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NATIONAL ELECTION BOARD OF ETHIOPIA

ከደምጽዎ የሚገመዱን!
TRUSTED FOR YOUR VOTE!

A report on the implementation and results of the Referendum held by the National Election Board of Ethiopia in Six Zones and Five special Woredas under the Southern Regional Government.



Introduction

The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), by virtue of the power vested in it by Article 7/1 of the NEBE Establishment Proclamation No. 1133/2019 and Article 11/1 of the Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Elections Code of Conduct Proclamation 1162/2019, was requested by the House of Federation in a letter dated 18/08/2022 (Ref. No. HoF/S15/80) to conduct a referendum in six zones (Konso, South Omo, Wolaita, Gamo, Gedeo, Gofa) and five special woredas (Burji, Basketo, Ale, Amaro, Dirashe) within SNNPR and announce the result. The Board issued a timetable for conducting the referendum and carried out the necessary pre-election activities. **Birr 410,100,000.00 (four hundred and ten million one hundred thousand birr)** was approved by the House of Peoples' Representatives for the execution of the referendum. After assessing the remaining operations, NEBE requested an additional budget of **31,000,700 (thirty-one million seven hundred birr)** and **Birr 25,000,000.00 (twenty-five million birr)** was approved and put into the operation. Accordingly, NEBE conducted the referendum in the zones and special woredas listed above on February 06, 2023.

I. Preparatory Activities

The Board began to fulfill its responsibility of implementing the referendum by approving guidelines for its implementation. In addition, NEBE organized various discussion forums with political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs), the regional government, the administrative bodies of the zones and the special woredas, as well as federal and regional security offices, and advised on issues important for the implementation of the referendum. Offices for conducting the referendum were opened at every level, with the main coordination office opened in the town of Arba Minch. Under this, six zone and five special woreda offices, 31 referendum coordination centers, and 3,771 polling stations were established.

➤ Recruitment of Election Officers

A call was announced to election officers who had been involved in the 6th National Elections and who were interested in participating in the referendum in order to implement the referendum. Online applications were made public to applicants for polling stations where previous election officers were unavailable. In order to confirm the neutrality of the election officers, their list was announced for public comment, and adjustments were made based on factual evidence presented by various stakeholders on the neutrality of the officers. The 17,651 election officers recruited by NEBE entered into a signed contract to implement the referendum.

➤ Training

Regarding the training for election officials at every level, 145 zone/ special woreda officials and center coordinators, 299 field trainers who train polling station officers, 11,175 polling station officers, and 15 results verification experts received training on the voter registration process, polling day, tabulation, reconciliation, verification, announcement of election results and the conduct of election officers in various rounds of trainings or forums.

A total of 60 police officers, comprising 58 men and two women from different parts of the

SNNPR, were trained in two rounds on the legal framework for the referendum, election security and related issues, investigation of election-related violations, and the role of the regional police. Training was provided in collaboration with the Ethiopian Police University.

Likewise, two rounds of training were delivered to 33 Grievance Hearing Committee members established in the six zones and five special woredas on voter registration, vote counting, and the results announcement process.

➤ **Selection of Alternative Symbols for the Referendum**

The symbol proposed for the formation of the six zones and the five special woredas into one common region was a ‘white dove’. The symbol presented to those who didn’t support the formation of the six zones and five special woredas into a common region was a ‘hut’.

➤ **Distribution of Referendum Documents and Materials**

The distribution of referendum documents and materials for both referendum operations and training for voter registration and voting processes was carried out in four rounds. Voter register books, voter cards, reconciliation and results forms used for referendum voting day, 8,000 ballot boxes (including contingency), four million ballot papers, and various forms and materials were distributed to 3,771 polling stations.



II. Voter Education

➤ **Voter Information**

Several public service announcements (PSAs) were prepared and made accessible to the public through various media. In this process, six TV PSAs calling on voters to register and vote were prepared in two languages and broadcast a total of 824 times on four TV channels. At the same time, five radio messages were prepared in 22 languages, and broadcast 2,181 times on nine radio stations.

➤ **Reporting on the Referendum**

A total of 17 TV, radio, print, and online media outlets applied to cover the referendum and 169 reporters and cameramen were given accreditation badges.

➤ **Platform for Debate**

NEBE organized the first referendum debate forum and announced a call to debaters and debate organizers to engage nine debaters in three debate forums. The debates were broadcast to the public through two TV channels and two CSO-run social networks.



