



Preliminary Report by the Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) on the conduct of the Referendum Day Voting processes in the Six zones and Five special Woredas under the SNNPR region of Ethiopia

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Introduction

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) is a network of over 175 local civil society organizations. CECOIE is an independent and nonpartisan citizen observation group that works on behalf of Ethiopians to contribute to ensuring that elections are inclusive, transparent and accountable.

It is well known that several nations, nationalities, and peoples in the Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) have put forth claim to be a region on its own independent of SNNPR. Among these are the Sidama region, which became a region following a referendum on November 20, 2019, and recently the South West Ethiopia Region, which successfully held a referendum on September 30, 2021, to establish the 11th Ethiopian region. Following the approval of six zones and five special woredas in the SNNPR to establish a region by their councils in June 2022, the House of Federation (HoF) informed the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) to prepare for a referendum. On February 06, 2023, NEBE conducted a referendum on the above-listed zones and districts.

In accordance with its mandate, CECOIE recruited, trained and deployed 434 stationary and 76 mobile observers in the six zones (Konso, South Omo, Wolayta, Gamo, Gedeo, Gofa) and the five special Woredas (Burji, Basketo, Ale, Amaro, Derashe) of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region where referendum voting took place. CECOIE's stationary observers arrived at their assigned polling stations starting from 5:00 AM. The stationary observers were expected to observe all the voting processes at their assigned polling station until the results were announced while the mobile observers visited several polling stations to observe the processes. The main objective of observing the referendum was to contribute to enhanced transparency and accountability of the SNNPR region referendum and providing a systematic and factual objective information on the conduct of the electoral processes in the referendum.

This report is based on information collected from the 410 stationary observers, in 410 polling stations, who reported on the entire electoral process of the referendum day. In addition to stationary observers, CECOIE has used the data gathered by 75 mobile observers on critical incidents. This report captures data gathered from 410 polling stations on the arrival of observers at polling stations, opening and setup of polling stations, voting, closing, counting and aggregation of results.

Key Findings

Opening of polling stations

- NEBE officials are expected to be present at polling stations before the opening time in order to have them prepared for voting to start at 6:00 AM. CECOIE requested its observers to arrive at the polling station by 5:30AM in order to accurately observe the preparation, opening and setup procedures. In 400 (98%) polling stations, polling officials were present when observers arrived at polling stations by 5:30 AM.
- In 409 (99%) polling stations, observers were allowed to enter polling stations. However, in one polling station in Gamo Zone CECOIE observers were not permitted to observe. Later the polling station officials allowed the observer to enter the assigned polling station following intervention by CECOIE secretariat.
- In relation to the opening of polling stations, in 362(88%) polling stations, the voting process started between 6:00 AM and 9:00 AM. However, 48 (12%) polling stations opened before 6:00 AM. The electoral law stipulates that polling stations should be open at 6:00 AM.
- 407 (99%) polling stations were established in places permitted by the electoral law. However, a few were located in a prohibited area. These are detailed in the critical incidents section.

Accessibility of polling stations

- 17 (4%) of the polling stations were not convenient for persons with disabilities (PWDs) or persons with mobility challenges, such as pregnant women. In addition, 14 polling stations that were observed by mobile observers were not easily accessible for persons with disabilities (PWDs), persons with mobility challenges, etc.

Availability of electoral materials

- Except 4 polling stations where the results and reconciliation form were missing, in 410 (100%) polling stations, the following materials were present before commencement of voting: ballot papers, the NEBE official stamp, indelible ink, the official ballot box, ballot box seals, and the electoral roll. In addition, the ballot box was shown to be empty before being sealed.

Polling Officials

- On average, there were 4 NEBE polling officials present at the polling stations with 2 being women.
- In 93 (23%) polling stations, the polling station chairperson was a woman.

