

Ethiopian National Elections held on June 21, 2021

CECOE Preliminary Statement

Introduction

For Ethiopia's sixth national and regional elections, more than 176 civil society organizations from across the country came together to form the Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Election (CECOE). CECOE is an independent and non-partisan citizen observation organization that works on behalf of all Ethiopians to help ensure that elections are inclusive, transparent and accountable. This is CECOE's preliminary statement on the June 21, 2021 elections based on an initial analysis of reports from our deployed observers. The electoral process is not yet finished and results are still being tallied by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). We are continuing to observe the process for those constituencies that voted on June 21 and we are committed to observing elections for those constituencies where elections have yet to be conducted. CECOE applauds the people of Ethiopia and major stakeholders in the electoral process, especially voters who queued for long hours to exercise their democratic rights, the NEBE, political parties and their candidates, security agencies, and allied supporters for working to ensure that this critical democratic process took place on June 21, 2021.

In the period leading up to the sixth national and regional elections of the country, CECOE recruited and trained over 3,000 observers in seven regional states and two city administrations. Guided by an observation checklist, these observers, duly accredited by the NEBE, monitored the polling station set-up process, opening, voting and counting procedures, and announcement of the vote count. CECOE's observers were deployed both as stationary and mobile observers monitoring several aspects of Ethiopia's sixth national and regional elections. Stationary observers reported their data to CECOE's Addis Ababa-based data center via coded SMS messages while mobile observers traveled throughout their respective communities capturing the electoral environment from one polling station to the other.

CECOE's election day observation is premised on systematic data collection, which allowed it to use standardized checklists to gather consistent information on the quality of the electoral process in all parts of Ethiopia where the election took place. This systematic approach enables CECOE

to be methodical in its observation, data collection and analysis, and, more importantly, provide citizens and electoral stakeholders information of what is happening on election day across the country. In addition, CECOIE stationary observers were trained to immediately send in special “critical incident” reports if they witnessed any serious issue that threatened the integrity of the voting or counting process. CECOIE stationary observers were complemented by its mobile observers, of over 150, who visited multiple polling stations and submitted critical incidents to CECOIE data center in Addis Ababa. Based on this methodology the reports received from CECOIE’s trained and deployed observers will enable CECOIE to provide information on the conduct of the polling process and critical incidents at polling stations and areas where election took place. It is important to note, however, that given the late delivery of badges by the NEBE and issues of missing and duplicate badges, not all of CECOIE’s trained observers could deploy on election because they did not receive a badge.

CECOIE’s preliminary statement provides highlights of CECOIE’s election observation findings relating to the conduct of the elections. This preliminary statement is an update on some of the information already made available to the public in a CECOIE ‘Situational Release’ made at a press conference on Monday, June 21, 2021 at Golden Tulip Hotel in Addis Ababa, and ‘Press Release’ to the media issues the evening of June 21, 2021. The content of this statement is based on real-time reports CECOIE received on polling station set-up, opening of polls, voting, counting of votes case and vote counting from observers from every region and administrative city conducting elections as of 21 June 2021. y.

Summary of Observation Findings

CECOIE’s Preliminary analysis of its observer reports provides independent, non partisan information on the conduct of the polls as observed by its deployed observers. The following preliminary findings are based on the reports of only 2,200 observers deployed in every region holding elections. In addition, and as indicated above, CECOIE collected reports on critical incidents from all its observers (mobile and stationary) over the course of the election providing information on key issues that threatened the integrity of the election.

Arrival at Polling Stations

In order to have polling stations ready for voting by 6:00AM in the morning, NEBE officials are expected to be present at polling stations well before the opening time. To be able to assess the opening and set-up process accurately, CECOIE asked its observers to reach polling stations by 5:30AM. CECOIE's observers reported that in 93% (2,052) of observed polling stations, polling station officials were present by 5:30AM. All CECOIE observers were duly accredited by the NEBE and issued with accreditation badges as well as an observation kit. Accordingly, 97% (2,128) of observers were allowed access to polling stations after presenting proper accreditation badges issued by the NEBE.

