign period. Some young people were detained in the Oromia Special Zone, allegedly on the grounds that they sympathized with extremists and attempted to disrupt the elections. In a statement issued on June 18, the OLA reiterated its call not to participate in the elections.

The National Security Task Force, of which the NEBE is a member, oversees broad election security matters, with the NEBE responsible for the security of the polling stations and their offices as per Proclamation 1162/2019. The Electoral Security Organs Directive N° 12/2021 further details the responsibilities, procedures, and the Code of Conduct for security personnel assigned to electoral facilities and activities. The regulatory framework is the first of its kind in Ethiopia and marks a milestone improvement despite some vagueness with regard to the agencies involved and the identification of officers on duty. Together with cascade election security trainings, the framework

<sup>32</sup> On May 27 NEBE released details about the funding disbursement to political parties via its [Facebook page](#).

<sup>33</sup> According to information provided by NEBE, PP received ETB 11.7 million for women candidates (1,171), ETB 2.3 million for PWD candidates (15) and ETB 1.3 million for women in executive party positions (5). In comparison the biggest opposition party, EZEMA, received ETB 1.8 million (183), ETB 3.4 million (22), and ETB 1.5 million (6), respectively.

helped election security personnel in understanding their role and respecting the law. The implementation of security-related legal provisions was supervised by teams of federal and regional police officers deployed jointly at the regional, zonal, and *woreda* levels for seven consecutive days around and including on June 21.

According to the law, only legally established security organs may provide election security. However, public announcements made by regional and zonal administrations suggest that militias were trained to secure electoral activities in various parts of Amhara, Dire Dawa, and Oromia.<sup>34</sup> The LEOME's national support staff together with stakeholders reported that militias carried out election duties in all regions, except Gambela and Sidama. They also observed militia in city centers of the Amhara region. Involving militias in elections bears the risk of normalizing groups that are perceived as politically and ethnically aligned and have been identified as a perpetrator of election violence on election day.

Based on political parties' reports, complaints, press conferences, and CSO reports, the LEOME collected more than 230 allegations of election-related violence perpetrated by affiliates of subnational state actors/ regional and local authorities, including approximately 150 during the voter registration process, which included targeting of opposition party candidates, agents, members, supporters and family members, voters, and election officials. Cases included harassment, intimidation, coercion, administrative delays, undue arrest and detention, unwarranted home searches, physical assault, assassination attempts, and murder. Many reports implied collusion between the local *kebele* administration, local police forces, and rural militias, especially on election day. These violent incidents reportedly occurred mostly in Amhara, Oromia, and SNNPR regions and in specific areas of Somali and Afar regions. Violence during the electoral process detracts from the level playing field between contestants and raises concerns about the integrity of the process. It can also discourage women and ethnic minority groups from participating in elections at all levels.

On election day, the NEBE provided some security related information at various press conferences. Coordination between NEBE's regional branches and police commissions was positively assessed in most regions. However, regional NEBE offices had limited election security information as they were not involved in the risk assessments conducted by NEBE. The LEOME also faced challenges in collecting information on election security from the NEBE. Moreover, the police commissions' communication with the LEOME was opaque—similarly, most of NEBE's regional branches were not aware of the detailed security deployment plan elaborated by the police.

Several mitigation initiatives were implemented in an effort to address concerns of electoral violence; however, these initiatives were reduced due to budget constraints following the COVID-19 pandemic and the postponement of the elections. The NEBE headed the Joint Election Violence Prevention Platform (JEPP), a multi-stakeholder structure established both at the national level and in the regions. However, some JEPPs were established late, reportedly in part because of delays in the disbursement of funds from the NEBE to regional offices. Other mitigation measures included CSO early warning units, as well as calls for peace and non-partisanship prior to election day by such institutions as the Office of the Prime Minister, the federal and regional police commissions, the Inter-Religious Council, and political parties. Longer-term peace efforts were also underway but were reported to lack resources and political will to achieve long-lasting peace and reconciliation.

## Media Environment

The 1995 Constitution provides for the freedom of expression, opinion and of the press, as well as access to information. The Media Proclamation, as well as several NEBE and Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) directives,

<sup>34</sup> See for instance the Facebook post by the [Dire Dawa Government Communication Affairs Bureau](#) on June 20, and the Amhara Media Corporation on June 19 "Militia men determined to play a role for the peaceful accomplishment of the election" in South Wollo zone. A zonal government official also confirmed the deployment of militia in other parts of Amhara including in city centers. Addis Standard, May 20, "[Guji zone in Oromia regional state graduates 982 local militia](#)", with [photos](#) posted on Twitter.

govern the activity of the media during elections.<sup>35</sup> The Media Proclamation provides safeguards for public broadcasters against political interference and establishes an independent regulatory body, the EMA, accountable to the HoPR. However, it was adopted too late to be meaningfully implemented ahead of the 2021 elections.

Positively, the EMA allocated free news print and some 1,414 hours of free airtime to the 46 parties and 143 independent candidates in 57 state-run and commercial media, in accordance with a formula established by law.<sup>36</sup> The majority of interlocutors expressed satisfaction with the allocation of free airtime which provided opportunity for all parties to introduce their platform and participate in political debates, and many did, though at times candidates declined invitations, including candidates nominated by the governing PP.<sup>37</sup>

During the election period, the EMA received five formal complaints from political parties pertaining to limited geographic coverage of the free media.<sup>38</sup> Still, parties and candidates used about 65 percent of the free airtime overall.<sup>39</sup> Smaller parties were least likely or not at all likely to take advantage of free media, reportedly because of a lack of capacity or means to finance the production of recordings. Several media outlets informed the LEOME of instances when they rejected material from political parties because of unverified information or language issues, noting that media is liable for content it airs. Disaggregated information on the allocation of free airtime by parties and media was not available on the EMA website. While media representatives praised the consultations and training held by the NEBE and EMA, the latter came under strong criticism from various stakeholders for its perceived bias toward the ruling party and overt direct or indirect interference in journalists' work.

