



International Foundation
for Electoral Systems

Elections in Ethiopia

2021 General Elections

Frequently Asked Questions

Africa

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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Frequently Asked Questions

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When is Election Day?

The Ethiopian general elections were originally scheduled for August 29, 2020, but were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. On December 25, electoral authorities announced that national elections, as well as a referendum in the South West zone in the Southern Nation Nationality and Peoples regional state, were rescheduled for June 5, 2021, with council elections for the cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa to be held on June 12. Due to logistical delays and extension of the voter registration process, on May 20, electoral authorities once again postponed the elections to June 21; as of June 1, a decision was pending on when the South West Zone referendum will take place. General elections and the Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city council elections will now be held on the same date. Elections will not take place in the Tigray region where an armed conflict has been ongoing since November 2020. Elections will also not take place in the Harari region, due to the status of pending court cases. Electoral authorities have also announced that it would be “very difficult” to hold elections in other conflict-hit constituencies throughout the country. As of June 4, there are 79 constituencies, Tigray region included, in which elections will not take place on June 21 but will take place at another date.

Why are the upcoming elections important?

The upcoming elections are an important milestone in Ethiopia’s democratic transformation. They are expected to be more competitive and have more political party representation than previous electoral cycles. Since 1995, with the introduction of nominal multiparty elections, polling in Ethiopia has been marked by unfulfilled hopes. In 1995 and 2000, significant political parties were either barred from participating or they boycotted elections, alleging an unlevel playing field. While the 2005 general elections were highly competitive, a protracted and opaque results management process sparked an outbreak of violence and the arrest and imprisonment of opposition leaders. Subsequently, the government introduced restrictive policies that shrank the political and civic space, resulting in elections that had the ruling party in control of 98 percent of the parliamentary seats in 2010 and 100 percent of seats in the 2015 elections.

The upcoming general elections will be the first since Abiy Ahmed was elected prime minister by members of Parliament. Abiy has undertaken significant political reforms since coming to power in April 2018. Chief among the reforms are the opening of political and civic space, the release of hundreds of activists and members of the opposition from prison and the return of opposition party leaders from exile. These elections are also important as they are the first to be held after major changes to the Ethiopian electoral laws and electoral processes and the reformation of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. The elections are thus considered a key test of the unfolding reform agenda, and their success could help build positive momentum for democratic consolidation.

What is the electoral system?

Ethiopia is a federal republic. It is administratively divided into 10 regional states whose borders were established according to settlement patterns, language and ethnic identity: Amhara; Afar; Benishangul Gumuz; Gambella; Harari; Oromia; Sidama; Somali; Southern Nations,

Nationalities and Peoples; and Tigray. In addition to the 10 regional states, there are two chartered cities: Addis Ababa, the country’s capital, and Dire Dawa.

Ethiopia’s Parliament is composed of two chambers: the House of People’s Representatives (HoPR), the lower chamber; and the House of Federation (HoF), the upper chamber. HoPR members are elected by popular vote from 547 single-member constituencies for a five-year term, and the prime minister is elected from among these members. The constitution includes clear provisions for special representation for minority nationalities and peoples, requiring at least 20 of the 547 HoPR seats to be occupied by representatives of these groups. Elections for the HoPR usually take place in May, although its members’ five-year term expires in the first week of October. With the consent of its members, the prime minister can dissolve the HoPR before its term expires and hold new elections within six months.

The 153 members of the HoF are elected for a five-year term — either indirectly, by their respective Regional State Councils or directly, by universal suffrage. If a Regional State Council chooses to use the direct popular vote option, it must notify the National Election Board of Ethiopia six months before Election Day. HoF elections are held at the same time as the general elections. No Regional State Council has requested that HoF elections be held during the upcoming electoral cycle.

The constitution established a majoritarian first-past-the-post electoral system in which the candidate who receives the highest number of votes among the contestants wins the seat. Several opposition political parties have advocated for a proportional or mixed system, which would require a constitutional amendment. In response to increased public pressure, authorities have indicated that changes will be considered after the 2021 elections.