Opening

Polling stations are supposed to open at 6:00 AM. CECOIE observers reported on both the time polling stations opened and conditions at the polling station at opening time. According to reports on opening from observers, 98% (2,116) of polling stations opened by 7:00 AM. With regard to the location of the polling station, 4% (92) of polling stations observed were established in NEBE's prohibited areas, such as a police station, a military camp and political party office. Additionally, while political parties are forbidden to campaign for 4 days prior to the election and campaign materials are not allowed within 200 meters of the polling stations, 12% (256) of observers reported that there was campaigning and/or campaign materials in or around the polling station they visited..

Set-up

The set-up of a polling station is also a key component to ensuring that the electoral process in each polling station is in line with the regulations of the NEBE. As such, CECOIE observers assessed and reported on the set-up of polling stations. CECOIE observers evaluated the accessibility of polling stations, the presence of polling stations materials as well as collecting information on observers, polling station officials and party agents involved in the process. The following are some of the important preliminary findings on the aforementioned issues:

- Regarding accessibility, about 95% (2,039) of observers reported that both male and female voters could equally access locations selected at polling stations. In conjunction, 13% (285) of polling stations visited by reporting observers were identified as inaccessible without assistance for persons with disabilities and mobility issues (the elderly, persons carrying small children, etc.)
- During the opening of polling stations, in 99.8% (2,133) of polling stations visited by reporting observers, ballot boxes were shown to be empty before being sealed.
- Regarding polling station officials, an average of four polling station officials were present in polling stations according to reports submitted by observers. An average of two electoral officials were female while in 20% (420) of polling stations visited by reporting observers the chairperson of the polling station was female.
- In 91% (1,937) of polling stations, other observers groups were present in the polling station at the time of opening. Similarly, 89% (1,910) of polling stations reported by observers, party agents were present at the time of opening of polling stations.

Voting

After assessing the set-up and opening of polling stations, the next crucial area of observation is the voting process in each polling station, CECOIE observers reported on their ability to witness the voting process, adherence to voting procedures, the observance of COVID-19 protocols during the voting process as well as assessing security concerns in and around polling stations.

- NEBE has provided that observers have the right to be in the polling station throughout the election process, with the exception of limitations placed due to COVID-19 restrictions. 94% (1,975) of CECOIE observers reported that they were able to observe the entire voting process without limitations. Whereas, 1% (12) of CECOIE's observers were not allowed to remain in their respective polling stations for the entirety of the voting process for reasons not related to COVID-19 protocols. An additional 6% (119) of CECOIE's observers reported that they were asked to leave the polling station for some period of time because of

COVID-19 protocols. While the coalition expects all accredited observers to partake in the electoral process, it would like to note that, it expected observers to be asked to leave the polling station for COVID-19 reasons due to the circumstances and set up of polling stations in Ethiopia. Finally, observers reported on 86 occasions that there were unauthorized people in the polling stations they visited on election day. In other words, this means that in 96% (2,020) of the polling stations reported on by CECOIE observers only authorized personnel were present in the polling station.

- CECOIE's preliminary findings on procedure shows that 89% (1,879) of polling stations reported on by observers, electoral officers stamped on ballot papers before giving it to voters. However, in 11% (226) of polling stations there was either partial or no compliance in stamping ballot papers before giving them to voters.. Another notable preliminary finding is that in 17% (366) of polling stations observed by the Coalition, voters were not marked with indelible ink before voting while in 10% (198) of polling stations, CECOIE observers also reported that the secrecy of the voting process was not entirely respected. However, in 98% (2,073) of the reports received from observers, the ballot box was placed in a visible place throughout the day.
- As stipulated in the NEBE directives and procedures, only voters on the electoral roll will be provided the opportunity to vote. CECOIE observers reported that in 39% (829) of polling stations, there were instances where voters were turned away for **not** being on the electoral roll. However, in 6% (114) of polling stations were not allowed to vote despite being on the electoral roll.
- COVID 19 is another important point of assessment for CECOIE in the context of an election being conducted during a pandemic. As such it designed questions geared at measuring the level of compliance with COVID-19 protocols of both voters and electoral officers. Preliminary findings show that in 28% (601) of polling stations NEBE officials did not fully wear masks for the entirety of the voting process. This number significantly goes up in the context of voters, as 62% (1,312) of reports received by the CECOIE, voters did not fully wear facemasks in the process of voting. Finally, CECOIE observers reported that in 4% (84) of polling stations they observed, voters were turned away for not wearing conventional masks despite a clear position by the NEBE to allow voters to partake in the election so long as they covered their face in some manner.