Allegedly due to capacity issues, the EMA said that it does not monitor campaign media coverage and therefore cannot assess how equitable, balanced, proportional, or comprehensive it is, as required by law. Neither the EMA nor any other group issued any public reports of their media monitoring initiatives during the campaign. The Ethiopian Mass Media Professionals Association (EMMPA) released monthly qualitative reports stressing that independent media had more balanced coverage than state-run or some private broadcasters.

Following repeated breaches of the campaign silence period and after formal complaints were lodged by several parties, including EZEMA, the EMA reminded state-run and private broadcasters (which planned to air an interview of the Prime Minister) of the legal requirement of political neutrality. Despite the reminder, mainstream media continued to broadcast news content, including during the media silence period and on election day, of PP figureheads or the incumbent Prime Minister, blurring the line between campaign events and government activity. During the press conference announcing the results, the NEBE Chairperson criticized the media coverage of the campaign, which overwhelmingly favored the incumbent and affected the electoral process. This unusual criticism of the media and denouncement of the power of the incumbent was illustrative of the independence of the institution and its Chairperson.

Interlocutors noted that journalists and media professionals had increasingly come under threat in Ethiopia. Arbitrary arrests, threats, and physical and verbal abuses against journalists from state and non-state actors, online and offline, increased. Instances of journalists being arrested by police or Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) in June 2020<sup>40</sup> and the murders of two Ethiopian journalists in 2021 tarnished the security environment for media

35 Accreditation, Procedures and Code of Conduct for Media No. 2/2020, Directive on Political Parties and Independent Candidates' Use and Allocation of Mass Media, Directive on Election Campaign Code of conduct.

36 According to the Media Proclamation, the allocation of free airtime takes four factors into consideration: the number of seats political parties have in the HoPR and regional councils; the number of candidates/political parties present for the election; the number of women and PWD candidates standing; and equal allotment of airtime for all participating political parties.

37 On June 18, EMA announced that 142 debates took place on 14 media outlets.

38 EMA satisfied four party requests to be allocated time in a different media because the geographical scope of the media they were assigned time on did not satisfy the parties; in the fifth case, EMA did not agree to allocate time to another media, despite a request based on a disagreement between the party and the Amhara Media Corporation. The media finally agreed to air the disputed content, but the Agaw Beharwi Shengo party refused.

39 In total, 65.6 percent of the free radio airtime was used and 64.1 percent of free airtime on TV. Some 34.3 percent of the free space was used in printed newspapers (EMA).

40 Although most have been released on bail, several court cases are still pending, including for allegedly disseminating false information.

professionals and raised serious concerns about freedom of speech in Ethiopia. Shortly after the June 21, 2021 elections, a dozen journalists were arrested and detained without official charges or court order, contributing to a climate of fear and self-censorship.<sup>41</sup>

## Social Media

Ethiopian internet penetration, access, and affordability—especially among women—remains among the lowest in Africa.<sup>42</sup> Still, institutions such as the NEBE and EMA had Facebook pages in Amharic which were often updated more frequently than their websites. On April 23, the NEBE reminded NAMA, PP, EZEMA, OFC, and other parties of the law on the use of hate speech and incitement to violence, after flagging some of their posts on social media. The NEBE also reported that it worked with Facebook to address false information during the election and to verify political party pages.

In April and June 2021, Facebook announced it had taken down networks of accounts on its flagship Facebook and Instagram platforms for coordinated inauthentic behavior targeting Ethiopian users.<sup>43</sup> The Facebook investigation found links between accounts originating in Ethiopia and individuals associated with the Information Network Security Agency in Ethiopia (INSA). The platform also announced that it had removed 87,000 pieces of hate speech in Ethiopia between March 2020 and March 2021, but did not publicize further information about the posts or how it reached the decision to remove them. Though limited in scope and reach, independent fact-checking initiatives including Ethiopia Check and HaqCheck proved highly professional.

From April 1 to June 29, the LEOME examined 120 Facebook pages, 10 Telegram channels and six Twitter accounts.<sup>44</sup> LEOME's monitors found that most political parties have Facebook pages, although many relevant political and civic pages are frequently unverified, which complicated their identification for voters, given that fake political party sites were common. Paid advertisements on Facebook played a limited role in the process. Of the paid advertisements published on Facebook, most lacked disclaimers indicating their origin which is a requirement of the Facebook ad authorization process.

The PP enjoyed a well-structured and dominant presence on Facebook, which was partially due to having both national and regional sites. The Prime Minister's personal Facebook page was the most popular political page in Ethiopia, and various third-party pages ran ads supporting the Prime Minister where, notably, some were deleted after the elections.

EZEMA is the only party that ran a significant number of ads albeit they also did so during the official campaign silence period. EZEMA was the only party whose social media content was highly political in nature and that came close to the Prime Minister's level of popularity. EZEMA also took advantage of the interaction tools on Facebook to engage with users under the #askEZEMA campaign. Although other parties increased their Facebook posts in the latter weeks of the campaign, the content was rarely educational in nature but designed to appeal to the emotions of supporters.

Facebook posts by the OLF, OFC, and their affiliates sometimes called on supporters not to participate in the process or referred to would-be voters as "traitors". Another narrative discredited the process as "fake elections". Freedom and Equality and Balderas for True Democracy parties frequently accused the NEBE of bias toward the ruling party. The heightened rhetoric by Oromia and Tigray social media platforms continued into election day,

41 Respectively, ten and two journalists from the YouTube based Awlo Media and Ethio Forum. Two journalists from Ethio Forum were temporarily abducted and beaten by unknown offenders on election day.

42 According to UNESCO data from 2017, the male literacy rate is 59.24 percent, while the female rate is 44.42 percent.

43 See the Facebook [statement](#) on the deletion of the profiles.

44 The research was conducted by a limited team of monitors and did not involve systematic coding of pieces of content. In addition to the NEBE page on Facebook, 19 political party/candidate pages, 51 media pages, 14 public institution pages, 23 CSO pages, seven influencers, and five diaspora pages were monitored.

while allegations of intimidation, violence, and fraud, including doctored photos of results forms, circulated on election day and immediately after.

