



Preliminary Statement on the Elections and Referendum Held on 30 September 2021

CECOE Preliminary Statement

04 October 2021

Introduction

It can be recalled that for the Sixth National and Regional Elections of Ethiopia, the Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Election (CECOE) designed and implemented a citizen election observation project assessing imperative aspects of the voting and counting process in both June and September. The Coalition - which consists of 176 local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) - serves as an independent and non-partisan observation organization which works to contribute to ensuring inclusiveness, transparency and accountability of electoral processes on behalf of all Ethiopian citizens. It can be recalled that CECOIE deployed 2,050 stationary and over 100 mobile observers for the election day on 21 June 2021 as six regions and two city administrations cast their votes. However, it was already announced ahead of the June election date that the election would not take place in June in the Somali and Harari regions as well as parts of the Amhara, Benishangul Gumuz, and Oromia regions. The referendum to determine the regional state status of the South West Ethiopia area located in the SNNP region also did not take place as anticipated in June. Following election day, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) announced that supplementary elections and referendum voting was scheduled to take place on 6 September 2021. However, on 17 August 2021 another announcement from the NEBE pushed election day to 30 September 2021 as well as ruling out the parts of the Amhara, Benishangul Gumuz and Oromia regions initially anticipated to take place in September.



Recognizing the imperative importance of these rounds of voting to the completeness of the sixth national and regional elections, CECOIE recruited, trained and deployed 956 stationary and 37 mobile observers to witness and report on the voting and counting process which took place in the Harari, Somali and parts of the SNNP regions holding regular voting or referendum voting. CECOIE also deployed observers in selected polling stations in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa which held voting for the Harari National Assembly as well as deploying a mobile assessment team to the Qolaji IDP Settlement located in the Dendema Woreda of the Fafen Zone, Somali Regional State to assess the voting and counting process in this camp. This is CECOIE's preliminary statement based on 944 reports and 26 confirmed critical incidents collected on election day from observers deployed across the aforementioned parts of the country on the opening and setup of polling stations as well as the voting and counting process in said polling stations. Additionally this statement includes a contextual analysis of observations made by 7 observers reporting from the IDP Settlement.

Trained on and equipped with observation checklists, these duly accredited observers assessed the opening and set up of polling stations, as well as the voting and counting process in each polling station. Additionally, observers have reported critical incidents whenever such incidents occurred. Stationary observers arrived as early as 5:30 am and remained in their selected polling stations until the counting process concluded. They reported their data to CECOIE's Data Center based in Addis Ababa via coded SMS messages. CECOIE collected information from mobile observers and observers deployed in IDP polling stations by calling observers in the field from the Data Center.

CECOIE used a systematic data collection methodology on election day, which allowed it to use standardized checklists prepared in several local languages to gather consistent information on the quality of the election across all areas where citizens cast some sort of vote on 30 September 2021. This systematic data collection methodology allows CECOIE to derive a picture about the quality of the elections in different parts of the country. In addition to these standard checklists, CECOIE stationary election day observers were trained to immediately send in special "critical incident"



reports if they witnessed any serious issue that threatened the integrity of the voting and counting process or the security of voters, electoral officers or other vulnerable groups participating in the elections.

This preliminary statement provides highlights of CECOIE's election observation findings relating to the conduct of the elections. This preliminary statement includes an update on some of the information already made available to the public in a CECOIE Situation update press statement issued on 30 September 2021, regarding the polling station setup and opening processes, as well as makes some comparisons to the data collected from CECOIE observers on June 21.

Summary of Observation Findings

CECOIE's preliminary analysis of its observer reports provides independent and nonpartisan information on the conduct of the polls as observed by its deployed observers. The following preliminary findings are based on the reports of 944 observers deployed in every region holding elections. In addition, and as indicated above, CECOIE collected reports on critical incidents from 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

The arrival of electoral officers at polling stations is the first important step on election day. In order to open polling stations ahead of the 6 AM deadline, electoral officers must be at polling stations earlier than this time. To assess if officers got to polling stations in a reasonable time to open polling stations, CECOIE observers were instructed to arrive at polling stations by 5:30 AM. Most (97%) of observers reported that when they arrived at their respective polling stations, electoral officers were present preparing to open polling stations.



