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Elections in Ethiopia

2019 Sidama Referendum

Frequently Asked Questions

Africa

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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Frequently Asked Questions

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Disclosure:

These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Ethiopian elections authorities as of November 18, 2019, to the best of our knowledge. This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.

What and when is the Sidama referendum?

Ethiopia is a federation with nine regional states that can choose their official language and have limited powers over taxation, education, health and land administration. Through the Sidama referendum, residents of Sidama will vote to decide whether the Sidama Zone, currently subsumed into the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), will be transformed into a regional state. The largest in population of the 56 ethnic groups in the SNNPR, the Sidama people have been demanding recognition as a separate regional state since July 2018. The referendum was initially scheduled to take place on November 13, 2019, but was rescheduled for November 20 due to challenges with poll worker recruitment, delayed finalization of the list of neighborhoods where polling will be held and the required legal and administrative frameworks.

Why is the referendum important?

Ethiopia's federal constitution requires the authorities to organize a referendum within a year of the statehood request being made. As Sidama representatives submitted the formal request in July 2018, tensions grew when the one-year deadline approached and it became apparent that the vote would not be organized on time. Some Sidama campaigners threatened to unilaterally declare Sidama's statehood in July 2019, which triggered clashes between government security agencies and protesters, leading to at least 25 fatalities. Injuries and property losses were also reported in various parts of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). Although the Sidama leadership ultimately deferred a formal declaration of statehood, acceding to a plan by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) to hold a referendum in November 2019, risks of violence remain high.

Additionally, the NEBE, which is responsible for organizing elections and referendums, has not previously implemented a vote on regional statehood. The Sidama referendum will also be the first electoral exercise that the newly constituted NEBE will undertake. If the referendum result favors Sidama statehood, Sidama would be the first new state created in Ethiopia since the current nine-state federation came into being in the 1990s. As the SNNPR is among Ethiopia's most diverse regions, if Sidama becomes a state, this may presage the disintegration of the SNNPR. The Wolayta – the second-largest ethnic group in the SNNPR – and other ethnic groups have already filed requests for statehood referendums.

What is the election management body? What are its responsibilities?

The election management body is the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). The NEBE consists of two components – the Board and the Secretariat – and answers to the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR). In November 2018, the prime minister appointed former federal judge and former leader of an opposition party, Birtukan Mideksa, as the new chairperson of the NEBE. Her appointment was followed by the promulgation of Proclamation 1133/2019 in April 2019. The proclamation reduced the number of NEBE board members from nine to five, introduced a new board members' nomination process and provided a framework to ensure the NEBE's neutrality, independence and professionalism. Following the new nomination process in June 2019, the HoPR approved the appointment of four additional NEBE board members.

According to Article 11 of the recently adopted Proclamation 1162/2019 – the Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration, and Elections Code of Conduct Proclamation the NEBE is responsible for organizing a referendum to assess public interest or support for a measure. The law states that when organizing a referendum, the NEBE, –in consultation with the constitutionally mandated body, will determine the polling date, the voter requirements, the choices to be put on the ballot paper and the types and contents of campaigns relating to the referendum.

What is the election management body’s organizational setup for the referendum?

The Sidama referendum process has a hierarchical order. The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) is responsible for organizing referendums in Ethiopia and has the highest authority over the Sidama referendum as well.

The Referendum Coordination Office (RCO) is below the NEBE. The RCO ensures that polling stations are equipped with all the necessary materials and staff to conduct the referendum. The RCO also assigns polling staff to polling stations and oversees their performance. Similarly, coordination offices stationed at each *Woreda* (district) are responsible for controlling the dissemination of necessary materials and ensuring that all polling stations perform their required tasks. Furthermore, they are responsible for ensuring that materials and forms received from the polling stations are duly completed. They also add up results from polling stations and submit them to the NEBE.

The lowest levels of the NEBE structure for the referendum are polling stations, where voters register and cast their votes. Polling stations receive and set up all the necessary equipment and materials for the referendum and conduct voter registration and Referendum Day polling in accordance with applicable laws, including the NEBE Sidama Referendum Directive.

Who can vote in the referendum?

Any person who is an Ethiopian citizen, is 18 years or older on the day of registration and has been residing within Sidama Zone for at least six months can vote in the Sidama referendum. However, a citizen is ineligible to vote if declared to be incapable of making decisions due to intellectual or psychosocial disability as confirmed by the relevant authority or by sufficient evidence. A citizen is also ineligible if his or her electoral rights have been stripped by the law or a court decision. Those serving a court-ordered imprisonment are also ineligible.

What is the voter registration process?

