

Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC)



Joint Statement of the Oromo Liberation Front and Oromo Federalist Congress On the #COVID19 & Postponement of the 2020 Ethiopian Election

On March 31/2020, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) has announced that due to the outbreak of Coronavirus pandemic, it has cancelled the current electoral calendar and suspended election operations of the coming national elections which were planned to be conducted on August 29/2020. The Board stated that measures being taken by the government to combat the outbreak has forced it to suspend many of its planned activities and election preparations. We, the undersigned, political organizations recognize the difficulties COVID-19 has brought to the global community in general and Ethiopia in particular, as well as the challenges NEBE is facing in organizing the election. However, we believe that the process the Board has followed to reach its decision is wrong, and yet another manifestation of part of a troubling pattern.

The Board stated that the said decision, which in effect postponed the election, was made in consultation with stakeholders. It is true that NEBE had organized consultative meetings with political parties on March 20/2020 at Hyatt Regency Hotel in Addis Ababa in the presence of representatives of political parties, including the incumbent Prosperity Party and representatives of opposition parties. At the end of the meeting, NEBE, represented by its chairperson Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, promised that there would be another round of meeting to hold additional dialogue with all stakeholders before making any decision. However, this was not done as promised and the March 31 announcement to postpone the election was made public without even internally notifying the decision to political parties. Furthermore, the Board referred the matters to the House of People's Representative (HoPR) while the current members of the House have no mandate to decide on matters that will occur after their five-year term expires. It should be noted that according to Article 58 of the FDRE Constitution, the term of office of members of the HoPR lasts for five years and election shall be held one month prior to the expiry of such five years.

Nevertheless, we the undersigned parties believe that while the postponement of the election due to pandemic is unfortunate and beyond the control of the Board, the incumbent, political parties and other stakeholders such as civil society organizations, it presents all with a renewed opportunity and commitment to correct mistakes that have been threatening to derail Ethiopia's transition to democracy and put it back on the right track.

The incumbent, which was entrusted to lead the transition in a smooth fashion, has been backtracking on its promises, and dashing public expectations in the process. Contrary to the early days when the current leadership assumed office and promised to open the political space, in recent months, it has been taking actions that have reversed those early positive changes. Intimidation, mass incarceration of opposition party leaders and members, all point to return to the old authoritarian days.

The narrowing of the political space and the return to this authoritarian behavior by the ruling party has been worsening as we approach the election, and the prospects and hopes for a free and fair election were fading away. Hence, the postponement of the election creates a new opportunity, but only if it is used appropriately. We believe in rethinking and reset to correct these dangerous trends that we are witnessing in recent weeks and months.

The postponement should also give chances to the NEBE to right its own immediate and fundamental wrongs. As an institution constitutionally entrusted to organize what was hoped to be the first multiparty and competitive transitional period election, the Board was expected to make its decision-making process based on the outcomes of a thorough consultative dialogue with all stakeholders and in a transparent manner that leaves no room for doubts.

The Board should also use this opportunity to right its fundamental fault lines. From the drafting of election laws and regulations to the appointment of election executives, the Board has been less consultative and transparent than it promised it would be. For instance, five articles were added to the election law after the drafting committee comprised of leaders of different political parties and experts had finalized and submitted.

With regards to the appointment of regional election executives, the list of candidates were sent to political parties very late, with insufficient information about the background of the candidates and the decision was made without waiting for the responses from political parties. Such lack of consultation and transparency have put into question the credibility of the candidates in particular and the Board in general.

It is therefore within this framework that we, the undersigned parties, urge the postponement of the election to be used appropriately as it presents us with another opportunity to rectify the aforesaid mishaps. We also call upon all stakeholders to take this opportunity to better prepare for a credible transitional election and adopt the following resolution:

- 1) We all need to join hands and prioritize defeating the coronavirus. Towards this end, no political activity or decision should hinder the collective fight against the pandemic.
- 2) Laws, decrees and directives passed to deal with the pandemics should be limited only to dealing with the public health emergency and the pandemic should not be used as pretext to further narrow the fragile political space.
- 3) While prioritizing the fight against the pandemic, stakeholders should take maximum precautions in line with WHO recommendations and continue to deliberate and consult about the election.
- 4) Decisions about the new election date and issues related to that should be made after sufficient consultation and consensus among all parties and stakeholders. Neither the government nor the election board should rush to pass any decision without sufficient consultation and consensus with all stakeholders.
- 5) It is clear that the postponement of the election means the term of the current government expires, potentially triggering a constitutional crisis. Issues related to how the government is run during the interim period should be decided based on the constitution and in consultation with all political parties and stakeholders.

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