

Sidama Referendum

The National Election Board of Ethiopia has been organizing re-elections, by elections and referendums according to the constitution and election laws adopted at different times. Ever since its establishment, the Board has organized six referendums. Article 11 of the new Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Election's Code of Conduct Proclamation No.1162/2019 declares that the National Election Board of Ethiopia has the authority to organize referenda.

Referendum legal framework

Article 11- 1162/2019

1. When an appropriate body decides based on the constitution or other laws, the Board shall organize a referendum to assess public interest or know the decision of the public.
2. The Board, in consultation with the body which decided the holding of the referendum, shall conduct the referendum by organizing polling stations in a way convenient to execute the referendum.
3. The Board shall, in consultation with the constitutionally authorized body, determine the polling date, the voters' criteria to participate in a referendum, the choices to be put on the ballot paper and the types and contents of campaigns relating to a referendum.
4. Details shall be determined by a directive to be issued by the Board.

According to this proclamation, the following are requirements for voting in a referendum.

Requirements to register as a voter:

- Must be an Ethiopian citizen;
- Must be a resident of woredas and kebeles in Sidama zone;
- Must be 18 years of age or older on the day of registration;
- Must have resided for at least six months in the kebele;
- The registrant of the referendum can register to vote by presenting a document that shows his/her residence and proof of identity.
- The referendum officers have to confirm the residency of the registrant.

The following are ineligible to register as a voter:

- Not a citizen of Ethiopia;
- Under the age of 18 at the time of registration and those who lived for less than six months in the area of polling station;
- A person who is proved to be incapable of making decisions due to mental disorder as confirmed by the relevant authority or sufficient evidence;
- A person whose voting rights have been restricted by the decision of a court of law based on law or relevant law.

Sidama Referendum

The Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Representatives, via a letter (hፖ/አ/9/7092/2011) written on 21/11/2018, requested the Board to organize a referendum to establish Sidama as a state.

The Board conducted a successful referendum on November 20, 2019 by making various preparations, developing an implementation plan and engaging various stakeholders.

The election that took place on November 20 was peaceful and had no significant logistical problem. Although there were long queues in some polling stations due to the high number of voters, it was completed as planned. On polling day, the Board members conducted field trips and furthermore vote counting was completed and posted outside polling stations. Various corrective measures were also taken following complaints by voters. On December 4, 2019, The Board announced the final results of the Sidama referendum to the public in the table presented below.

| Type of information | number | percentage |
|---|---------------|-------------------|
| Number of registered voters | 2,304,577 | |
| Number of voters who cast their ballot | 2,279,022 | 98.8911 % |
| Number of voters who didn't vote | 25,555 | 1.10888 % |
| Number of voters who voted for "Shafeta" (for the statehood of Sidama) | 1,984,283 | 97.7% |
| Number of voters who voted for "Gojo" (for Sidama to stay under the SNNPR administration) | 30,018 | 1.478 % |
| Canceled ballots | 248,097 | |
| Invalid ballots | 16,624 | |

Sidama referendum preparations

Public consultations

According to the Sidama Referendum implementation plan, which was already developed, the National Election Board of Ethiopia held a discussion on September 18, 2019 with various law enforcement officers, security forces and board members to ensure the peaceful implementation of the referendum.

A discussion took place with representatives of the Federal Police; the SNNPR police commission representatives; the regional command post director; Hawassa city police commander; Sidama zone police commander; the regional administration and security officials.

An agreement was reached among the law enforcement bodies, who participated in the discussion, to develop a referendum security plan that shows security issues that may arise; the remedies that must be taken; and the body responsible for the task in the implementation plan (the referendum preparations, voting and post referendum) and to present the same on October 4, 2019. On the appointed date of October 4, the referendum security plan was presented and a joint discussion was held.

The National Election Board of Ethiopia's discussion with regional and zonal stakeholders regarding the Sidama referendum

As per the action plan, there were discussions to be held with various stakeholders regarding the Sidama referendum, to this end the National Election Board of Ethiopia held a meeting on September 5, 2019 with the SNNPR council, the regional administration and the zonal representatives.

Timetable

The NEBE prepared a referendum timetable, which it presented to the relevant regional and zonal governing bodies and revealed the same to the public. Accordingly, the budget needed to execute the referendum was approved by the regional administration. In order to conduct the referendum peacefully, it also prepared administrative and legal framework following the request of the regional council for the protection of the rights of other ethnic groups living in the zone and the division of property between the existing and the newly created region, if the voting turnout was "to establish Sidama as a region".

Polling stations

In the pre-referendum preparation phase, the Board's experts conducted a field research and compiled data of polling stations.