A majority of observers (98%) also reported that they were allowed to observe the election day process after presenting their NEBE issued accreditation badge. In this regard, CECOIE commends the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia for issuing timely and accurate accreditation badges in this round of election. However, the Coalition also would like to underline an issue observers sometimes faced on election day because of the lack of knowledge by NEBE officers about the requirements to observe an election. As noted in its election day Situational Press Release,¹ CECOIE observers reported isolated incidents across the three regions where observers were denied access to polling stations despite having observation badges in places like Dawro special woreda in the SNNP region, Babile in the Harari regional state as well as a Harari National Assembly polling station established around Legehar, Addis Ababa. Again, the NEBE's cooperation must be noted here because in all these cases once CECOIE reported cases of denial to access the polling stations, all incidents were quickly solved.

Opening of Polling Stations

According to the NEBE, polling stations are supposed to be open for voters from 6 AM to at least 6 PM. Recognizing the importance of observing these opening and closing times, CECOIE collected information in this regard and assessed the environment in which polling stations were opened for voting. According to reports by CECOIE observers, 98% of polling stations were open for voting by 7 AM. One other finding is related to the presence of campaigning or campaigning materials near or inside polling stations. A majority of observers (99%) reported that there were no campaigning materials present at polling stations in compliance with the cool-off period in the Ethiopian electoral law, which dictates that 4 days prior to the election campaigning is not allowed, as well as campaigning materials being forbidden within 200 meters of the polling station.

¹ <https://www.cecoe.org/>



Setup of Polling Stations

Another key component of an electoral process is the proper setup of polling stations for voters to cast their ballots. In addition to its importance to the integrity of the electoral process, the setup of polling stations is also important in the context of the coronavirus pandemic. Therefore, CECOIE observers reported on procedural and COVID19 related questions upon arriving and accessing polling stations. The following are some of the findings from reports collected by CECOIE from observers on election day:

- To guarantee that voters can access polling stations and cast their votes easily, it is essential for the NEBE to establish polling stations in areas accessible to all persons. CECOIE observers reported on election day that 96% of polling stations were established in locations that were accessible to persons with disabilities and mobility challenges (such as the elderly, persons with disabilities, women carrying children). Similarly, observers also reported that 97% of polling stations were established in locations that are equally accessible to both male and female voters coming to cast their ballots. It must be noted here that while findings related to the equal accessibility of polling stations to women and men voters is consistent with the June 2021 observation findings, there is a significant improvement when it comes to accessibility of polling stations for persons with disabilities, which stood only at 87% in the June elections as compared to the 96% reported in this round of voting.
- Regarding the presence of electoral officers, NEBE requires at least 3 electoral officers to be present at polling stations for voting to commence. CECOIE observers reported on election day that an average of 4 officers were present at polling stations at the time voting started, of which 37% were women. In addition to this, data collected by the Coalition suggests that 11% of the polling stations visited by observers had no women serving as electoral officers despite the NEBE stipulating that there must be at least one female electoral officer in all polling stations. Finally, in 23% of polling stations women served as polling stations chairpersons.



- The availability of essential electoral materials throughout election day at polling stations is critical to the conduct of the electoral process. In the period leading up to the elections, the NEBE has the responsibility to make sure all essential materials in appropriate quantities are present in polling stations thus allowing all registered voters to cast their ballots. Almost all (99%) of CECOIE's observers reported that electoral materials such as ballot papers, ballot boxes, ballot box seals, official NEBE stamps, indelible ink and Reconciliation and Results forms were present at polling stations when voting commenced. In June, one of the challenges on election day was different electoral materials being missing, inaccurate or insufficient in several parts of the country.² In comparison, the NEBE managed to make sure that accurate and sufficient materials were available at polling stations for the 30 September election.
- Another finding from CECOIE's observation reports is the amount of party agents present at polling stations when the polling station opened. In 77% of polling stations visited by CECOIE, party agents were present. However, it is also important to note that in polling stations that only held referendum voting the number of political party agents present at polling stations was significantly lower, dropping to 40%.
- The coronavirus pandemic is another thematic area which was assessed by observers deployed to polling stations on 30 September 2021. CECOIE asked questions related to the compliance with COVID19 protocols in relation to the set-up of polling stations. Observers reported on both the outside and inside of polling stations, asking if these polling stations were set up in a manner that allowed for social distancing to be observed by voters in the process of casting their ballots. According to reports on these aspects of the election, 89% of polling station queues were set up in a manner that allowed voters to social distance as they await their turn to vote. With regards to the inside of the polling station, 96% of polling stations were set up in a manner that ensured social distancing during the voting process.

² Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society for Election (CECOIE), A Press Release Regarding the Commencement of Voting in Polling Stations [<https://www.cecgie.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Election-2021-Preliminary-findings-EN.pdf>] (23 June 2021)



The Voting Process

After polling stations open and are set up by electoral officers, the next integral step in the electoral process is the voting process. On 30 September 2021, most polling stations were opened by 7 AM as noted above, staying open for voting until 6 PM in polling stations across Somali and parts of the SNNP regional state where voters cast ballots for regular House of People's Representatives (HoPR) or Regional Council elections. However, due to long queues throughout the day, voting was extended until 8:00 PM in the Harari Regional State election and those polling stations where referendum voting was taking place in the SNNP region. Observers remained at polling stations throughout the day assessing the voting process in both areas where voting ended on time and areas that had to vote after the 6 PM deadline had passed. The following are findings from observation reports on the voting process on election day.

- Accredited observers have the right to access polling stations throughout the voting process. The one reason observers may be legitimately asked to leave the polling stations is related to the coronavirus pandemic protocols, where the NEBE may ask observers and party agents to rotate their presence in the polling station in order to maintain social distance. In line with this rule, CECOE observers were not asked to leave the polling station at any time in the day in 98% of the cases, apart from 23 incidents in which observers were asked to temporarily leave the polling station due to reasons related to COVID19. Compared to the voting process in June, when there were 12 incidents in which observers were asked to leave polling stations for reasons unrelated to COVID19, there were no similar reports from observers similar to this on 30 September. Observers reported no unauthorized personnel were present at polling stations throughout the voting process.
- To ensure the inclusion of all citizens in the election process, voters who cannot vote unaided are allowed to receive priority access to the polling station and assistance from a person of their choosing. Most (98%) observers reported that persons with disabilities or mobility challenges were given priority access in the queue, and in most cases when they required assistance (96%), they were able to receive it from a person of their choice. Other



voters, including pregnant women or those unable to read the electoral materials, were allowed to receive assistance to move around the polling station or cast their votes at 9% of observed polling stations.

- Regarding the findings related to the procedural aspects of the observation, 20% of observers reported at least one incident in which indelible ink was not being applied to voters before voting. In a majority of polling stations (95%), ballot papers were being stamped by electoral officers before being given to voters, while 5% cases suggest that officers stamped voters' ballots some of the time or did not stamp ballots at all. One significant improvement is that while in June the ballots were not stamped at all in 9% of polling stations, this figure decreased in this round of voting to 3%. CECOE's preliminary findings also show that in 90% of polling stations visited by CECOE the secrecy of voting was maintained throughout the voting process, while 99% of observers reported that the ballot box was placed in a visible place during the entirety of voting.
- On election day, only voters who appear on the voter roll can cast their ballot in the polling station they were registered in. As such, officers are tasked with the duty to return anyone that is not on the voter roll and admit all voters that registered to vote by the NEBE. CECOE observers reported that in 9% of polling stations at least one voter was allowed to vote even though they were not on the voter roll. CECOE observers also reported that in 34% of polling stations at least one voter was turned away despite being on the voter roll. This is concerning given that this situation results in the denial of a citizen's political rights. Furthermore, CECOE observation findings suggest that this problem was less prevalent in areas only conducting referendum voting, which recorded this situation in only 19% of polling stations observed by the Coalition.
- In accordance with the NEBE electoral directive, voting is supposed to end at 6 PM. Polling stations must stay open until 6 PM to make sure all voters are able to cast their ballots on election day. In 85% of the polling stations visited by observers on election day, polling stations were closed between 6 PM and 7 PM, whereas 15% of polling stations were closed between 7 PM and 9 PM. Another important procedural requirement related to the closing of polling stations is making sure all voters who were on the queue at 6 PM vote even if