Figure: House of People’s Representatives Constituencies and Regional Council Seats

Regional State or City	HoPR Constituencies	Regional Council Seats
Afar Regional State	8	96
Amhara Regional State	138	294
Benishangul Gumuz Regional State	9	99
Gambella Regional State	3	156
Harari Regional State	2	36

Oromia Regional State	178	537
Sidama	19	190
Somali Regional State	23	273
Southern Nation Nationality and Peoples Regional State	104	291
Tigray Regional State*	38	152
Addis Ababa City	23	138
Dire Dawa City	2	189

Which positions will candidates compete for in the general and local elections?

Candidates will compete for 468 of the 547 House of People’s Representatives (HoPR) seats at the national level or respective Regional State Council seats during the June general elections. Due to ongoing security and logistical challenges, elections have been postponed in 79 constituencies and will not take place in June. Each of the constituencies has single-member seats, and the candidate in each constituency who receives the highest number of votes will be declared the winner. Regional Councils have multiple seats in a constituency, depending on the laws of each region. Candidates will compete for available seats based on regional laws and on the number of seats per constituency. Those who receive the highest number of votes will be declared the winners. The table above shows the number of seats in the HoPR and the 10 Regional State Councils, in addition to the seats allocated to the two chartered cities.

Who is eligible to run as a candidate in the upcoming general elections, and how many candidates are there?

Candidates affiliated with legally recognized political parties and independent candidates can run in the upcoming elections as long as they meet the requirements stipulated in the new Electoral Law (Proclamation 1162). These include being an Ethiopian citizen at least 21 years of age and being born in the constituency where he or she intends to run, or residing in it continuously for one year before Election Day. Potential candidates also cannot have their

* Elections will not be held in Tigray until the state of emergency in the region is lifted.

electoral rights restricted by law or the decision of a court or other relevant authorities. Finally, they must be willing to abide by the Election Code of Conduct.

The candidate registration process has three stages: 1) political parties and independent candidates select symbols that will represent them on the ballot, 2) candidates are registered and 3) a lottery is conducted to determine the order of appearance of political parties and candidates on ballot papers. Currently, 47 parties have been registered and have fielded more than 9,300 candidates to run for seats in the House of People's Representatives and at Regional Council levels.

Who organizes elections in Ethiopia?

The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) is an independent institution tasked with organizing national, regional and local elections under the constitution. The NEBE has two components, the board and the Secretariat, and answers to the House of People's Representatives (HoPR).

NEBE's board is composed of five full-time members who are appointed to a six-year term by the HoPR upon the recommendation of the prime minister. The chief executive officer oversees the Secretariat. The current chairperson, Birtukan Midekssa, was appointed in November 2018. Her appointment was followed by the promulgation of Proclamation 1133/2019 in April 2019, which reduced the number of NEBE board members from nine to five; introduced a new board member nomination process; and provided a framework to ensure the NEBE's neutrality, independence and professionalism.

NEBE's responsibilities include organizing all national, regional and local elections and referendums; registering and accrediting political parties and candidates and regulating their behavior; providing guidelines for how funds may be contributed to political parties; and determining the number of polling stations necessary to carry out elections. The NEBE also accredits local and international observers, party agents, journalists covering the elections and civil society organizations that provide voter education.

The NEBE also establishes long- and short-term regional and subregional branch offices and oversees permanent branch offices in the 10 regional states and the two charter cities. For the upcoming general elections, the NEBE established constituency offices in 672 locations. The constituency offices register candidates; oversee the dissemination of voter registration and electoral materials; manage poll workers administer voter registration and Election Day activities; and tally constituency-level results and submit them to the NEBE for final approval and announcement.

What is the legal framework for the upcoming elections?