III. Voter Registration

➤ Voter Registration Process

Voter registration was open to all citizens living in the six zones and five special woredas who meet the legal requirements. Voter registration took place from December 20, 2022, to January 4, 2023, and at special polling stations in the Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps from December 31, 2022, to January 4, 2023. At certain polling stations where voter registration was terminated following reports of violations of the law by the Monitoring and Evaluation Team of the Board, and according to the Board's decision, re-registration was conducted from January 4 to 8, 2023. A total of **3,028,770** voters were registered at **3,771** polling stations. Of the total number of registered voters, 1,453,399 are female while the remaining 1,575,371 voters are male. Amongst them, 493 voters identified themselves as voters with disabilities.

For the first time, NEBE facilitated the participation of IDPs in the referendum. Accordingly, a total of nine special polling stations were established in the IDP camps located within the two zones and two special woredas specifically three in Konso, two in Gamo, three in Alle, and one in Dirashe, and voter registration was conducted to enable the IDPs to cast their votes.

➤ Monitoring of the Voter Registration Process

NEBE deployed its experts to monitor the voter registration and voting processes and confirmed that there were major procedural irregularities and violations of the law in the voter registration process. NEBE took the necessary corrective measures by passing a quick decision on this matter. During the voting process, adjustments and various decisions were made, with the guidance and support of the Board members. In addition, various corrective measures were taken based on information received through the toll-free telephone lines which were set up to enable the public to directly inform the Board of irregularities observed in the voter registration and voting processes.

Consequently, during voter registration, 24 polling stations were identified by the Monitoring and Evaluation Team of the Board, where voter registration was canceled and redone. The election officers were replaced by new ones. Executives and administrative bodies involved in the violation of the law are being investigated by the Federal Police. In addition, polling stations were opened in new sites in place of polling stations that had been established where they shouldn't have been. Furthermore, security forces were deployed at places where they were not available.

IV. Voting



The voting process was conducted on February 06, 2023, without any security incidents. There were shortages of ballot papers in a few polling stations and the problems were resolved immediately. The Board members and 13 NEBE monitoring teams made field visits. Counting of votes was completed on the same day and the results were posted at each polling station. Various corrective measures were taken based on the feedback from voters on the day of polling.

The Board checked and verified the results at the Referendum Coordination Office in Arba Minch town of Gamo Zone, after the voting process was completed and provisional results were announced at the zonal and special woreda levels. During this process, an official call was made for observers and media experts accredited by the Board to attend and report on the scene.

V. Referendum Result

➔ Approved Results

After examining and verifying the tabulated results of the six zones and five special woredas, the Board approved and announced the results listed below. This excludes Wolaita zone and 81 polling stations in other zones and special woredas, whose results are not included.

Referendum Zones/Special Woreda	Number of Polling Stations	Registered Voters			Number of Voters			Number of Polling stations excluded from the referendum results	Voter Turnout	Invalid Votes	Valid Votes	Referendum Options	
		Female	Male	Total	Female	Male	Total						
Konso Zone	135	57,753	53,808	111,561	54,760	50,532	105,292	4	94%	2,180	103,004	101,114	1,890
South Omo Zone	428	144,056	153,892	297,948	129,392	137,599	266,991	4	90%	5,273	261,523	256,159	5,364
Gamo Zone	805	296,874	333,466	630,340	283,410	318,723	602,133	21	95%	8,141	593,439	583,757	9,682
Gedeo Zone	626	176,472	196,282	372,754	139,941	161,053	300,994	23	80%	11,941	288,444	241,695	46,749
Gofa Zone	329	141,995	147,312	289,307	131,528	133,137	264,665	10	91%	8,471	255,633	243,327	12,306
Burji S/Woreda	39	17,273	18,850	36,123	15,604	14,339	29,943	2	83%	676	29,225	28,460	765
Basketo S/Woreda	50	16,193	16,446	32,639	14,787	15,125	29,912		92%	1,098	28,807	27,674	1,133
Ale S/Woreda	64	13,905	16,045	29,950	10,746	12,774	23,520	3	78%	710	22,807	22,395	412
Amaro S/Woreda	98	46,441	47,792	94,233	44,808	46,574	91,382	7	97%	598	90,593	90,377	216
Dirashe S/Woreda	85	27,825	28,976	56,801	26,380	26,775	53,155	7	94%	1,163	51,920	51,467	453

Therefore, in general, the Board has approved and announced the results in the zones and special woredas mentioned above and passed the decision listed below regarding the referendum held in Wolaita Zone. The Board will prepare and submit a schedule and operation plan for the next referendum.

➤ Decision Regarding the Referendum Process in Wolaita Zone

While verifying and validating the results of the referendum held on February 06, 2023, in six zones and five special woredas in the SNNPR, the Reconciliation and Results Forms received from 77 polling stations in Wolaita Zone were found to be defective. Accordingly, the National Election Board of Ethiopia issued an order on February 26 for verification of the voter registers in the said polling stations. It is to be remembered that the Board announced to the public on February 20, 2023, that it had decided to conduct further investigations due to the large-scale irregularities of voter registers identified in 74 out of the 77 polling stations, and that a final decision would be made once the investigation is completed.