closing time has passed. In 52% of polling stations visited by CECOIE there weren't any voters on the queue, whereas 47% of observation reports stated that voters on the queue at 6PM were allowed to cast their ballots in accordance with NEBE directives.

- Regarding the COVID19, in 72% of polling stations visited by CECOIE electoral officers applied face masks during the entirety of the voting process, while 27% of voters applied face masks partially during voting. Similarly, CECOIE also assessed the level of compliance by voters. About 34% of reports suggested that voters applied masks during the entirety of the voting process while 55% of the reports provided that voters applied masks in some of the times during the election day. On the other hand, 12% of the reports have shown that voters never wore masks within polling stations. Finally, regarding face masks the NEBE has clearly stated that the lack of proper face masks cannot be used as a reason to turn voters away. In these circumstances, so long as voters can cover their mouth with some sort of cloth they can vote. According to reports collected by CECOIE however, in 7% of polling stations voters were in fact turned away because they were not wearing proper (surgical) face masks, even though they were using other kinds of face coverings. CECOIE believes this to be a very concerning matter.

The Counting Process

Counting is the final step on election day. After the closing of polling stations, electoral officers are tasked with the duty of making sure all ballots are accounted for and counting is done at polling stations except in circumstances where postponing counting is allowed by law. The following is a summary of the findings on counting from CECOIE observers.

- Like voting, observers are allowed to observe the counting process except for reasons related to the coronavirus pandemic which are considered as legitimate grounds to ask observers to temporarily leave polling stations during counting. About 19 observers (2%)



reported that they were asked to leave polling stations due to reasons related to COVID19 whereas a majority of observers (98%) were able to stay in polling stations to observe and report on the counting process.

- Almost all (99%) of observers said that counting of all ballots was conducted at polling stations after voting was concluded. Whenever counting occurred, most observers (99%) also reported that there was no interruption to the counting process once it started. In one isolated incident counting was interrupted for an hour because an electoral official fainted during the counting process and another incident of interruption because of heavy rain. Interference, intimidation or harassment at polling stations during the counting process was only reported by two CECOIE observers, with a majority of observers (99%) reporting that there was no form of interference, intimidation or harassment at polling stations during counting. One of the above two incidents of interference related to a party representative who refused to allow the voting process to be suspended until the following morning, despite a message from the NEBE allowing officials to follow the appropriate protocol and resume counting the following day, given the presence of persons with disabilities and pregnant women among the electoral officers.
- An average of three party agents were present at the polling stations CECOIE observers visited on election day. CECOIE observation reports show that on average there was about one complaint made at polling stations on election day, which is significantly low compared to June when the average of complaints made in each polling station visited was six. With regards to complaints, CECOIE would like to note that further conversations with selected observers seem to suggest that there were Grievance Hearing Committees established in polling stations which resolved several complaints on election day, with a few exceptions in which committees were not established in polling stations according to some observation reports.
- Speaking to some procedural findings related to counting, CECOIE observers reported that in 97% of polling stations visited, electoral officers used consistent criteria to determine the validity of ballots throughout the counting process. In addition, 97% of observation



reports claimed that marks made by voters on electoral ballots were clearly visible as electoral officers displayed and counted ballots on election day. Finally, CECOIE observers also noted that the Reconciliation and Results Forms (RRF) were posted outside the polling station in 98% of the polling stations, which is a significant improvement from the June elections, when only 73% of polling stations posted the RRF.

Reporting on Critical Incidents

In addition to collecting data on the voting and counting process in polling stations across the three regions under CECOIE's current observation exercise, the Coalition also collected critical incidents on election day. Incident types observers are asked to look out for on election day include not being allowed to observe, the establishment of polling stations in forbidden locations, absence or shortage of electoral materials, the suspension of voting and counting and other procedural and security related issues.