Voting

- In 408 (99%) polling stations, officials gave priority in the queue to persons living with disabilities, the elderly, the frail, pregnant women and parents of young children. However, in 16 polling stations observed by mobile observers, priority was not given for the groups of voters specified above.
- In 410 (100%) polling stations, persons with disability were allowed to receive support from a personal assistant of their choosing.
- In 358 (87%) polling stations all voters were marked with indelible ink while in 52 (12%) of polling stations, between 1 - 10 voters were not marked with indelible ink before voting.
- In 410 (100%) polling stations, the polling officials stamped on all the ballot papers before giving them to the voters.
- In 398 (97%) polling stations, the secrecy of the vote was respected throughout the day at all times while at 12 (3%) polling stations the secrecy was violated.
- In 410 (100%) polling stations ballot boxes were placed in a visible place at all times.
- In 14 (3%) polling stations, on average 5 people who were not on the electoral roll were allowed to vote.
- In 6 (1%) polling stations, there was a presence of unauthorized person(s) inside the polling stations at some point during voting. These instances are detailed in the critical incidents section.
- In 1 polling station, voting was suspended at some point during the day as detailed in the critical incidents section.
- In 344 (84%) polling stations, security personnels were present outside the polling station at all times during voting. Moreover, in 57 (14%) polling stations, security personnels were present outside the polling stations some time; while in 9 (2%) reported there were no security personnels¹.
- The official closing time for the polling stations is at 6:00 PM. 11 (3%) polling stations were closed before 6:00 PM, in 391 (95%) polling stations closed between 6:00 PM and 7:00 PM, while 8 (2%) polling stations closed between 7:00 PM and 9:00 PM.
- In 139 (34%) polling stations, all voters who were in the queue at the closing time of polling stations, 6:00 PM, were allowed to vote in accordance with the law. The electoral law provides that voters in the queue during the time where polling stations will be closed should be allowed to vote.

¹ Security officers were not present in polling stations that CECO observers observed located in Burji Special, Wolaita zone Damot Sore, Wolaita zone, Gamo Zone Chenka Woreda, Gedio Zone Bulle Woreda, Gedio Zone Dilla city, Gofa Zone Oyda liyu, Wolaita zone Boditi Town,

Counting

- In 375 (91%) polling stations, copies of the reconciliation and results form were posted outside the polling station.
- In 410 (100%) polling stations, counting of ballot papers was conducted on referendum day at the polling station where referendum voting had taken place.
- No suspension of the counting process is reported at the polling stations observed,
- In 410 (100%) polling stations, the polling station chairperson clearly displayed the ballot papers during the counting;
- In 410 (100%) polling stations, the polling officials used the same criteria consistently to determine whether ballot papers were valid or invalid.

Critical Incidents

Critical incidents are irregularities that are serious in nature and which could have an effect on the referendum processes and outcomes. Observers were instructed to report critical incidents immediately to the CECOIE Referendum Situation Room. CECOIE staff at the Situation Room would undertake further follow-up and verification. CECOIE observers reported a total of 244 incidents as detailed below:-

Missing Electoral Materials

1. Reports from observers in three polling stations, (Amaro Special woreda (1 polling station), and Gamo Zone Kemba Woreda (2 polling stations), indicate that the result and reconciliation forms were missing.

Polling Stations in Forbidden Location

2. *Tenadam* Polling Station 1 in South Omo, Jinka town city administration was established in a private residence contrary to the electoral law.
3. Gelma polling station 02 in Gedio zone Berada mender was established in a recreation area contrary to the electoral law.

Unauthorized persons at polling stations

4. In one polling station in Gamo Zone Gerese woreda, an unauthorized person entered the polling station alleging they were coordinators.
5. In one polling station in Gofa zone, Sawla town, an unauthorized person entered the polling station to hoist a flag.
6. In one polling station in South Omo, Turmi town, there was an unauthorized person who entered the polling station to take pictures.
7. In one polling station in Gedeo zone, Gedeb Woreda, woreda administration officials were present in the polling station at the time of Ballot counting.
8. In one polling station in Gofa zone, Sawla Ketema, political party members from the Prosperity Party were present throughout the whole voting process.

9. In one polling station in Gamo Zone Kamba Zuriya woreda, two unauthorized individuals (One male and one female) were present in the polling station as observers without showing their IDs or other verification of their identity.