Out of the 1,112 polling stations in the eight centers set up in Wolaita Zone, the voter registers from **25%** of the polling stations from each center - i.e. 277 polling stations - were sampled and examined. Out of the total 350 voter register books that were examined, only 13 could be verified as the number of irregularities found was less than ten, while 337 were found to have significant violations and irregularities.

In addition, several irregularities (citizens under the age of 18 voting, proxy voting, ballot box stuffing, breach of secrecy of the vote, observing elections without having a badge) were found in 10 polling stations by the monitoring teams of NEBE and in 10 more polling stations by the electoral rights monitoring team of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission.

In total, the voter registers of 357 (96.5%) out of the 370 polling stations were checked. This, together with the large-scale irregularities confirmed on the day of polling, convinced the Board that electoral fraud focused on voter registration, which is fundamental to the integrity of the election, had been committed in most of the polling stations in the zone. Such results represented a breach of the objectives/principles of Proclamation No. 1162/2019, as NEBE learned from the investigation report.

Therefore, as this affects the credibility and authenticity of the entire referendum process and distorts the overall results, the Board decided to annul the voter registration for the Wolaita Zone Referendum and re-conduct the voter registration and voting processes, per Article 7 Sub-Article 20 of Proclamation No. 1133/2019.

VI. Role of the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and CSOs

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) monitored the pre-referendum and the day of the referendum to ensure that the procedures met human rights standards and monitored the human rights conditions in the post-referendum as well. The commission deployed 64 human rights monitoring experts for the polling and conducted monitoring at 186 polling stations.

Twenty-nine CSOs were accredited by NEBE to provide voter education on the referendum and 16 of them were engaged in providing voter education. Out of the three CSOs accredited by the Board to observe the voting process of the referendum, the Ethiopian Women's Federation (ECFE) sent

915 observers at 915 polling stations, the Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) sent 510 observers at 700 polling stations, and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRC) deployed 22 observers at 89 polling stations. The three CSOs were able to deploy 1,447 observers covering 1,704 polling stations.

VII. Progress

Based on the lessons learned by the Board from the 6th General Elections, adjustments were made to several activities and the lessons learned were applied to the recently held referendum. Accordingly, the following revised procedures have been implemented:

- Based on the recommendation given in the 6th General Elections regarding the field electoral operation, the Board deployed monitoring teams during the voter registration and voting process to identify serious violations of the law as well as seemingly simple but negative loopholes and to take immediate corrective action. At the same time, it made it possible to make the necessary decision regarding the violation of the law committed by the administrative bodies by interfering in the election process.
- In terms of ensuring the inclusiveness of the election process, it was possible to standardize the compilation of voters' data and include it in official reports. Thus, the data of male and female voters was put in segregation all forms and documents used in the referendum. Data regarding the participation of persons with disabilities in the referendum was better collected and properly documented.
- Gender mainstreaming was implemented at a better level in the referendum activities.
- For the first time, the Board established a special polling station to ensure the participation of IDPs;
- For the first time, the Board organized debate forums for the referendum by sending invitations to debaters and debate organizers, nine debaters were involved in three debate forums, and efforts were made to make voters aware of the alternatives;
- It has been found that the preparation of a detailed operation manual for the referendum, in which the responsibilities of structures at every level, from the Board to the polling station, are explained in detail and who will perform what tasks, has added value to the process;
- The participation of election officers, who took part in the 6th General Election, in the referendum, excluding those who have been the subject of complaints by various parties and whose irregularities have been confirmed by the Board, has allowed the election officers to develop skills and experience in election execution, and the Board has identified officers with improved performance and set up an organized database of officers for future elections;
- A memorandum of understanding was signed between the two institutions to enable the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission to carry out its legally mandated responsibility of monitoring human rights during the election as much as possible, and human rights monitoring was carried out by the commission;
- CSOs and the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission were invited to observe the referendum and were quickly accredited. They were given an understanding of the

referendum implementation process, and the observation was successfully completed. Thus, an important report was presented to the Board for further exertion.