During the June elections, CECOIE received significant numbers of critical incidents throughout the voting and counting process. For the election which took place on 30 September 2021, 26 critical incidents reported by CECOIE observers were verified by the data center. The decline of critical incidents reported by observers from June to September is partly due to the significant difference in the magnitude of the two voting rounds of the 6th National and Regional Elections of Ethiopia as well as the improved quality of the elections in September compared to the June round of voting. However, observers did report serious incidents on several occasions which are summarized below.

- Denial of access to polling stations was one of the incidents reported by CECOIE observers on election day. Several observers deployed in the Kaffa and Dawro zones of the SNNP region, the Harari regional state, the Fafen zone of the Somali region and a Harari Regional Assembly voting station established in Addis Ababa were denied access upon presenting their NEBE issued accreditation badges. While all these situations were resolved following



conversations with the NEBE, CECOIE would like to note, especially the incident that happened in the Dawro zone, where an observer was denied access by a police officer and detained from 05:30 am to 11:00 am. CECOIE is pleased the situation was quickly solved but calls on the NEBE and other government bodies to understand as well as implement requirements to allow observers access to polling stations.

- Another critical incident reported by CECOIE was related to multiple voting which was reported on three occasions in the Wolayta zone located in the SNNP region of Ethiopia. In one incident, the observer reported that there were five individuals who voted repeatedly, with one of the individuals voting at least 20 times according to the observer. Another observer from the same region also reported that three people were repeatedly voting at least two or three times at the same polling station while another observer reported witnessing multiple voting by the same person.
- It is known that even though polling stations are supposed to close at 6 PM, voters who are on the queue by 6 PM must be allowed to cast their ballots even after the official closing time. Contrary to this rule, an incident was reported from the Somali region, where 20 persons who were on the queue before 6 PM were not allowed to vote. Considering the seriousness of disenfranchising voters, CECOIE emphasises the importance of emphasizing this practice when training polling station officers.
- Another incident reported by observers deployed in Jigjiga, Somali region related to the secrecy of the voting process. In this particular incident, the observer reported that in one of the rooms at the polling station meant to serve voters to mark their ballots in secrecy, there was a person sitting there throughout the day. The observer further noted that the ballot box was also not placed in the common space visible to voters, officers and observers. Rather, it was located in the same room where voters were marking their ballots and the person claiming to work for the NEBE was sitting in.

These and other critical incidents received by CECOIE while isolated, highlight some of the key challenges associated with the conduct of the election. The Coalition has been reporting cases to the NEBE whenever it believes the board can intervene and provide solutions.



IDP Settlement Voting

One of the most interesting aspects of this round of voting was the decision by the NEBE to hold elections in the Qoloji IDP Settlement site, where some citizens have been displaced since 2016. Recognizing the importance of enfranchising internally displaced persons, CECOE trained and deployed seven observers including members of its assessment team to assess the voting and counting process in the 41 polling stations established in the Qoloji Settlement site. CECOE observers were deployed as mobile observers allowing them to conduct assessment in 23 polling stations using standard election day checklists and a specialized IDP questionnaire throughout election day. Even though CECOE is still analyzing and verifying information from observers in the field, below are some of the key findings from observations conducted by CECOE observers.

According to the NEBE, IDP voting is one of the types of voting categorized as special voting in Ethiopia. According to reports from the 7 mobile observers deployed to IDP polling stations, all 41 polling stations were located inside the IDP settlement, with observers stating that they did not witness persons out of the settlement casting their votes whenever observers were present at a particular polling station. Some voters informed CECOE observers that voter registration was conducted by the NEBE prior to election day using Identification Cards issued by the IDP camp clearly stipulating that they are internally displaced persons. Voting commenced after 7 AM according to CECOE's assessment team, who also reported that when they arrived electoral officers were still in the process of finalizing preparations when observers arrived at polling stations.