Hate speech, derogatory language, gender-based bias, and incitement to violence targeted, amongst other groups, journalists (of note Lucy Kassa and Yayesew Shimeles). In addition, an alleged leaked audio file featuring the Prime Minister, released by Kello Media on May 31, quickly went viral before other media outlets revealed it to be manipulated.<sup>45</sup> While access to Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram was temporarily restricted on May 17, no Internet nor telecommunication shutdown took place during the election period.<sup>46</sup>

## Inclusion of Marginalized Groups

### Inclusion of Women

Though the Constitution of Ethiopia explicitly provides for equal rights for men and women, significant barriers to women's meaningful participation and influence on decision-making processes persist including widespread sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), harmful social norms and gender roles, and generalized conflict and insecurity. Violence and insecurity were widely cited as a serious barrier to women's participation in elections as both candidates and voters. Violence against women in elections (VAW-E) was monitored by Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA), which monitored cases of violence against women election officials.<sup>47</sup> VAW-E can manifest as persistent harassment, psychological abuse, physical or sexual assault against women in politics at any level which has a chilling effect on the potential of women at large and is a challenge to democracy itself.

Recent legal and institutional changes aimed at promoting the political participation of women including an additional subsidy for political parties that register a minimum percentage of women candidates or as party leaders, as well as an allocation of free airtime for political parties have incentivized, to limited effect, the political participation of women. In addition, the appointments and election of women to high-level offices, including Ethiopia's president, president of the Supreme Court and chairperson of the NEBE, are seen as positive signs of the vital role women should play in public life and of more gender inclusive politics. However, women lead only one of the 53 registered political parties and the number of women in leadership positions within their structures remains low at 58. While women's representation in the previous HoPR was above the regional average (39 percent compared to 24 percent), this was likely due to an informal quota system employed by the EPRDF.

As compared to 2015, the participation of women candidates in the 2021 elections decreased from 29 percent in 2015 to 21 percent. Most interlocutors attributed the decrease to security concerns such as increased threats and intimidation, to which women candidates are more vulnerable, as well as the extremely volatile security situation. Lack of financial resources and traditional gender bias toward women's involvement in public and political life also impeded their participation.

In total 1,976 women were registered as candidates by political parties and six registered as independents. Most political parties set different qualification requirements for candidates running for HoPR and regional council elections. Consequently, more women candidates were registered for regional council elections (22 percent as compared to 16 percent for the HoPR). While women constituted some 42 percent of the PP candidates overall, most opposition parties reportedly struggled to include women candidates in their lists. Some political parties

<sup>45</sup> In the audio file, a voice alleged to be that of the Prime Minister could be heard declaring victory in an election that was yet to take place, and vowing to destroy the opposition to ensure PP preponderance for more than a decade. The speaker also stated that he would stop at nothing to retain power, including employing violence.

<sup>46</sup> However, internet and communications blackouts did take place in Tigray.

<sup>47</sup> See Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) [Preliminary Statement of VAW-E Monitoring](#).

adopted specific gender policies, however, only 13 parties successfully reached the 20 percent threshold of registered women candidates to qualify for additional funding.<sup>48</sup>

While all women candidates face disproportionate barriers in contesting elections, women candidates from opposition parties and independent women candidates reportedly faced additional challenges. Several interlocutors reported that women candidates from opposition parties were more frequently the target of intimidation, threats, and campaign interference by security forces as well as members of the ruling party. Independent women candidates faced a range of additional difficulties in the collection of signatures and financial impediments resulting from late disbursement of state campaign subsidies.<sup>49</sup>

In total 17,091,128 women were registered to vote, representing 45 percent of all registered voters. While all regions have approximately the same share of women voters, the Afar region recorded only seven percent of women registered voters. Although the region traditionally reports low voter interest, additional factors such as poor voter education and security concerns combined with cultural prejudices towards women's involvement in public life may have led to the exclusion of eligible women voters from the 2021 elections.

### ***Inclusion of Ethno-linguistic Minorities***

Ethiopia has an ethno-federal system which recognizes some 80 ethno-cultural groups. The 1995 Constitution reserves at least 20 special constituencies or seats in the HoPR for nationally recognized minority "Nationalities and People."<sup>50</sup> According to interlocutors, there have never been any written requirements or criteria to determine which ethno-linguistic groups or geographic areas would qualify for a special seat. Likewise, there is no clear process for adding or eliminating a special constituency and it is unclear if the list of special seats has been amended since the promulgation of the 1995 Constitution. Furthermore, there are no published requirements for candidates standing for elections in special constituencies beyond those outlined in Article 31 of Election Proclamation 1162/2019.

Of the 22 special seats for 2021, 15 are located in SNNPR, two in Benishangul-Gumuz, and one each in Amhara, Gambela, and Harari.<sup>51</sup> Special seats are elected on the same basis as regular mandates: on a plurality of votes cast. On June 21, however, the elections were held in only 13 of the 20 special constituencies (with the others expected to be held on September 6). Among them, Mao Komo Special in Benishangul-Gumuz and Dasenech in SNNPR were uncontested. The other 11 constituencies included at least two competing parties. In SNNPR, only national parties fielded candidates in these constituencies while no regional, ethnic-centered parties were featured.

EZEMA's victory in the Zeyse Special constituency in SNNPR indicated the participation of opposition parties heralded more meaningful competition in special constituencies, where the EPRDF and its regional affiliates formerly stood. However, the Harari Democratic Organization and the Argoba Nationality Democratic Movement filed complaints with the NEBE, challenging the right of their nationwide party competitors to contest the special constituency seats, which they claimed were reserved for parties founded by ethno-linguistic minorities. The NEBE reports that it has developed a special voting procedure for Argoba Special and Harari and that elections will take place in September. Limited efforts to translate relevant election materials into languages other than Amharic and the other four recently added official tongues impeded participation by some ethno-linguistic communities,

48 Some political parties attempted to implement voluntary gender quotas, however they were not always successful: e.g. EZEMA did not reach 20 percent of women candidates. Some women advanced after their parties joined the ruling PP: e.g. former leader of SEPDM (part of EPRDF), Muferihat Kamil, was appointed Minister of Peace; the leader of the now extinct ANDP, Ayash Mahommed, became Minister of Defense and later Minister of Development and Construction. Both parties have joined PP in December 2019.

