

AFRICAN UNION



**AFRICAN UNION ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION TO THE 21 JUNE 2021
GENERAL ELECTIONS IN THE FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF
ETHIOPIA**

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

ADDIS ABABA

23 JUNE 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Ethiopians went to the polls on 21 June 2021 to elect the members of the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR), Regional State Councils and City Councils. These were the 6th General Elections since the return to civilian rule in 1995 and were largely considered as a watershed for democratic development. The elections took place within a context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing conflicts in the Tigray region, regional state border disputes, the international border dispute with Sudan and the dispute over the filling and operation of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). All these contribute to heightened political and security concerns in the country.
2. Furthermore, the elections took place against a background of extensive institutional, political, and legal reforms undertaken since the ascendance to power of Prime Minister (PM) Abiy Ahmed in April 2018, following the resignation of the former PM Hailemariam Desalegn. These reforms opened the political and civic space which contributed to greater freedoms and the proliferation of new political parties and civic organisations.
3. Notwithstanding the substantive reforms undertaken, the arrest and detention of high-profile opposition individuals have resulted in certain political parties boycotting the elections, while others have been barred from taking part in the elections.
4. The African Union (AU) engaged in the June 2021 elections following an invitation from the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and as part of its mandate to promote peaceful, democratic elections on the continent. The African Union Election Observation Mission (AUEOM) to Ethiopia is led by **His Excellency Chief Olusegun Obasanjo GCFR**, former President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and comprised eight (8) Long Term Observers (LTOs) and 57 Short-Term Observers (STOs). The mission was mandated to conduct an impartial, independent, and objective assessment of the 2021 elections in line with the AU and international principles for democratic elections, and the legal framework governing elections in Ethiopia.
5. This statement presents the preliminary findings, recommendations, and conclusions of the AUEOM. It is being issued before the completion of the entire election process. Therefore, this preliminary statement only reflects observations from the date of deployment of the mission on 02 June 2021 up to the conclusion of the counting process at polling stations. A comprehensive final report on the elections will be released at a later stage and shared with Ethiopian stakeholders and published on the AU website.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Political Environment

6. It is noteworthy that the June 2021 general elections took place within the context of reforms that opened the political and civic space which enhanced the enjoyment of more basic rights and freedoms in comparison to the 2015 elections. Among the many positive political developments, the most prominent were the institutional strengthening of the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), the release of political prisoners and the return of exiled political activists.
7. The Mission notes that this is the first time that the Prime Minister is seeking political legitimacy through elections, hence the importance attached to these elections.
8. The Mission also notes the tense security atmosphere in some parts of the country, especially in the Tigray region, which has rendered it impossible to conduct elections in those regions. Similarly, ethnic-induced and border-related conflicts in some regional states such as Somali-Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz and West Wollega, which the authorities designated as “hotspots”, also impacted the elections. Despite this worsening security situation, the Mission notes that the Government of Ethiopia put in place adequate security measures that ensured a largely peaceful atmosphere during the conduct of elections.

Legal framework

9. Elections in Ethiopia are governed by the 1995 Constitution¹, the 2019 NEBE Proclamation (No.1133/2019), the 2019 Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Elections Code of Conduct Proclamation (No.1162/2019), which stipulates steps for the conduct of elections and dispute resolution, and the Organisations of Civil Societies Proclamation (No.1113/2019). Other relevant rules and regulations included 27 directives that were adopted by NEBE. The electoral legal framework was elaborately done with stakeholder consultations.
10. Based on the overall assessment of the constitutional and legal framework for the June 2021 general elections, the AUEOM notes that it was largely adequate and meets regional and international standards for the conduct of democratic elections.

Electoral Administration

11. The AUEOM notes NEBE enjoys the trust and confidence of stakeholders. This is mainly due to the transparent and consultative process of constituting NEBE as well as the positive perception of the Chairperson, Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, a former Judge and political detainee.

¹ Proclamation No. 1/1995.

12. The AUEOM commends the efforts of NEBE in professionalizing the institution and asserting its independence. It applauds NEBE for achieving key aspects of the electoral process such as the establishment of the regional offices, recruitment and training of election officials, registration of political parties and candidates, registration of voters, and procurement and delivery of material under a limited timeframe and challenging conditions.
13. The Mission notes that most of the members and staff of NEBE have little or no prior election administration experience and conducted the 2021 general elections under a new and untested legal framework. The limited experience may have contributed to the operational and logistical challenges NEBE encountered.

Voter registration

14. Voter registration was conducted between 25 March and 14 May 2021. At the end of the registration process, a total of 37,408,600 voters were registered, representing approximately 75% of the projected 50 million eligible voters.
15. While the AUEOM did not observe the voter registration process, reports from interlocutors indicated that the exercise was extended several times in some areas and postponed in others due to security and operational challenges. In addition, stakeholders raised concerns about the implications of outdated census data on which NEBE based its projection for voter registration.