Accordingly, 1692 polling stations were set up and additional 169 polling stations were set up after voter registration. A referendum security plan to ensure peace and security was developed and presented by the region's; the zone's; Hawassa city administration's; Federal security agencies and administrative agencies.

Referendum officers

A total of 6,843 referendum officers were recruited from Addis Ababa and Oromia region and deployed to the zones to execute the referendum with neutrality and according to the law. All referendum officers were trained on how to execute the referendum. The training was given for five days by 20 master trainers who previously took training of trainers. All referendum officers were given a printed copy of the referendum training manual.

Voting materials

The Board distributed 3,000 ballot boxes; and more than 2.5 million ballot papers and forms, including reserve voting materials with in the few days between the completion of voter registration and voting day.

Peace and security

The peace and security situation from the pre-referendum preparations to post referendum was being evaluated frequently by the joint committee and thus a peaceful referendum was conducted.

In the referendum process, the Board used various methods to collect data regarding peace and security and thus conducted field researches in Hawassa city and polling stations in other woredas.

The Board Members visited few kebeles with disputed areas and history of previous conflict, to discuss the issue with the community and kebele administration. In addition, a platform that included the security officials from the Sidama zone and SNNPR, the Federal police and the army was established to ensure the peaceful execution of the referendum.

Voter registration and informing the voter

In order to motivate voters to register for the referendum, briefing on the various registration requirements and information about the voting process were broadcast on radio and television. Various activities were undertaken to help prevent restrictions on the rights of citizens and ensure the peacefulness of the referendum.

Firstly, the Board members rectified shortcomings and operational gaps related to voter registration and voting by monitoring the voting process in Hawassa, Yirgalem, Wondo Genet and Belela. In addition, direct telephone lines (hotlines) have been publicized on mass media and social media to allow citizens to report on violations observed during the voting process, to the Board directly.

Voter Registration

Voter registration was carried out from November 7, 2019 to November 16, 2019 and the total number of registered voters were 2,304,577. The registration process was completed peacefully with the cooperation of the security forces of the zone and the region, the federal police and the army. Voter registration, conducted from November 7, 2019 to November 16, 2019, was open to all eligible citizens residing in the zone and Hawassa city.

Reforms made during voter registration

1. Regarding voter registration and documentation required to register, as per article 21 of the Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Election's Code of Conduct

Proclamation 1162/2019, the Board announced that any person who resided in the zone for six months and who are 18 years old can register by submitting one of the following:

- Kebele identification card, even if expired;
- Evidence of identity bearing a photograph of the voter (worker ID, driver's license, passport ...); However, if the ID cannot show the place of residence, the individual can be registered by presenting three witnesses with an ID.
- If he does not have any ID, he can register by bringing three witnesses, with resident ID, who can confirm his residency.

It has stated that any party, who does not agree with any of the voter registration process, has the right to appeal to the Grievance Hearing organ in the woreda and zone coordinators.

2. During the process, the Board made a number of corrections by collecting information to ensure that the registration process was safe and efficient, these were:
 - Among the reported gaps to the Board and its findings during various field visits, people who were not allowed to be within 200 meters radius of the polling stations and prohibited symbols were observed and the problems were rectified accordingly.
 - The Board informed the Sidama Zone and Hawassa Town Administration that kebele, woreda and public administration institutions workers are not allowed to be in the polling station.
 - Referendum officers have been briefed on few issues of offenses. As already announced by the Board, referendum officers who committed a major offense, like taking home the voters' card was fired and another was arrested and investigated for trying to flee the area with the electoral roll.
3. A member of the city administration, who was found to be interfering with the observers' activities, has been charged by the federal government for disrupting the election process.
4. Among the suggestions given through a hotline introduced by the Board, the major one was to address lack of information required to register. The registration requirements were made clear in their details to the referendum officers. Promotional activities were undertaken in various media organizations to further clarify the registration requirements. Kebeles with frequent complaints against them were monitored by coordinators.
5. With regard to the administrative boundaries, the Board sought to resolve the complaint by consulting with community members and the Sidama zone leaders in Wondogenet, which shares a boundary with the West Arsi Zone, Edo woreda polling station 1. As a result, the polling station was merged with "polling station 2" in the same kebele. This decision has considered the safety of the referendum officers and has helped maintain the peace of the process. A one-day voter registration that was terminated in this process was carried out on November 17, 2019.
6. The Board, by identifying the polling stations with a high number of registered voters, set up additional 175 stations on polling day, which were located next to the pre-existing polling station to speed up the voting process and conduct it on time.

Referendum observers

To ensure the peacefulness, fairness and transparency of the referendum process and in order to take lessons for future events, accreditation to observe and report was given to 128 civil society observers and 74 local and foreign media journalists. In addition, in collaboration with the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, 20 observers of the Commission were instructed to observe the referendum.