VIII. Challenges

As much as the implementation process of the public resolution has shown progress, the following problems were observed in many polling stations in Wolaita zone, some polling stations in other zones, and special woredas:

➤ Problems during Voter Registration

- During voter registration at certain polling stations, woreda and kebele officials put pressure on the election officers to conduct unlawful voter registration;
- Non-illegible citizens were registered as voters (for example: handing out voters' cards door-to-door and registering voters under 18 years of age);
- Although the Board sent a report to the federal police about the mentioned legal violations, the matter was not investigated and prosecuted;
- Even though the Board created opportunities for both options of the referendum to be introduced to the public equitably, the parties campaigning for the second option did not participate sufficiently;
- In some polling stations, the voter number reported to the Board in the form was found to be different from the number of voters in the voter register;
- Vehicles were not assigned to monitor the voter registration process in Gofa Zone and Wolaita zone (except Humbo and Bedessa);

➤ During Polling and Announcement of Results

- The signatures of the voters on the register during voter registration appear to be different from their signatures on polling day;
- A list of voters signed with a written signature at the time of registration and with a fingerprint on the day of voting is displayed on the records;
- Having the same signature signed for different voters registered in the voter register (during registration and on the day of voting);
- The number of voters who signed with their fingerprint on the voter register (during voter registration and on polling day);
- Even though the voter's information is filled in the voter's register, their signature is not signed either in writing or with a fingerprint;
- Many voters aged 18-50 who are presumed to be literate have signed with their fingerprints;
- Signed with a fingerprint on the day of voter registration and right-marked on the place of signature on the day of voting;
- Failure to fill voter information on the voter register.

➤ **Problems during Tabulation and Data Entry**

- The number of voters who registered as voters and voted in several polling stations on the day of the referendum was found to be suspiciously equal;
- Unauthorized corrections were made on the Results Reconciliation Forms (RRF) and there were several parts erased or deleted in the documents;
- The number of ballot papers did not match with the number of voters who registered and voted;
- Failure by the election officers to put their signature on the RRF and the voter register;
- In Bule Constituency, the re-election for the HoPR and the regional council was held concurrently with the referendum, and due to the existence of two voter registers for three types of elections (House of peoples Representatives, regional council, and referendum) and the time it took to verify names, there was a long queue at polling stations and the polling was extended till 8:00 PM only for Bule constituency.

➤ **Other Problems**

- The fact that a large number of ballot papers are folded together and stuffed in a ballot box;
- Temporary ID cards were issued by local government officials to voters who lined up to vote on polling day;
- Entry of officials, election officers and individuals into the secret voting booth /block;
- Registration of new voters on polling day without the approval of the Board;
- The discovery of individuals under the age of 18 taking part in the voting process;
- It was confirmed that there are eight polling stations where the voting process started late on polling day due to various reasons;
- Polling stations were established in places where they should not have been.

IX. Actions Taken

- The registration conducted at 24 polling stations where violations of the law were committed during voter registration was canceled and voter registration was conducted again.
- The contract of election officers involved in the 24 polling stations was terminated and the Board has written a letter to the Federal Police for the criminal investigation of the administrative bodies who played a role in the violation of the law, and the case is under investigation.
- Where the number of registered voters reported upon completion of voter registration in polling stations show a difference against the number of registered voters on the RRF on election day, after examining the register, the results were canceled in polling stations where the difference was more than negligible.
- After investigating the irregularities discovered during the monitoring on the polling day conducted by NEBE, Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, and CSOs, and those irregularities found while the Board was verifying the validity of the election results, it was decided that the results of 81 polling stations should be excluded and the referendum should be repeated in Wolaita Zone;

- There was a shortage of ballot paper at 8 polling stations on the day of voting, but the problem was resolved in time by supplying from the reserve material at the centre.

X. Acknowledgements

The Board received support from various bodies, institutions and individuals to make the referendum in six zones and five special woredas a success. Accordingly, the Board would like to extend its thanks to the following institutions and individuals:

- To all residents of Konso, Wolaita, South Omo, Gamo, Gedeo and Gofa zones and of Burji, Basketo, Alle, Amaro and Dirashe special woredas who participated in the referendum;
- To the administrative bodies of Konso, Wolaita, South Omo, Gamo, Gedeo and Gofa zones as well as of Burji, Basketo, Alle, Amaro and Dirashe special woredas;
- To the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission;
- To civil society organizations involved in observing the referendum and in providing voter education;
- To the executive officers of the referendum who carried out the referendum in sometimes difficult conditions by going far from their living areas, and to the NEBE staff who worked relentlessly to coordinate the operation;
- To the SNNP Police Commission;
- To the SNNPR Peace and Security Office;
- To the FDRE Defense Force and the Western Command of the Army;
- To the Federal Police;
- To the Council of SNNPR, to the President of SNNPR and to the Office of the SNNPR President;
- To the United Nations Development Programme and the European Centre for Electoral Support, as well as other organizations that have provided us with support.

National Election Board of Ethiopia
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