



# **CECOE September 30 Pre-elections Observation Report**

## **Introduction**

Since March, the Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations (CECOE) has been observing various aspects of Ethiopia's 6th General Election process, including the voter registration, the pre- and post-electoral environment, as well as the election day process that took place on June 21, 2021. Given that various regions and locales were unable to participate in the June election due to logistical and/or security challenges, the NEBE re-scheduled elections in some of these locations to take place on September 30<sup>th</sup>. Accordingly, CECOE recruited, trained, and deployed 41 long-term observers (LTO) for those constituencies that did not conduct the elections (e.g. Harar Region, Somali Region, limited zones in Benishangul-Gumuz, Oromia, Amhara and SNNPR) in order to assess the pre-election period. However, after the NEBE announced that there would be no voting in September in the Benishangul Gumuz, Amhara and Oromia regions due to security concerns, CECOE focused its pre-election observation at the Harari, Somali and SNNP regions, which is reflected in the current report.

Since 10 August 2021, LTOs have monitored electoral activities such as voter education and information, political campaign activities, activities of marginalized groups (youth, women, and persons with disabilities), election-related violence, and the use of hate speech and language that may incite violence. CECOE's observers were also trained to report any critical incidents they witnessed or heard of immediately. While CECOE's data center received 279 reports between 10 August 2021 and 9 September 2021 - because only the Harari, Somali and SNNP regions are voting on September 30 2021- the following report is based on 191 reports received from observers deployed in the above regions.

## **Observation Findings**

For the current pre-election monitoring exercise, CECOE used standardized checklists including questions on monitoring the campaigning process, preparatory actions by the NEBE, voter



education, intimidation of voters or electoral workers and civic space in the period leading up to the September 2021 elections. Observers also completed critical incidents whenever the situation required so using forms given to them by the coalition. The following are findings from the aforementioned observation reports sent to CECOIE by observers.

### ***Campaigning for the September 2021 Elections***

Campaigning forms an integral part of proceedings leading up to any election. But campaigning should not just be understood to be a part of an election. Instead, it's an integral component of the right to vote and the right to be elected as well as other political rights such as the freedom of association, the freedom of assembly and the freedom of expression. Recognizing this, CECOIE monitored the manner in which election campaigns were being conducted in areas expected to vote come September 2021. The first important finding to note with regards to campaigning is that 43% of reports suggest that there was no campaigning in the constituencies observers were deployed to monitor, whereas 57% of observers reported that there was no media coverage of campaigning activities. Reading these figures together with the aforementioned importance of campaigning activities to the integrity and completeness of any election, CECOIE believes this is a concerning indicator when talking about campaigning activities for the September 2021 elections. However - whenever campaigning took place - it was generally peaceful and inclusive of women and youth as captured in the figures below:

- While there was a general lack of campaigning in the parts of the country monitored by CECOIE prior to the election, only 5% of reports by observers stated that campaigns were banned by the government. Interestingly, all reports of campaigning activities banned were from the Somali region, capturing the distinct pre-election environment in the regional state.
- Regarding inclusion - wherever campaigning took place - 67% of observers reported that that campaigning promoted the active participation of women. Similarly, whenever there were campaigning activities 70.91% of observation reports stated that campaigning promoted youth participation and 60% of reports claimed that the campaigning in the respective constituencies promoted the participation of persons with disabilities in the electoral process. Additionally, 62.3% of observers from areas that had campaigned



reported that campaigns also called for the participation of civil society actors in the September elections, which is encouraging statistics for a coalition such as CECOIE.