Political Party and Candidate Registration

16. NEBE registered 53 political parties successfully. Of this number, 46 political parties fielded candidates: 17 at national and 29 at regional levels.
17. The Mission commends NEBE for providing incentives for the inclusion of women and persons with disabilities, which contributed to increased participation in the electoral process.
18. The Mission notes the concerns raised by stakeholders on the withdrawal of the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) from the 2021 general elections, which has left many seats unopposed in the Oromia region. Their major reason for boycotting the elections was alleged intimidation and harassment of their members. The OFC is considered one of the major opposition political parties.

Election Campaign and Campaign finance

19. Election campaigns started immediately after political parties and candidates received certificates of registration and ended on 16 June 2021. Campaigns were carried out through rallies, door-to-door, social media, billboards and debates on state media. The campaigns were largely peaceful and political parties and candidates were able to campaign freely except in some areas where they were

reportedly limited by security challenges. The Mission received unconfirmed reports of intimidation and harassment of opposition candidates in some constituencies and regions.

20. The AUEOM notes that NEBE provided funding to political parties for campaigns. Additional financial support was provided to political parties that fielded women candidates and persons with disabilities. Although this is a commendable good practice, independent candidates were reportedly left out.

Women Participation

21. The Mission notes the positive impact of ongoing reforms on women. For instance, since 2018 women have been appointed to key positions such as the President of Republic, President of the Supreme Court, and Chairperson of NEBE.

22. For the June 2021 elections, women comprised 45.7% registered voters, 15.9% candidates for House of People's Representative (HoPR), and 22.16% of candidates for Regional Councils (RC). Of the participating political parties, the Prosperity Party has fielded the most women candidates.

23. While a quota system for women was not expressly included in the electoral law, NEBE considers gender parity as a crucial criterion in all its operations, including staffing and programming and support to other stakeholders.

Civic and Voter Education

24. Civic and voter education was primarily carried out by NEBE, with the support of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and political parties. NEBE used public and private media outlets, bulk SMS, t-shirts, banners, flyers, and roadshows to raise awareness of the electoral process.

25. While civic and voter education was deemed to be effective in urban areas, the same could not be ascertained in the rural areas.

Role of Civil Society

26. The enactment of the Organisations of Civil Society Proclamation No.1113/2019 opened the space for CSOs' participation in electoral and political processes. The AUEOM notes that CSOs played a crucial role in the June 2021 elections by sensitising voters and observing the conduct of the electoral process. The Coalition for Ethiopian Civil Society Organisation for Elections (CECOE), which comprises several CSOs, is the most prominent that deployed 3500 observers across the country on election day.

27. Despite the opening up of the civic space, CSO interlocutors acknowledged limitations with regards to resources and technical capacity to effectively carry out their work.

Election Security

28. The security environment was a major factor that impacted the June 2021 General elections. The AUEOM notes the report of interlocutors that in the run-up to the elections, several NEBE offices were attacked and destroyed in some regions such as Oromia and Amhara, which affected smooth electoral operations in those areas.

29. Despite the challenging security landscape, the Mission commends the security measures put in place by Ethiopian authorities, which ensured a largely peaceful environment on election day, particularly, the Multi Stakeholder National Security Task Force (MSNSTF) of which NEBE is a member. The Mission notes that these measures were also replicated at regional and local levels. At polling level, the Mission notes the role played by youth volunteers in assisting the police to maintain order.

ELECTION DAY FINDINGS

30. The AUEOM deployed observers in five (5) regions and two (2) cities where they observed the opening, voting, closing, and counting procedures.

Opening

31. The AUEOM observed the opening in 22 polling stations, all located in urban areas in five (5) regions and two (2) cities. Of these, 13 did not open on time mainly due to the late arrival of polling officials and materials, and poor preparations by polling officials.

32. At the opening, the AU observers reported that the election materials were sufficient in most of the visited polling stations. However, the shortage of ballot papers was noted in a few polling stations.²

33. In all the polling stations observed, ballot boxes were correctly sealed. The setup of the polling stations allowed for free flow of voters as well as guaranteed the secrecy of the vote.

² Woreda 8 (Addis, Kirkos, station #: 7), Woreda 6/8 (Addis, Station # 1453100102017), Kore condominium (Addis, Woreda 2, Station # 1453500901005), Election center 14A (Addis, Woreda 06), St George (Addis, Woreda 13, station #2), Dubati (Afar, Dubati, station # 204402100113), Debre markos (Amhara, Kebele 03 Merecha tabia 6, station # 308101096606), Sefene Selam 05 1 Le (Amhara, Bahir Dar, station # 311630139406), Kezira (Dire Dawa, Kezira community centre, station # 1554601100514), Newland C (Gambela, Gambela City, station # 1251804100404), Goudomale (Gambela, Hikada, station # 851201048314), U/1/2 (Oromia, Kabele09, station# 740002019405 (Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region, Chamo Kebele).