Counting

Counting is one of the crucial and sensitive components of any election. On Election Day, the NEBE announced that voting would be extended by three hours and that polling stations would close at 9:00 PM rather than 6:00 PM. This was a positive decision as it helped ensure voters would be able cast their ballots on election day. In some parts of the country voting was delayed until the following day or postponed entirely. While these decisions have enhanced the ability of Ethiopians to vote, they delayed the counting process and created challenges in receiving information on the counting process from CECOIE observers.

In line with NEBE regulations, in 95% (1,983) of polling stations visited by observers, electoral officers did not ask observers to leave when counting started. In addition, observers reported that in 99% (2,043) of polling stations, ballots for House of Peoples' Representatives seats were counted in the polling stations immediately following the voting process while in 93% (1,927) of polling stations regional council or city council ballots were counted in the polling station immediately following the voting process. In addition, there was interference or intervention in only 1% (20) of polling stations during the counting process. Reports from observers show that there were an average of 4 party agents present during the counting process while in 14% (297) of polling stations party agents refused to sign on the Reconciliation and Results Form (RRF). According to NEBE directives, following the conclusion of counting the RRF should be posted at a visible place at the polling station within an hour for voters and interested stakeholders to have access to the information. From CECOIE observers, in 27% (568) of polling stations, RRF forms were not posted outside of the polling stations after counting was concluded. However, some observers reported that when they returned to the polling station the next day, the RRF forms were present and available for the public to see.

Reported Critical Incidents

In addition to collecting data on procedural and technical issues, observers also reported a number of critical violations on election day. CECOIE's critical incident reports capture instances that could undermine the integrity of the electoral process. Incident types range from polling stations not opening, to voting and counting suspended and from incidences of violence to presence of armed groups, and issues pertaining to improper voting procedures and counting. Over the course of the voting process observers reported over 400 critical incidents, of these 338 have been verified by the CECOIE data centre as of today and reflected in this preliminary statement. CECOIE continues to receive and conduct verification of critical incidents as reported by its deployed observers, and will update and inform the people of Ethiopia in its final report.

In this preliminary statement, the majority of incidents observed on election day include: missing election materials, observers not being allowed to observe, presence of unauthorized persons inside the polling station and instances of intimidation and harassment during the voting and counting process.

- In total there were approximately 138 instances of missing election day materials across the country. For example, observers in Addis Ababa, Benishangul Gumuz, Gambela, and Sidama, among others, reported missing ballot papers, voter rolls, and other essential materials..
- In total observers reported around 40 instances where they were prevented from observing. In Oromia, some observers reported that they were not initially allowed to observe at the polling station because NEBE zonal coordinators believed they required an official list of accredited observers from NEBE in addition to observation badges. CECOIE observers reported 30 different instances from across the country of unauthorized persons inside the polling stations. For example, CECOIE observers in the Amhara region reported presence of unauthorized persons inside the polling stations, particularly Kebele staff, including the chairperson in some instances, during the voting process.

- CECOIE observers reported that there were issues of intimidation and harassment at 17 polling stations. Observers noted that in limited instances in Gambella and Amhara regions, political party members were intimidating voters and poll workers during the voting process.

These critical incidents reported, highlight some of the key challenges associated with the conduct of the election.

Conclusion