The necessary support was given to the US government agencies and diplomats authorized by the Ethiopian government, to observe the referendum.

Referendum voting day

The Sidama referendum was peacefully conducted as planned. On voting day, the election took place between 6 am and 6 pm, however due to overcrowding in nine polling stations, the voting process was extended until 8 pm.

The Sidama referendum preliminary result

The total number of registered voters in the referendum was 2,280,147. Out of this, 2,277,063 people cast their ballot. This shows that the voter turnout on the Election Day was 99.96 percent.

The number of people who voted for the Sidama to stay in the existing region, “Gojo”, were 33,463, while the number of those who voted for Sidama to become an independent state, “Shafeta”, were 2,225,249. As a result, 98.51% of voters voted for ‘Shafeta’ while 1.48 percent voted for ‘Gojo’. The number of invalid votes were 18,351 (0.000002%). The Sidama referendum was carried out in a peaceful and legal manner according to article 47 (2) and (3) of the FDRE Constitution which states, "Every nation or nationality has the right to form its own territory". Sidama was able to garner votes that allowed it to be established as a state based on the free will of residents of the Zone.

Sidama referendum final result

The Board announced the final result of its decision on December 4, 2019 after having reviewed the preliminary results in each polling station and having looked at polling stations with tabulation and other discrepancies.

Out of the total 1,972 and the additional 169 polling stations, the Board found various discrepancies in 235 polling stations. The problems included tabulation error occurred during the numbering process by referendum officers and discrepancy due to having higher number of voters registered as compared to the number of registered voters.

Though normally when such problems occur votes are recounted to determine the source of the problem, due to the wide difference between the options in the results of each options, the Board decided against recounting of votes in order to avoid delays in announcement of results as it would neither impact the results significantly nor the overall credibility of the process.

Accordingly, considering international result management experiences; the nature of the election; and the inconsistencies created in certain polling stations and after considering the limited influence on the vote, the Board looked at the status of affected sites and made the following decisions.

1. Discarded the results of 127 polling stations, where the number of votes were higher than the number of registered voters.
2. Out of the polling stations with errors in counting and tabulation, if the difference is 10 votes and below, the difference was considered to be of sound value; whereas, polling stations with cumulative difference of more than 10 votes were decided to be excluded. Accordingly, the result of the 37 polling stations was canceled due to a huge counting and tabulation error.

Overall, the results of 164 polling stations were canceled due to the two reasons mentioned above. In 71 polling stations, however, their results were maintained despite their error because the difference was less than 10 votes.

Result Description

- Total number of registered voters - 2,304,577
- Voter turnout - 2,279,022
- Percent - 98.8911%
- Voters who did not vote- 25,555
- Percentage - 1.10888%

The overall result

- Invalid ballot paper - 16, 624
- Vote for 'Shafeta' (for statehood of Sidama) - 1,984,283
- Percent: 97.7%
- Vote for Gojo (for Sidama to remain in the SNNPR Region) – 30,018
- Percentage: 1.478%
- Cancelled votes - 248,097

[You can see the results here](#)

Amendments implemented by the Board during the referendum process

- Local militia members had no role in maintaining security at polling stations;
- People were arrested for unlawful interference during the referendum;
- Efforts were made to get representatives from both options during voter registration and voting process;
- Missing referendum materials were provided quickly.

Challenges

The Board believes, given the short time for preparation, the referendum was successful and that the peaceful and legitimate execution of the referendum is a positive result. To this end, high integration in the process was the key to success. The execution process has given valuable lessons, but it also had internal weaknesses and external challenges. Therefore, it is worth raising the following:

- Responses were delayed on requests made by the Board to the Regional Council for the adoption of a legal framework (protection of minority groups; equitable distribution of wealth);
- Only one option was presented during campaigning and the region refused to assign representatives to observe the referendum process despite being repeatedly asked.
 - Lack of complete information regarding total number of populations needed in order to determine polling stations;
 - The presence of non-voters in certain polling stations in Hawassa and rural areas; the tendency to influence voters.
- Overcrowding of some polling stations due to large number of voters.
- Projection and disclosure of the outcome of the referendum were made by officials from Hawassa City and the Zone's administration ahead of official statement was made by the Board.
- In some polling stations, not adhering to the official opening and closing time of the polling station was a major challenge. The region's security institutions and Southern regional command of the FDRE National Defense highly cooperated in transporting, maintaining peace and order of the region; protecting officers during deployment and securing ballots after voting ended. Such integrated cooperation can be raised as a huge accomplishment during the referendum.

Statements related to Sidama's referendum can be downloaded below. (show)