- A majority of observation reports (94%) stated that there was minimal intervention by security forces during campaigning activities whenever campaigning took place. Concurrently in 95% of reports analyzed by the coalition, incidents of hate speech, misinformation, insults, threats or intimidation did not form part of the campaigning. According to 5% of the reports all incidents reported that relate to misinformation or intimidation occurred in the Somali regional state. Finally, though a similar percentage of the reports received by the coalition (about 95%) reported that there were no incidents of loss of life, bodily harm or property damage related to campaigning activities, the remaining 5% of the reports have indicated occurrences of damages to body and property.
- Finally, the coalition has observed that precautionary measures to mitigate the transmission of the coronavirus pandemic were not observed in areas that conducted campaigning, a common theme of the June elections that seems to have crossed over to the September elections. According to 78% of reports collected by the coalition, Covid-19 mitigation measures were not observed during campaigning activities which are known to attract large numbers of people.

### ***The NEBE's Preparation for September Voting***

As a coalition working on election observation and voter education, timelines of activities by the NEBE and their execution directly affects the activities CECOIE carries out. However, the importance of the NEBE's preparatory activities is not limited to the convenience of stakeholders such as CECOIE. To the contrary, it is indicative of what to expect on election day when voting commences. Recognizing this, CECOIE designed questions to allow it to gauge the preparation of the NEBE ahead of the September elections. However, before sharing findings on this it must be noted that CECOIE observers were deployed at the beginning of August under the impression that voting would take place on September 6 in places where elections did not take place in June. Consequently, this may be the reason behind the less favorable numbers reflected below regarding the preparation of the NEBE.



About 51% of reports received by CECOIE from Harari, Somali, Amhara and Benishangul regions have indicated that preparatory activities by the NEBE made the electoral process conducive for political parties, voters and other stakeholders. In this regard, even though CECOIE does not have enough information to make systematic comparisons among regions, in places such as the Benishangul Gumuz region (74%) and the Amhara region (79%) the percentage of locations where observers reported that the NEBE preparations were not conducive for stakeholders stood higher than the overall average (49%). This is consistent with the subsequent announcement by the NEBE that voting would not take place in the Benishangul Gumuz region and parts of the Amhara regional state which did not cast votes in June. The training of electoral officials is a key preparatory activity for any electoral body. Of the 171 reports received and analyzed by the coalition, 64% stated that observers did not hear or see training sessions being conducted for electoral officials in their respective constituencies. Concurrently, 63% of observation reports stated that electoral materials were not distributed by the NEBE in the constituencies visited by the NEBE. However, it must be noted here that CECOIE observers were deployed early in the electoral cycle due to the last-minute changes to the electoral timeline by the NEBE.

### ***Civic Space, Intimidation of Voters and Electoral Workers, and Voter Education***

Another important element of any pre-election process is the civic space leading up to election day. In this light, CECOIE monitored the civic space in the pre-election environment from the perspective of civil society, journalists, political parties and other stakeholders. The coalition also had a section of its monitoring checklist devoted to voter education, which is a key indicator of the pre-election civic space. The following are findings from reports sent by observers from the Harari, Somali and SNNP regions on the civic space leading up to the election and voter education activities:

- All reports received by the coalition except one from the Somali region stated that there was no visible infringement by the government or other bodies on the activities of civil society organizations. Concurrently, no reports of abuse or attack against civil society organizations working on election were received by the NEBE. This may seem like an encouraging statistic at first glance. However, when one considers that 76% of reports by observer's state that there were no voter education activities by Civil Society Organizations in the reporting period, it suggests that interference might have been low in part because active participation of CSOs was lacking. Similarly, pre-election reports collected by



CECOE suggest that political parties and journalists were generally not banned from doing their work or harmed in the process of doing their work, with the Somali region being the only one reporting infringement on journalists on seven occasions and some sort of harm to journalists on one occasion. Similarly, it was only the Somali region which reported infringement on the work of political candidates on two occasions, while some form of harm to political candidates reported on one occasion by observers from the region.