The legal framework for conducting elections is stipulated by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) Establishment Proclamation (Proclamation No. 1133/2019) and the Ethiopian Election, Political Parties Registration and Elections Code of Conduct Proclamation (Proclamation 1162/2019). The former outlines the establishment of NEBE and its roles and responsibilities, and the latter outlines various elements of the electoral cycle. The electoral

cycle includes election administration processes, candidate registration and campaigning, voter registration and education, and the voting and result announcement process. Proclamation 1162/2019 also specifies that the NEBE will issue directives to regulate different areas set out under the law, and Article 163 of the Electoral Law authorizes the NEBE's board to draft directives as needed to implement the law.

What is the electoral campaign timeline?

Upon receiving a certificate of candidacy from the National Election Board of Ethiopia, political parties and independent candidates have the right to conduct election campaigns by sending written notification to their respective administrations or municipalities. However, campaigning is prohibited at any time before the start of the official campaign period (February 15 for the 2021 elections) and during the four days leading up to the election.

Who can vote in the upcoming general elections?

Ethiopians must meet certain criteria to be eligible to vote, as set forth in the new Electoral Law (Proclamation 1162) and must register during the voter registration period. These criteria are being an Ethiopian citizen of at least 18 years of age at the time of registration; being capable of making decisions; residing in the constituency of registration for at least six months; and holding a valid identification card, such as a Kebele local identity card, passport, driver's license, military discharge document or student identity card. Individuals whose voting rights have been stripped by the decision of a court or other relevant authorities are not allowed to vote.

The National Election Board of Ethiopia estimates that 55 million Ethiopians are eligible to vote in the upcoming elections. This estimate is based on the last census conducted in 2007, adjusted for urban and rural population growth and other factors, as well as an expected surge in turnout due to the competitive nature of the elections. As of May 31, 2021, NEBE had registered around 37.4 million voters.

How can people register to vote?

Those who are eligible to vote are required to go to a polling station to register and receive a voter registration card. For the upcoming elections, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) set up an online registration system for university students, since voter registration is taking place during the academic year. Although registration can be completed online, students will be registered to vote at polling stations at their permanent places of residence and are required to vote in person on Election Day. As of late May, the NEBE was developing a plan to allow internally displaced persons to register to vote through a special process.

According to the Electoral Law, the NEBE is required to publicly announce the location of polling stations 15 days before voter registration starts. The voter registration period normally runs for 30 days, including weekends but excluding public holidays. The completed roll will be displayed for 10 days. The start of voter registration, initially slated for March 1, 2021, was postponed to March 25. On April 14, the NEBE announced that, due to higher levels of insecurity, difficulty recruiting poll workers and hurdles in transporting registration materials to polling stations, voter registration had opened in only 50 percent of polling stations; in Afar and Somali region, the

exercise had not started. On May 7, the NEBE extended voter registration in all regions to May 14. Extension of the voter registration exercise has prompted further postponement of Election Day, from June 5 to June 21, 2021.

How will voters cast their ballots?

Voters will cast their votes in person at the polling station where they are registered. A total of 49,407 polling stations were expected to open across the country, with at least five poll workers per polling station. However, as of the end of voter registration, due to security and other challenges, the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) had opened only around 46,000 polling stations for voter registration. Voters are required to present their voter registration card to the polling station officer for identity verification, along with the identification document they used when registering. Voters who do not have voter cards can still vote by proving with their identification documents that they are on the voter roll in that polling station. Once a voter's eligibility is confirmed, a poll worker will mark the voter's left thumb with indelible ink and request that she or he sign the voter roll. Another poll worker will then stamp ballot papers with the NEBE's official insignia (one ballot paper for the House of People's Representatives elections, one for the Regional Council elections and, where applicable, one for the referendum) and provide instructions on casting the ballots. Voters mark their choices privately, in a polling booth, before depositing the ballots in their respective ballot boxes.

What measures are in place to ensure the safety of voters during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Election officials must take an oath committing to enforcing and implementing the COVID-19 preventive measures described in the National Election Board of Ethiopia directive, minimizing exposure to COVID-19 and protecting themselves from the disease while on duty. All people in the polling station will be required to sanitize their hands, wear face masks, and maintain a two-meter (approximately 6-foot) distance during queuing and while inside the polling station.