49 Allocation of state subsidies to independent candidates was made on June 16, on the eve of the campaign silence period.

50 Article 54 (3), Constitution, 1995. The HoF, however, is the primary body mandated to promote equality and unity among all nationalities and "decide on issues relating to the rights of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples to self-determination, including the right to secession." Article 62 (3) and (4), FDRE Constitution, 1995.

51 The list excludes the two special constituencies in Tigray, which will not take part in these elections.



particularly in SNNPR.<sup>52</sup> Limited outreach to rural communities was achieved through NEBE voter education messages that were translated and broadcast into local languages by community-based radios.

No national political party developed outreach strategies for ethno-linguistic minorities primarily due to lack of resources to expand their narrow base of sympathizers. Likewise, due to limited funding and poor infrastructure, NEBE-accredited CSOs rarely ventured outside urban areas to implement in-person voter education activities, thus potentially excluding a significant number of ethnic minority communities.

### ***Inclusion of Young People***

Ethiopia's National Youth Policy defines young people as those aged 15 to 29, with census projections suggesting that young people aged 18 to 29 could comprise approximately 40 percent of the voting age population. There are no official figures of registered voters disaggregated by age. Apathy, disinterest, and distrust in the election process among young people was widely reported by most interlocutors though, in contrast, the PP reported to the LEOME that some 12.6 million young voters registered to participate. Political parties recognized the importance of the youth vote, but made no substantial effort to involve young people in election activities and did not address youth needs in their party programs.

The NEBE implemented special arrangements for online voter registration for university students, however, university students were required to vote at polling stations in their constituency of origin. It was reported that some 4,075 university students registered to vote. However, despite an online voter registration process for students, many could not travel to cast their ballots at their constituency of origin due to lack of affordable, secure transportation. The NEBE accredited 169 CSOs to disseminate voter education, many targeted at youth and first time voters. Neither political parties nor CSOs had specific gendered approaches targeted toward young people.

Concerns were raised about increasingly pronounced ethno-cultural divisions among the country's young. Notably, interlocutors reported that 'ethnically based political parties' often provoke their young members to participate in ethnic-related violence.

### ***Inclusion of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)***

According to the International Organization for Migration, there are approximately four million IDPs in Ethiopia.<sup>53</sup> About 82 percent of the country's displacement is conflict-induced. With the ratification of the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internationally Displaced Persons in Africa (*Kampala Convention*) in February 2020, the Ethiopian government took a first step towards addressing the exclusion of IDPs from the country's civic life. Following consultations with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and CSOs, the NEBE developed and approved Directive No. 13/2020 in an effort to align Ethiopia with its regional and international obligations.<sup>54</sup> The Directive requires the establishment of special polling stations for IDPs, university students, and the military to facilitate their registration as voters. It is both ambitious and prescriptive, notably requiring IDPs registered in special polling stations to vote in elections held in their constituency of origin. On the other hand, the directive does not cover IDPs living outside known settlements for whom residency requirements and identity documents listed under Articles 18 and 21 of Proclamation No. 1162/2019 would apply for registration in regular polling stations. The EHRC criticized this gap in the legal framework as it can lead to disenfranchisement of IDPs who lack the ability or legal standing to establish residency at the site of their displacement.<sup>55</sup>

52 The other four languages are Afaan Oromo, Afar, Somali, and Tigrigna.

53 "Ethiopia National Displacement Report 8, Site Assessment Round 25 & Village Assessment Survey Round 8: March 2021 and April 2021" (June 30 2021).

54 Article 9 (I) of the Kampala Convention requires State Parties to "take necessary measures to ensure that IDP who are citizens in their country of nationality can enjoy their civic and political rights, particularly public participation, the right to vote and to be elected to public office."

55 See EHRC [statement](#) on June 14.

The NEBE was unable to implement most of the directive's provisions. IDPs were therefore registered in small numbers and a majority were not eligible to vote on June 21. The lack of engagement by regional authorities hampered the possibility of establishing special polling stations or making them accessible for IDPs.<sup>56</sup> The Board officially listed 427 special polling stations across Afar, Dire Dawa, Harari, Gambela, Oromia, and Somali regions, where IDPs from past conflicts were settled. Yet, the LEOME was only able to verify the existence of four special polling stations that processed voters on June 21 in Gambela. Elsewhere, NEBE's regional offices allowed the registration of IDPs in regular polling stations, where they voted for local candidates, along with the general population; in most areas, logistical and security challenges stood in the way of the NEBE addressing the needs of more recent IDPs spawned by ongoing intercommunal conflicts in Amhara, Western Oromia, and Benishangul-Gumuz.

IDPs were also not sufficiently afforded civic and voter education and were thus not adequately prepared to exercise their right to participate. Likewise, political parties did not include IDPs in their voter outreach strategies, arguing that IDP settlements were out of reach and that IDPs were generally more preoccupied with receiving shelter and other forms of humanitarian assistance.

Due to the uncertainty surrounding the establishment of special polling stations, no civil society organization observed the vote inside IDP settlements. CEHRO, the only organization accredited to observe at IDP sites, was ultimately unable to secure funding for its election observation mission and did not deploy any observers on IDP sites on election day. On the other hand, monitors from the EHRC directly observed IDPs queuing outside regular polling stations in Konso zone, SNNPR.

The NEBE did not compile data on IDPs registered in regular polling stations nor did it share the list of regular polling stations that registered IDP voters. Furthermore, the Board did not report the number of IDPs registered in special polling stations or the number of votes cast in these polling stations in the aftermath of the elections.