The voter registration period was originally scheduled for November 6-November 15, 2019 – pushed by one day to start November 7 – and an additional day for display. There will be approximately 1,692 polling stations with three registration poll workers per polling station. Two will register voters on the respective electoral rolls and the presiding officer will oversee the overall registration process. Each polling station has its own electoral roll, which will include the following columns: registration serial number; registration date; full name of voter, including his or her grandfather's; age; gender; disability;

duration of residence within Sidama Zone; house number/village or locality/area name; signature or fingerprint on the day of registration; and signature or fingerprint on the day of voting.

A voter may be registered only once in one polling station by producing a *Kebele* (district) ID card or a passport, even if expired, that proves his or her identity. In the absence of a Kebele ID card or a passport, voters can present identity documents with recent photographs, such as a driver's license, residence ID card, military discharge document or student ID card, to register. Undocumented voters can register upon verification of their identity by the registration officers or based on testimonies. Eligible voters who are blind or otherwise need assistance to register in person can request the assistance of an aid. Any person duly registered as a voter will be issued a voter registration card.

Upon conclusion of voter registration, the electoral roll will be officially displayed to the public in the polling station premises for one day. Any person with grievance related to voter registration may lodge a complaint with the Polling Station Grievance Hearing Committee.

When and where will voters cast their ballots?

Referendum Day is scheduled for November 20, 2019, and will start at 6 a.m. and end at 6 p.m. Anyone who has already joined the queue at 6 p.m. will be allowed to vote. Voters will cast their ballots in about 1,692 polling stations staffed by approximately 5,100 poll workers.

How will voters cast their ballots?

Voters will cast their ballots in person at the polling station where they are registered. They are required to present their voter registration card and the document used to register to the polling station officer for identity verification. Persons with disabilities, the elderly and pregnant women will be given priority during registration and voting. Any voter who needs assistance to put a mark on their ballot paper and insert it into the ballot box has the right to select any adult for assistance with the exception of observers and optional agents.

What is the code of conduct for poll officials?

Poll officials are expected to perform their duties according to electoral laws and the applicable directives legislated by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, including the code of conduct for electoral officials. Poll workers are mandated to carry out their tasks in a transparent, ethical and professional manner, without exerting any influence on voters. They are expected to follow all the necessary procedures to safeguard the secrecy of the entire process. While discharging their duties, they are expected to be respectful, cooperative, pleasant and helpful to voters and other stakeholders in the referendum.

What are the roles of observers, agents and journalists in the referendum?

Observers, agents of both sides of the referendum, and journalists are stakeholders in the Sidama referendum and each have their own duties and responsibilities.

Observers monitor the entire referendum process and provide comprehensive reporting on the overall conduct, including voter registration, campaign, Referendum Day, and post-referendum periods. Observers are expected to follow certain principles, such as impartiality, transparency, and professionalism, and must refrain from activities that could interfere with or influence the referendum process.

Similarly, journalists are also expected to uphold media reporting principles, such as truthfulness, accuracy, objectivity, impartiality, fairness and public accountability, while discharging their duties. Their main responsibility during the Sidama referendum is to report and disseminate accurate information about the referendum and its outcome.

Unlike journalists and observers, agents of the two sides of the referendum are partisan. Their principal role in the referendum is to observe the process but as representatives of either referendum option. However, they are expected to refrain from activities that would jeopardize a peaceful referendum process.

When will official results be announced?

The referendum coordinators will be notified about the polling station results approximately one hour after the count is completed at the polling station level. The coordinators will then report polling station results to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) on November 21, 2019. The NEBE will issue a public statement to display temporary referendum results on November 22 and the official results will be announced on November 27, after NEBE approval.

How will elections disputes be handled?

There is a comprehensive election dispute resolution system for all parts of the electoral process.

Grievance Hearing Committees – at the polling station, *Woreda*(district) and zonal levels – adjudicate disputes or objections regarding voter registration, polling, counting and other disputes related to the electoral process. Election disputes or complaints can be lodged at the polling station.

If one is not satisfied with how the complaint was handled, it can be escalated to the Woreda-level Grievance Hearing Committee. It can further be escalated to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia zonal level. After exhausting these administrative dispute resolution steps, the aggrieved party can go to the regional court.

Who is responsible for security on Referendum Day?

In preparation for the referendum, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) is consulting with the relevant federal and regional security agencies to ensure peaceful pre- and post-referendum periods. The NEBE is planning to set up a joint elections operation center platform to bring together security forces, including the security bureau and federal, regional and zonal police, to ensure security in the lead-up to and on Referendum Day.