What measures are in place to enhance the impartiality of poll workers in the upcoming elections?

The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) recruited approximately 130,000 poll workers (three per polling station) for voter registration and will recruit at least 100,000 more for Election Day. Among other requirements, recruitment will be based on the capacity and qualifications of poll workers. Due to past concerns over partisanship, the NEBE has mandated that poll workers engaged in previous elections are not be eligible for recruitment. Poll workers have received intensive training on voter registration and polling and counting based on international standards, and an election simulation will be conducted to familiarize them further with voting procedures. Two rounds of training are being provided: one prior to voter registration and another before Election Day.

What measures are in place to encourage persons with disabilities to participate in the upcoming elections?

The new Electoral Law identifies several ways to remove barriers and encourage the full participation of people with disabilities in elections, including ensuring that polling stations are accessible. Voters with disabilities will be given priority in the queue and be allowed to select assistants (with the exception of observers and party agents) in case they need help casting their ballots. Additionally, voters who are blind or have low vision will have access to election-related documents in braille, including about 1,400 copies of the Electoral Law in English and Amharic. In addition to persons with disabilities, older voters and pregnant women will be given priority during registration and voting.

What measures are in place to encourage women's participation in the upcoming elections?

The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) has taken steps to promote and facilitate women's participation in the upcoming elections as both candidates and election officials. The NEBE Establishment Proclamation (Proclamation 1133/2019) states that the board itself must allow for a ratio of two women to every three men in its current composition. New draft directives on the organization of regional branch offices, constituencies and polling stations also stipulate gender diversity in committees and other bodies.

The Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Elections Code of Conduct Proclamation (Proclamation 1162/2019) encourages political parties to consider gender representation in recruiting members and in internal party elections.

Women's participation in Ethiopian politics and decision-making has shown general improvement in recent years. Women's representation in Parliament grew from only 2.01 percent in 1995 to 38.8 percent in 2015. Since coming to power in April 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has appointed a gender-balanced cabinet comprising 50 percent women and appointed more women to key strategic positions in the defense and security, trade, labor, culture, science and revenue departments. Furthermore, Ethiopia has made significant strides in ratifying and recognizing international agreements and developing national policies that broadly affirm women's equal rights and their meaningful participation in leadership and political decision-making.

Is out-of-country voting allowed?

The Ethiopian electoral framework provides for the participation of Ethiopian nationals residing abroad in the elections as long as the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) submits a study on the issue for parliamentary approval. Citing the tight timeframe, other pressing needs (including public health requirements and preparations for special polling stations for internally displaced persons) and budgetary limitations, however, the NEBE is not considering conducting out-of-country voting for the upcoming general elections.

Who can conduct electoral observation, and how can they become accredited?

Both local and international observers plan to observe the upcoming general elections. The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) has developed various directives pertaining to local and international observers, a code of conduct for the mass media, and a procedural framework and code of conduct for party and candidate agents. All eligible groups are required to obtain accreditation by verifying their status and relevant information using NEBE's online application and signing the Election Observers' Code of Conduct. Accredited local and international observers can monitor the electoral process and report on activities, including voter registration, electoral campaign, Election Day operations and post-election processes. During their work, observers are expected to abide by certain principles, such as impartiality, transparency and professionalism and must refrain from activities that could interfere with or influence the electoral process.

International observer groups may observe the elections upon invitation by the Ethiopian government. The government has invited the European Union (EU), the United States Government, implementing partners and others to observe the upcoming general elections. On May 5, however, the EU canceled the deployment of its electoral observation mission to Ethiopia, citing disagreements with the country's government regarding observation methodology and the importation of the mission's communication systems.

In addition to accredited electoral observers, accredited media representatives, political party agents and special guests (e.g., members of the diplomatic community, international advisors, associates or security guards accompanying the guests) are also allowed in polling stations. To receive accreditation, journalists will be required to sign and abide by a code of conduct that binds them to the principle of fair, balanced and unbiased reporting. Any violation of the code of conduct should result in the revocation of their accreditation.