### ***Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs)***

Ethiopia has ratified all major instruments and treaties in relation to the inclusion of PWDs, which obligates the state to proactively ensure their rights. The Constitution also recognizes PWDs' equal political, social, economic, and cultural rights. Persons with disabilities constitute approximately a sixth of the Ethiopian population, but despite their high number, they play a minor role in the election process and public life in general. Notwithstanding the legal provisions aimed at furthering inclusion, PWDs illustrate the gap between regulation and practice.

Political parties fell short of including PWDs on their party lists despite additional campaign subsidies allocated to those formations that registered PWD candidates. Only 99 among the 9,505 registered candidates are PWDs, representing 0.9 percent of the candidates registered by political parties for the HoPR elections and one percent for the regional council elections.

Interlocutors acknowledged the efforts made by the NEBE to include PWDs in the election process by conducting consultations with PWD associations and CSOs at different stages of the process. This was seen as an important effort by the NEBE. A number of PWD associations were involved in the preparation of NEBE training materials and voter education activities, though interlocutors reported limitations in election information reaching PWDs. While the election law was translated into braille, the lack of braille ballot frames limited independent voting for visually impaired voters. Sign language was used for NEBE videos and announcements on television, but voter education outreach activities were not tailored to voters with hearing impairment, especially those living in rural areas, where mostly traditional sign language is used. Assessment of physical accessibility of voter registration and polling

<sup>56</sup> On June 15, NEBE Communications Advisor Soliana Shimelis told *Voice of America Amharic* that only four regions provided adequate data regarding their respective IDP populations, including their numbers and locations.

stations for PWDs was conducted by stakeholders such as Federation of Ethiopian Associations of Persons with Disabilities (FEAPD) and the Ombudsman's Office whose reports indicate that many are inaccessible for PWDs.

While participation may have been easier for PWDs in urban centers, those living in rural areas faced considerable difficulties accessing adequate voter information, transportation, and physical access to voter registration and polling locations.

## CSO and Civic Engagement

Interlocutors across the board praised the opening of the civil space following the amendments introduced to the legislation governing the establishment, operation and funding of non-governmental organizations. The Civil Societies Proclamation significantly eased restrictions in place since 2013. Previous legislation – often described as 'draconian' – restricted the Ethiopian CSOs' ability to receive foreign funding and engage in activities related to the promotion or protection of democracy, governance, and human rights.

However, the years of repression and little political space left a significant mark on the civic space, depleting the trust of citizens towards civil society and diminishing the internal capacity of CSOs to engage in electoral activities, democracy, human rights, and other non-humanitarian issues. With the exception of the limited exercise of observing the Sidama referendum in 2018, civic groups that engaged in these elections had little to no prior experience or institutional memory of participating in electoral processes.

Many CSOs responded to the call by the NEBE and applied for accreditation to conduct voter education activities across the country, despite their lack of experience. In the end, a total of 167 organizations were accredited by the NEBE for voter education, while some 45 CSOs received accreditation to observe elections. Some interlocutors reported delays in the accreditation process, especially in receiving badges; most cited the NEBE's limited capacity, inefficiency, and centralized decision-making, whereby all badges were issued by the Board's central office in Addis Ababa. Coupled with a tight electoral calendar, the delay further limited the CSOs' ability to deliver voter education and/or recruit, train, and deploy observers. As such, the interlocutors welcomed the postponements of voting in the hope of reaching more voters.

Despite the high number of CSOs accredited to engage in electoral activities, only half managed to mobilize resources and funding to do so. Almost all interlocutors named the lack of funding as their primary challenge, which was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and an unstable electoral calendar – both resulting in delays in the disbursement of funds even for those CSOs that had secured grants. Given the amount of financial assistance the NEBE had received from foreign donors, many groups shared an expectation that funding for voter education would come through the Board.

Most CSO interlocutors reported being able to operate freely and in good cooperation with the NEBE and other officials. However, the mission also heard reports from some interlocutors of self-censorship, allegedly applied by some CSOs as a gesture of gratitude for the easing of restrictions by the current government and by others out of fear of potential retribution.

## Citizen Election Observation

Reflecting greater political space for civil society, a number of CSOs across the country deployed long-term and short-term election observers, undertaking general as well as thematic-based observation. In total the NEBE accredited 45 CSOs as citizen election observers and a total of 47,932 citizen observers from 32 CSOs were deployed on election day.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Out of 45 accredited domestic observer organizations, five did not register individual observers and another eight did not deploy their observers despite NEBE having issued badges.

Notable among these efforts was the Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Election (CECOE), an umbrella organization uniting some 175 CSOs and consortiums from all over Ethiopia. CECOIE recruited, trained, and deployed over 100 long-term observers throughout the election process, including voter registration. For the June 21 elections CECOIE deployed over 2,000 trained and accredited observers and established a sophisticated national data center. CECOIE observers reported at regular intervals by coded text messages directly into a computer database. CECOIE released a detailed report on voter registration in advance of election day. CECOIE issued a mid-day report on election day detailing the setup of polling stations and shortly after election day issued its preliminary report on voting and counting<sup>58</sup>.

A number of CSOs undertook thematic-based observation efforts. For example, FEAPD focused on participation and access for PWDs. They deployed 50 PWDs as long-term observers and 100 PWDs as election day observers across four states and Addis Ababa, and issued a comprehensive report on the role of PWDs in the electoral process. EWLA tracked violence against women in elections. They deployed 150 women lawyers as long-term observers and 130 as election day observers, and issued a report detailing their observations.<sup>59</sup> The Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU) deployed 1,130 observers to 25 cities including Addis Ababa to observe on behalf of organized labor.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) developed plans to observe voting in IDP polling stations.

A very large percentage of election day observers were deployed by various women and youth associations and federations from across the country. These groups focused on presence at polling stations on election day and did not employ rigorous methodologies. Funding of these efforts was not always transparent with groups reporting they rely on membership fees and volunteers. Some experts suggested that in the past youth and women associations were generally affiliated with the ruling party, and neither nonpartisan nor independent.