- Voter education conducted by media organizations as well as in the form of campaigns was also immensely low in the reporting period according to post election observers deployed by CECO, with 74% of reports stating that voter education was not conducted on media outlets or through campaigns in areas voting on September 21, 2021. This is concerning because voter education is a key tool to make sure people exercise their right to vote and they do so in the proper manner.
- Whenever voter education took place in areas covered by CECO observers, voter education encouraged gender inclusion and participation according to 38.6% of reports shared by CECO observers, whereas in 28 reports observers believed that voter education called for the equal participation of persons with disabilities in the voting process. On the other hand, 39.1% of the reports stated that voter education targeted the inclusion of voters from all ages. It is important to mention at this point that it is difficult for the coalition to reach a conclusion about the inclusivity of voter education for the September elections because in most areas' voter education was not conducted or it was conducted minimally.
- Regarding intimidation of stakeholders to the electoral process such as voters, electoral officials and political parties, most of the reports received by CECO were positive rather than negative. Before discussing the figures however, CECO would like to once again state that the observation was implemented earlier than the ideal period under the understanding that voting would be on September 6. CECO understands that this could be the reason behind such low amounts of incidents being reported by observers during the pre-election period. Speaking to the data, voter intimidation was only reported on one occasion in the Somali region while the same region reported the six cases in which female observers were targeted for their political views. Encouragingly, in 93% of reports sent to the coalition ethnic and religion-based intimidation, insult and degrading comments were not present in the reporting period.



## **Recommendations**

As noted in the above summary of findings, CECOIE, like many partners of the NEBE, depends immensely on knowing where elections will take place, and when key pre-election and post-election activities take place. This requires continuous communication between the NEBE and civil society organizations like CECOIE in order to allow the effective planning of observation activities. The current report is an appropriate depiction of this fact. The fact that CECOIE rolled out its pre-election activities at the beginning of August with the understanding that voting would take place on September 6, 2021 has significantly impacted the data it collected and the confidence it lays upon it. However, based on the findings above CECOIE poses the following recommendations to the NEBE ahead of voting next week:

- The NEBE should issue and communicate its electoral timeline in due course as well as sharing important decisions such as the decision not to hold elections in the Benishangul, Amhara and Oromia regions at an earlier period than it is currently used to. This allows for CSO actors such as CECOIE to design and implement effective projects as well as effectively using resources in areas where elections would take place. The NEBE therefore must adapt more dynamic and effective means of communication with its partners in the future.
- The Somali region reported almost all of the concerning data speaking to the sensitive nature of the pre-election environment in the region. The intimidation of voters and electoral workers, violence related to campaigning and the prohibition of campaigning activities were all reported predominantly in the Somali region. This speaks to the level of attention required with regards to the region on election day and the period following election day. The NEBE along with other relevant authorities must take measures to ensure the implementation of a free, fair and stable election.



- Granted, civil society and the media may have increased their engagement in the later weeks of September. However, the immensely low levels of voter education in the three regions under observation in the reporting period is a concerning statistics speaking towards the limited engagement of civil society in the education of voters as well as the election in general. CECOIE believes that while it would have been ideal to implement its project closer to the election, it does not mean that the limited engagement of civil society in voter education activities during the reporting period is not concerning. The data points towards a rushed engagement of voters by CSOs limited to the weeks leading up to the election as opposed to a targeted and continuous education of voters. Civil society must correct this way and utilize the relatively open civic space currently available to leave lasting marks on the electoral process of the country.
- COVID19 remains to be a continuous shortcoming in regards to the current election with campaigning and voter education activities as well as preparatory activities by the NEBE reportedly not applying the precautionary measures necessary to combat the virus and its capacity to spread. This had been an area of improvement for the NEBE throughout the June elections and remains a strong area of improvement for the board as the September election day approaches.

## **Conclusion**

The Coalition of Ethiopia Civil Society Organizations for Election (CECOIE) plans to deploy over 940 observers on 30 September 2021 in the Somali and Harari regions as well as parts of the SNNP region casting their votes for regular elections or the referendum in the South West Ethiopia part of the country. On election day, CECOIE will collect reports from these observers on the opening and setup of polling stations as well as the voting and counting process in all parts of the country. CECOIE encourages citizens to participate peacefully in the upcoming elections taking place on 30 September 2021.