34. Most of the polling stations visited had the full complement of 5 staff and on average 2 were women. The presence of domestic observers, party agents and security personal was observed.
35. Overall, the opening procedures were largely adhered to in a peaceful atmosphere.

Voting

36. The mission observed the voting processes in 249 polling stations, of which 76.3% were located in urban areas and 23.7% in rural areas. Voting took place in a largely peaceful atmosphere, with long queues reported in 79.9% polling stations throughout the day.
37. Of the polling stations visited, 86.4% were accessible to persons with disabilities. Priority was given to the elderly, persons with disabilities and any other persons requiring assistance.
38. On average, women as polling officials represented 35.80%, 21.13% as party agents, and 51% as observers.
39. The AU observers reported shortage of voting materials in Gambela region, which led to the interruption of voting. At the time of the departure of the AU observers from the region on 22 June, additional materials were yet to be received at the polling stations.
40. The location and size of some of the polling stations observed impeded easy flow of voters. However, the secrecy of the ballot was still guaranteed.
41. International and domestic observers were granted unrestricted access to the polling stations and were allowed to conduct their duties without interference.
42. Overall, the AUEOM observers rated the voting process and the competence of polling station staff as generally good.

Closing and counting

43. The AUEOM observed closing and counting procedures in 18 polling stations. NEBE decided to extend the closing time from 18:00hrs to 21:00hrs to compensate for time lost due to late arrival of materials in some places while allowing those in the queues at the initial official closing time to cast their votes.
44. The counting took place in the polling stations observed immediately after the conclusion of voting and closing procedures. The majority of the polling stations covered by the mission conducted the counting until very late hours of the e-day

with a few of them resuming counting in the morning of the following day. This may have been as a result of the large number of voters allocated per polling station.

45. The results were posted publicly at 61% of the polling station visited by the mission.

46. Overall, although social distancing protocols on prevention of COVID-19 was not respected in most polling stations, use of hand sanitizer and mandatory wearing of masks was enforced.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the spirit of cooperation and commitment to strengthening of democratic processes in Ethiopia the AUEOM presents the following preliminary recommendations for consideration by stakeholders:

To the Government

- Maintain, sustain, and enhance the political freedoms engendered by the ongoing reforms.
- Urgently undertake measures to heal societal divisions through national reconciliation, dialogue, and inclusivity.
- Ensure commitment to democratic governance beyond the holding of regular elections.

To NEBE

- Undertake capacity building for staff through training, peer learning and exposure to electoral processes of other countries to enhance their experience.
- Continue to provide incentives to political parties to encourage increased participation of women and persons with disabilities.
- Extend campaign funding to independent candidates.
- Strengthen and intensify civic and voter education particularly in rural areas.
- Strengthen collaboration with political parties, CSOs and other stakeholders to enhance the credibility of the electoral process.
- Consider recruiting additional staff to assist in the counting phase.
- Consider increasing the number of polling stations with sizable voters per polling station for ease of ballot counting.
- Ensure sufficient and timely delivery of voting materials to polling stations to avoid interruption of voting.

To Political Parties

- Increase and strengthen women participation and representation within party structures especially in leadership positions and as candidates.

- Remain actively engaged in electoral and political process to strengthen the country's nascent democracy.
- Utilize effectively mechanisms provided for resolving election related disputes.

To CSOs

- Continue to actively engage in the electoral and political processes to strengthen democracy in the country.
- Undertake capacity building through trainings and peer learning.
- Strengthen collaboration with NEBE and other stakeholders to enhance the credibility of the electoral process.

To the African Union

- Support the strengthening of democratic institutions in Ethiopia.
- Encourage and support the Ethiopian authorities to undertake national reconciliation initiatives.

To the International Community

- Continue to support the strengthening of democratic institutions in Ethiopia, especially NEBE, CSOs and political parties.
- Encourage and support the Ethiopian authorities to undertake national reconciliation initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The Mission concludes that despite some operational, logistical, security, political and COVID-19 related challenges, overall, the pre-election and Election Day processes were conducted in an orderly, peaceful and credible manner. There was nothing, in the Mission's estimation, that distracted from the credible conduct of the elections. The Mission, therefore, commends all Ethiopians for the demonstrated commitment to the democratic development of the country.

The AUEOM calls on all stakeholders to remain calm in the remaining electoral phase. The Mission urges any stakeholder that is dissatisfied with the electoral outcome to seek redress through the established legal and institutional mechanisms.

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