Observer groups reported challenges with the NEBE accreditation process, but once accredited observers generally had unhindered access to polling stations. There were isolated instances, however, of observers initially facing challenges observing at polling stations. CECOIE reported that three percent of the organization's observers were not allowed to observe despite presenting their badges. EWLA also reported that some of its observers faced difficulties when entering the polling stations before opening.

The NEBE denied accreditation to the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. While recognizing the EHRC's role in elections as they relate to human rights, the NEBE determined that as a quasi-governmental organization that they did not meet the criteria to be accredited as observers. EHRC still deployed 100 observers and issued a report on the conduct of the elections with a human rights focus.<sup>61</sup>

## Election Day

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and widespread insecurity the LEOME did not deploy short-term observers for election day. However, LEOME election and regional experts were in Addis Ababa for election day and the periods immediately before and after.

Based on consultations with citizen observers, international observers<sup>62</sup>, political parties, CSOs, and other stakeholders, election day was largely peaceful with polling officials generally following procedures though with only limited adherence to COVID-19 protocols for public safety. There were some public reports of violence around the polling stations, but they were isolated. There were also reports of shortages of some election materials

58 See CECOIE [preliminary statement](#).

59 See EWLA [preliminary statement](#).

60 See CETU [preliminary statement](#).

61 <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/ethiopia-rights-commission-says-no-massive-poll-abuses>

62 See for example preliminary statements by citizen observers [CECOIE](#) and [EWLA](#) as well as by [AU](#) international observers.

reported across the country which in some instances prevented polling stations from opening. In the afternoon of election day, the NEBE announced that voting would be extended by two hours until 9pm. The extension was seemingly well received due to the time it took for voters to cast two ballot papers and the relatively high maximum number of registered voters per polling station (1,500).

According to reports from the LEOME's regionally-based national staff, civil society observers from CECOE, EWLA, Women's Federation, and the EHRCO were present in most regions apart from Oromia and Gambela. Several citizen observers were prevented from executing their duties by security forces, and even some arrested in Amhara.

Before election day, there was conflicting information from the NEBE whether candidate/party agents would receive copies of the official polling station results forms as required by law. Parties reported that on election night, copies of result slips were often not available, and party agents had to rely on photography to establish their own records.<sup>63</sup>

The NEBE received complaints from political parties about irregularities at polling stations and tabulation centers. To its credit, the NEBE reported, through regularly held press conferences, a significant number of challenges encountered at polling stations throughout the country. Complaints included late arrival of election materials and opening of polling stations, opposition party observers being refused access to polling stations, ballot paper shortages, long queues, and security related problems among other complaints.

## Tabulation and Announcement of Results

Election results were first tabulated at constituency level in the presence of party and candidate agents; they were then verified and certified by NEBE headquarters before being officially published. The law prescribes that official results be published no more than 20 days after election day—unofficial results can be released earlier, provided that no complaints are under consideration. While by July 7, the NEBE had announced 77 constituency results from 51 HoPR and 26 regional council constituencies, the vast majority of results were officially announced only on July 10. The NEBE held a results announcement ceremony attended by the country's President and select media. Shortly after, the NEBE started to publish more detailed data, including the number of votes obtained by different candidates or the number of invalid votes cast at the constituency level.<sup>64</sup>

The NEBE provided regional, but not national turnout figures. Regional level turnout for Addis Ababa was 99 percent, 97 percent for Afar, 96 percent for Oromia and 95 percent for Dire Dawa. All other regions had turnout of 90 percent or greater except for Benishangul-Gumuz where turnout was only 55 percent. These are extremely high turnout rates, even for countries that conduct voter registration in advance of election day, raising questions about the genuineness of the vote.<sup>65</sup> For elections in both 2010 and 2015 that were widely criticized, Ethiopia had a similarly high turnout of over 90 percent.<sup>66</sup>

In the HoPR election, the ruling PP won 410 of 425 seats declared by the NEBE, with NAMA winning five and EZEMA four seats, the Gedeo Democratic Organization winning two seats and four independent candidates winning in their respective constituencies, including three in Oromia and one in Addis Ababa. As such, PP won more than the 274 seats necessary to form a government. Similarly, in the regional/city council elections, the NEBE announced results for 1,664 seats with 1,625 or close to 98 percent being won by the ruling PP. A total of 39 regional/city council seats were won by other parties, including: 13 seats won by NAMA in Amhara; 10 won by

63 See Proclamation 1162/2019; Art. 60.3.

64 See NEBE [website](#).

65 For example, [Ghana's turnout was approximately 80% for elections in 2020](#).

66 See International IDEA [Voter Turnout Database](#).

EZEMA in SNNPR, seven by the Gambela Peoples Democratic Movement in Gambela, six by the Gedeo Peoples Organization in SNNPR and three by Argoba Democratic Organization in Afar region.

## Electoral Disputes

Ethiopia's election dispute resolution (EDR) architecture created by the Electoral Proclamation is complex, comprising: the NEBE itself, Grievance Hearing Committees (GHC), Councils of Inquiry, Joint Council of Political Parties (JCPPs), Political Parties' Joint Forums, and the courts. The jurisdictions of these mechanisms overlap, with the possibility of a dispute being addressed in multiple forums. The options available range from alternative, consensual dispute resolution, to adversarial proceedings tried before regional and federal courts.<sup>67</sup> In practice, the EDR system fell far short of that envisaged in the Electoral Proclamation.

Subsidiary legislation was required to make the EDR system operational. A Directive on Election Grievance Hearing Committees was approved by the NEBE, which required the establishment of GHCs at polling stations and constituency and regional levels. They were to be established prior to the commencement of candidate registration and were to receive complaints on candidate registration, voter registration, and on voting and counting. Only a handful of GHCs were established across the country, with aggrieved individuals and parties forced to address the NEBE at higher levels to seek redress. The Argoba Democratic Movement filed a case against the NEBE in the Federal High Court in June 2021, complaining of breaches of the law in the conduct of voter registration. The Court rejected the case, arguing that it should have gone to a GHC. Post-election complainants reported similar difficulties in filing complaints, addressing the NEBE headquarters in lieu of GHCs.