Generally, the election that took place in the Qoloji IDP Settlement Camp is a step forward to make sure elections are all inclusive and no voter is disenfranchised. CECOE commends the NEBE for executing an election in the context of an IDP camp, and efforts of settlement authorities to encourage IDPs to vote. However, observers also reported some procedural disparities and other challenges in the voting and counting process conducted in the Qoloji IDP camp. Procedurally



speaking, even when special communities such as IDPs vote, ballots from their place of origin are supposed to be used for voting (just as university students and military personnel voting). However, in this particular case voters cast their ballots for candidates running in the host community. Another challenge noted by CECOIE observers was that most voters did not know how to mark their ballots or execute other important procedural aspects of the election due to a high level of illiteracy among the community residing in the IDP camp. This resulted in high levels of assisted voting in the camp according to reports gathered from observers. Finally, one observation by CECOIE's ground team was that because of lack of preparation in some polling stations, party agents played active roles in the execution of some aspects of the election. CECOIE observers declined invitations by polling officers to actively participate in the election process, in accordance with international principles of citizen election observers..

Conclusion

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOIE) deployed 956 stationary and 37 mobile observers for the 30 September 2021 elections, including 7 mobile observers in IDP settlements. The coalition has observed the positive and negative aspects of the voting and counting process on 30 September 2021.

The Coalition believes the voting on 30 September 2021 had significant improvements compared to the elections held on 21 June 2021 in the following areas:

1. The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) has made adequate preparations for the elections, especially in the areas of providing sufficient electoral materials and providing observation badges to the Coalition in a timely and accurate manner;
2. The National Election Board of Ethiopia made necessary effort to have internally displaced persons exercise their political rights - specifically the right to vote - by holding elections in the Qoloji IDP Settlement site;
3. In most of the constituencies where the elections took place, the voting process started and ended in the NEBE stipulated time. The elections in Harari, which required additional



voting hours, and the referendum in the southwestern region of Ethiopia, were provided an additional 2 hours for citizens to exercise their voting rights;

4. The Coalition's observers were able to deploy and observe the proceedings as provided by NEBE's directive for citizens election observation. In addition, CECOE received cooperation from NEBE to quickly resolve the challenges that CECOE faced in its deployment for observation.

Despite the above mentioned positive aspects of NEBE's efforts there are gaps that need to be addressed by the board as well.

1. In some polling stations that were observed by the coalition, the lack of capacity of polling station officials was noticed. On two occasions in the IDP polling stations, the Coalition's observers were asked to provide assistance to electoral officials conducting implementations of the election process;
2. In some polling stations visited by CECOE observers, officers appointed by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) denied observers access to observe despite observers presenting NEBE issued accreditation badges. In one instance an observer was arrested temporarily by local security personnel upon attempting to access a polling station despite the required accreditation badge being on his person;
3. An observer reported that the voter roll was missing in one polling station located in the Wolaita Zone of the SNNP Regional State as well as other observers deployed in the same zone reporting repeated voting in some polling stations. The Coalition calls on the NEBE to further investigate these incidents;
4. According to information received from an observer in Jigjiga, Somali region, an individual was present throughout the day in the room designated for voters to mark their ballots in secret. The observer also reported that the ballot box in this polling station was not placed in a visible place for voters, observers and polling station officers to see at all times;



5. Although the coalition worked closely with the board during its pre-election preparations, in some cases (such as the location of the special polling stations for IDPs and other related issues) it was unable to obtain the necessary information in time from the NEBE;
6. While observing the election in the IDP centers, the coalition noted some limitations related to voter capacity. The coalition believes that all concerned bodies should work towards bolstering the capacity of voters in order to allow them to effectively participate in the exercise of their political right to vote.

In addition to the issues mentioned above that need to be addressed, the coalition noticed that the number of representatives of political parties in the polling stations was low. This indicates a low turnout of political parties in the September Election.

In addition to the information collected from the Coalition's observers on the election day, CECO will continue to verify information collected on pre-election findings as well as collecting information on the post election environment. The Coalition will issue a comprehensive report with recommendations after comprehensively analyzing the 21 June 2021 and 30 September 2021 rounds of voting.

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Election

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

04 October 2021