Party and independent candidates' agents have a rather different role than journalists and observers, given their partisanship. Their principal role in the elections is to observe the process to ensure there are no irregularities that might disadvantage their candidate or political party. Agents are also required to refrain from behaviors that could jeopardize the election process and its integrity. The head of a polling station may order any agent to leave the polling station if she or he is not complying with these obligations. In case of overcrowding, the head of a polling station may also order that each political party or candidate is represented by no more than one agent at a time in the polling station.

How will election security be handled?

The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) has conducted several rounds of an electoral violence risk assessment to identify possible security challenges that may arise during all phases of the electoral cycle. During the February 2020 Electoral Stakeholders Conference, the NEBE announced its plan to establish Joint Election Operation Centers (JEOCs) at the federal, regional and constituency levels as a platform on which stakeholders can coordinate electoral

security matters across the country. JEOCs will be composed of security forces, political parties' members and community leaders.

On April 16, 2021, the Office of the Prime Minister announced that it had formed a National Election Security Committee comprising members of the Federal Police, the Attorney General's Office, the National Intelligence and Security Service and the Ministry of Defense, as well as regional representatives.

On Election Day, police will be assigned to each polling station and will remain outside the venues unless the head of the polling station asks them to enter. Once a problem has been resolved, the police will be required to leave polling station and return to the designated location. The NEBE is working to provide guidelines for political parties on how to respond to and mitigate any security challenges and is trying to institutionalize the process of mitigating challenges as they arise.

How will results be tabulated and aggregated?

After polling closes, poll workers will count the votes at polling stations and fill out the Reconciliation and Results Forms. The law requires polling station results to be posted on the door or front gate of the polling station immediately after tallying is complete. Votes and results forms are then sent to their respective constituency offices, which will ensure that the number of votes does not exceed the number of registered voters. Aggregation of results also takes place at the constituency office.

How will election disputes be adjudicated?

Ethiopia's electoral framework has a comprehensive election dispute resolution (EDR) system for all parts of the electoral process. Grievance hearing committees (GHCs) will be established at the polling station, constituency and regional branch levels to adjudicate disputes or objections regarding voter registration, polling, counting and other disputes related to the electoral process. Each GHC will have three members (four at the constituency level), one of whom is an official from the election office at that level. The other members are selected through a public show of hands in each area. Depending on the type of complaint, individuals, political parties or candidates and their agents can file complaints at a GHC, although the right to file a complaint varies with each category of complaint.

Depending on the type of complaint, unresolved issues can be escalated to the constituency-level GHC, then to the regional branch GHC and finally to the National Election Board of Ethiopia. If further examination is needed, complainants can take the matter to the appropriate regional or federal court after exhausting all listed administrative dispute resolution steps. The judiciary has developed a procedure to handle election complaints, which is awaiting adoption by the House of People's Representatives. The members of the judiciary assigned to election benches have been trained on international standards for election adjudication and EDR processes.

Resources

- [Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia](#)
- [The Ethiopian Electoral and Political Parties Proclamation](#)
- [Proclamation to Establish the National Electoral Board](#)
- [National Election Board of Ethiopia](#)

About IFES in Ethiopia

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems' (IFES) work to support the development of free, fair and credible electoral processes in Ethiopia dates to 1994. IFES is currently implementing its three-year (2019-22) "Ethiopia Elections and Political Processes Program," funded by the United States Agency for International Development, which supports the National Election Board of Ethiopia to administer credible and inclusive elections in 2021 and beyond.

IFES is providing technical assistance on the electoral legal framework; leadership and skills-building training; electoral procedures and related training manuals; cascade trainings of election officials; targeted, data-driven voter education strategies for women and persons with disabilities; and post-election reviews, contributing to the development of long-term strategic and capacity building plans.

Disclosure

These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Ethiopian elections authorities as of June 7, 2021, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not necessarily represent any IFES policy or technical recommendation.

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