A draft directive on the NEBE's EDR procedures to include establishment of a complaints unit was never approved. In the absence of clear procedures for handling disputes, ad hoc solutions were developed. An Inquiry Council was created to investigate voter registration complaints in the Somali region, comprising external experts and NEBE staff. An "expert committee" was set up within the NEBE to receive and investigate post-election complaints.

Political party registration was the subject of several court challenges to decisions made by the NEBE. Fairness in administrative decision-making requires that both sides are heard and that decision-makers are impartial. The courts, in cases involving the Oromo Democratic Alliance, Oromo Obo Freedom Front and Oromo Freedom Unity Front, decided that the NEBE had not followed fair procedures in rejecting applications for re-registration. The NEBE had decided that signatures of members were invalid without informing the parties or giving them an opportunity to respond. The registration disputes dragged on over time, exacerbated by the NEBE's failure to implement court decisions, denying the parties access to timely and effective remedies, including the opportunity to participate in the elections.

Other legal challenges were made to NEBE decisions, including on the validity of party general assemblies (OLF; One Ethiopia Party); on the registration of imprisoned candidates (Balderas for Genuine Democracy); on determination of constituency boundaries (Mocha Democratic Party); on irregularities in voter registration (Argoba Party); on unequal treatment of regional and national parties (Gamo Democratic Party); and on nationwide voting for the Harari regional elections (Harari National Assembly). Four of these actions were successful. The NEBE exhibited untoward delay in compliance with the decisions, particularly in the Balderas case, where the complainants had to secure a further court enforcement decision to compel action.

<sup>67</sup> Regional and federal courts sat as dedicated election benches from one month prior to the commencement of voter registration. A Regulation on the Rules of Procedure and Evidence for the Adjudication of Electoral Matters by the Court was prepared by the judiciary to promote the expeditious determination of electoral disputes, removing them from the application of the standard rules of civil procedure. The HoPR did not enact the regulation.

The NEBE reported receiving formal complaints from 30 political parties and independent candidates related to 201 constituencies.<sup>68</sup> As a result of these complaints the results for nine HoPR elections were cancelled, with new polls scheduled for September 6.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Though the 2021 polls were marked by acutely limited political space, participation and competition, they still present an opportunity for Ethiopia to chart a new path toward more transparent, inclusive, and participatory elections. Positive steps were taken to open the political and civic space though more concerted efforts are needed to ensure enfranchisement of all eligible Ethiopians and to foster public confidence in the NEBE and electoral process more broadly.

In the spirit of international cooperation, the LEOME offers the following 39 recommendations to improve future elections in Ethiopia:

### LEGAL FRAMEWORK

#### *For the Immediate Period*

*The NEBE should implement court rulings in a timely and effective manner, streamline Electoral Dispute Resolution mechanisms and adopt procedures to ensure fairness and impartiality in decision-making. Further, a dedicated complaints unit within NEBE to handle complaints and ensure greater accountability and transparency in EDR should be established.*

#### *For the Longer Term*

*The election law and NEBE directives should be given greater dissemination in all official working languages, and the directives subsidiary to the Electoral Proclamation should be complete and consolidated.*

*The Electoral Proclamation should be amended to enhance the rules on campaign finance, with the intent of promoting greater equity and fairness in the election campaign as well as providing the public with access to related information to promote accountability.*

*The legal framework should be amended to clearly prohibit the use of state resources, including personnel, materials, equipment, procurements, permits and other measures, for the electoral advantage of those in office, and establish provisions for effective enforcement, including appropriate powers granted to the NEBE, prosecutors, and the courts.*

*Legal provisions on candidates' immunity from prosecution should be strictly respected and measures should be taken to safeguard candidates from politically motivated and otherwise unlawful arrest and detention. Safeguards should be put in place to ensure that provisions are not misused by candidates to disrupt the election process, interfere with voters' rights, or escape being held to account for criminal acts.*

*The rights and duties of national and regional political parties should be defined by the Electoral Proclamation and regulations, rather than left to judicial interpretation.*

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<sup>68</sup> The substance of the complaints varied, with the vast majority seeking cancellation of results. The NEBE contracted three external law firms to assist with assessment of the complaints. No legal challenges to the decisions of the NEBE had been made at the time of writing.

## ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

### For the Immediate Period

The NEBE should ensure that legal provisions mandating the issuance of certified copies of polling station result forms to party/candidate agents after counting are respected. To further enhance transparency and increase voter confidence in elections, the NEBE should, in a timely manner, make available election results disaggregated to the polling location level and could publish online scans of result forms posted at each polling station on election night.

The NEBE should ensure the timely accreditation of both international and citizen observers and should simplify procedures for accrediting citizen observers. Decentralizing the process of observer badge distribution to the sub-national level could streamline the process and facilitate its timely execution accreditation in future elections.

### For the Longer Term

Positive steps should be taken by the NEBE to increase the transparency of the electoral process in accordance with citizens' rights to seek and know information. To build public confidence, the NEBE should publish the electoral calendar and other updates in line with the Open Election Data Initiative, release candidate lists in a timely and easily accessible manner, and make information such as voter registration figures publicly available<sup>69</sup>. The NEBE should also publish lists of candidates soon after the candidate registration is completed, and candidate substitutions and withdrawals should be communicated to the public.

The NEBE should develop and implement an inclusive, permanent voters' roll, including a mechanism to facilitate its continuous update.

Measures should be taken to ensure the equality of the vote between constituencies. Deviations should not exceed the 15 percent foreseen in the law, in accordance with international good practice. A comprehensive national census should proceed a new delimitation exercise, though in its absence inclusive dialogue should be conducted to agree on measures to be taken.

To consolidate and expand initial efforts to reform the NEBE, training programs should be implemented to bolster the capacity of its personnel at the headquarters, regional, and constituency levels in order to build institutional resilience.

## SECURITY AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

### In the Immediate Period

Electoral Security Organs Directive N°12/2021 should identify the security agencies authorized to provide election security and outline their specific roles to facilitate operationalization, enhance transparency, and prevent the involvement of militias.

Women's perspectives and experiences of VAW-E should be mainstreamed into the leadership and decision-making of the NEBE, observer groups, security agencies, and others responsible for monitoring and mitigating electoral violence in the leadup to September 6 voting and in future elections.

### For the Longer Term

Training for legally established security organs should be enhanced in both the immediate period and longer term to include human rights, political and civil rights, election violence, and election security, including VAW-E, and maintaining political impartiality in their work, thus enhancing the professionalism and impartiality of security

69 See Open Election Data Initiative (OEDI) [website](#) and [principles](#).



providers and contributing to a more secure election environment for diverse groups of stakeholders in Ethiopia with a focus on women, diverse ethnic groups, PWDs, IDPs, and young people.

The Joint Election Violence Prevention Platform should be established as a permanent platform to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation in regions during and between elections, and should receive training on the unique risks of violence that women and other marginalized populations face.

Security agencies should cooperate more closely with the NEBE and citizen observer groups and should be more transparent about their election day deployments. The NEBE should involve its regional branches in security risk assessments and be more transparent with observer groups about election security.

## POLITICAL PARTIES AND CAMPAIGN ENVIRONMENT

### **In the Immediate Period**

Political parties should publicly renounce and pledge not to use violence, intimidation, incitement, and hate speech, including through social media and digital platforms, and take measures to educate their activists and supporters as well as to discipline members who act otherwise.

The Joint Council of Political Parties (JCPP) should be strengthened at all levels and utilized in the September 6 and future elections in order to facilitate forums for dialogue and conflict resolution.

### **For the Longer Term**

Political parties should make concerted efforts to improve participation of women, youth, and other marginalized populations in the parties' ranks and leadership positions, including but not limited to fulfilling criteria to receive the governmental subsidy for political parties that register a minimum percentage of women candidates or as party leaders.

In order to build their support bases and enable the voters to make informed choices, parties and candidates should participate in debates when opportunities arise. Political parties should be encouraged to publicize their platforms and programs, and review them to incorporate perspectives of women, young people, and other marginalized populations on approaches to issues and public policies. They should increase their outreach capacities and make use of indirect state subsidies such as free airtime and newspaper columns.

## INCLUSION

### **Inclusion of Women**

Federal and state authorities, the NEBE, gender equality and women's rights organizations, and all other stakeholders should take measures that foster greater participation in Ethiopia's political processes, leadership, and decision-making of diverse groups of women, including those from various marginalized populations. This could include, among other measures, a discussion of legislated gender quotas at federal, local, or party levels.

Federal and state legislation should be revised to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination and criminalize gender-based violence and VAW-E specifically.

To increase women's participation in elections in remote areas, the NEBE should put special emphasis on voter education and outreach for women, with the involvement of civil society groups and traditional social structures.

## **Inclusion of IDPs**

*NEBE should improve the inclusion of IDPs in the electoral process by adopting measures that facilitate their registration in regular polling stations, notably by revising residency requirements for those living in local communities.*

*NEBE could collect, disaggregate, and publish data on IDPs voting in special and regular polling stations to establish a reliable baseline from which to also gauge their participation in future elections.*

## **Inclusion of Ethno-linguistic Minorities**

*NEBE and civil society should develop outreach and communication strategies adapted to ethno-linguistic minority communities to ensure wide diffusion of voter information and education in rural communities, particularly in especially diverse areas.*

*Political parties should develop internal policies to recruit, mentor, and promote members of ethno-linguistic minorities within their governing structures.*

*The HoF should establish criteria for identifying minority nationalities that qualify for special representation in the HoPR, in accordance with its constitutional prerogatives and the law.<sup>70</sup>*

## **Inclusion of PWDs**

*Election administration, political parties, and other relevant groups should continue to work toward the inclusion of PWDs in all aspects of the electoral process. PWDs should have unobstructed and independent physical access to voter registration and polling locations, access to voter information in braille, and sign language translation for visually and hearing-impaired voters widely available.*

## **Inclusion of Young People**

*In order to facilitate participation of young voters in the election process, the NEBE could consider establishing special polling stations for university students.*

*Federal and state authorities, the NEBE, political parties, and CSOs should make concerted outreach efforts to young people to encourage them to engage in electoral and political processes and to incorporate and address their concerns and viewpoints.*

## **CSOs, CITIZEN ELECTION OBSERVATION AND VOTER EDUCATION**

*Civil society voter education initiatives should be enhanced for marginalized communities, including those living in remote or conflict-affected areas. To ensure wider participation, voter education activities should commence well in advance of the voter registration process and utilize a wider range of mediums and languages.*

*The international community should recalibrate efforts to build the capacity of Ethiopian civil society which has been dormant for many years and may lack expertise for conducting more effective voter education, comprehensive electoral observation, and related electoral accountability activities. Assistance should be rendered well in advance of the start of the election process.*

<sup>70</sup> See Article 62 of the “Proclamation to Amend the Proclamation Defining the Powers and Functions of the House of Federation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia” passed by the HoPR on July 6, 2021.

## INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

*Full implementation of the Media Proclamation No.1238/2021 should be ensured and pending proclamations on access to information, computer crime, and data protection promptly adopted.*

*Media outlets should not be liable for content that third parties air, unless the statements have been ruled to be unlawful by a court or constitute incitement to violence.*

*The Ethiopian Media Authority (EMA) should increase its media monitoring capacity and coordinate with the NEBE to both foster greater exchange of information and disseminate traditional, online and social media monitoring reports during the election period.*

*Political and civil society stakeholders should consider obtaining a 'verified' status for their social media pages to help voters more easily identify trusted information.*

*CSOs, the NEBE, and governmental authorities should enhance their capacities to monitor social media and other digital information platforms to identify and counter disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation while ensuring respect for privacy rights and freedom of expression. Longer term civic education concerning media literacy and responsibilities for safeguarding information integrity should also be addressed.*



## Ethiopia June 21, 2021 National Elections Report

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