Campaign activity done within 200 meters of polling station

10. In one polling station in Gamo Zone, Boreda Woreda, there were campaign materials representing the Dove mark within 200 meters of the polling station.

Incidents of ballot stuffing

11. In one polling station in Gamo Zone, Gerase woreda, an observer reported that during the counting process polling station officials stuffed unused ballots.

Illegal Voting

12. In one polling station in Wolaita zone, Areka town, an observer reported that polling station officials handed ballot papers to persons whose names were not on the voter roll.
13. In a polling station in Wolaita Sodo, Duguna Fungo Woreda, it was reported that voters were casting their votes more than once. Similarly, in another polling station in Wolaita Zone, Areka town, an incident of voting more than once was reported.

Ballot box not shown to be empty

14. In one polling station in Derashe Special Woreda, the polling station chairperson didn't display the ballot box to be empty before sealing and putting it in its place.

Interference of election officials in the voting process

15. In one polling station in Derashe Special woreda, election officials were observed interfering with the voting process by instructing voters what they should vote for.

Person not in the voter roll allowed to vote

16. In one polling station in Burji Special Woreda, an observer reported that at least 8 individuals carrying voter's cards were allowed to vote even though their names weren't in the voters roll.
17. In a polling station in Wolaita Zone, Chora Tare keble, 12 persons whose names were not in the voters' roll were allowed to vote.
18. In one polling station in Wolaita Zone, Areka Ketema, 30 persons whose names were not in the voters' roll were allowed to cast their votes. The 30 ballot papers were cast in the voting booth after being sealed in separate envelopes.
19. In one polling station in Wolaita Zone Duguna Fango woreda more than 20 persons whose names were not in the voters' roll were allowed to vote.

Indelible ink not marked on voters

20. In 52 separate polling stations, there were incidents where on average 6 voters were not marked with an indelible ink on their fingers.

Violation of secrecy of voting

21. In one polling station in Derashe Special Woreda, poll workers were in the voting booth throughout the day while almost all voters were casting their votes. Moreover, despite the opposition of three voters, the poll workers entered the voting booth. Though it was happening at irregular intervals similar incidents were also reported from one polling station in Gamo Zone, Gerase woreda.
22. Violation of secrecy of the voting was also reported in a polling station located in Wolaita zone, Damot Weyde Wereda where a kebele official was watching while voters were marking symbols which they voted for.

Interruption of the voting process

23. In a polling station in Gofa Zone, Zala woreda the voting process was suspended by the polling station officials for about 20 minutes on the grounds of counting male and female voters in the queue.

Observer asked to leave the polling station

24. In one polling station in Wolaita Zone Duguna Fango woreda, an observer reported an incident where unauthorized persons asked the observer to leave the polling station at 5:00 PM. Despite the request to leave the polling station, the observer insisted on staying in the polling station and continued to observe the process.

Conclusion

This preliminary report reflects CECOIE's observation of the referendum voting on February 6. It builds on the situational statement CECOIE released on Monday, February 6, 2023. Based on the preliminary findings, CECOIE observers reported overall compliance/adherence to the voting process by NEBE officials and as well infractions and irregularities recorded at some polling stations. CECOIE hopes these irregularities will be followed up and investigated by appropriate authorities, sanctions provided to perpetrators to serve as a deterrent in the future.

Below are the summarized strengths and areas of improvement observed in the just concluded South Ethiopia referendum.

Strengths

1. The electoral calendar was announced earlier and no amendment/change has been observed to the electoral calendar which is commendable;

2. Significant improvement has also been observed in providing sufficient electoral materials although there were still some limitations;
3. By and enlarge the voting process started and ended in the timeframe provided by the electoral law;
4. Although there are gaps and not fully utilizing the system, the initiative to build online observers' accreditation application is commendable;
5. Number of women poll workers has also shown an increase from 37% in the Sixth General Elections to 50% in the South referendum.

Area of Improvement

1. Observers' accreditation took longer than anticipated. In addition, NEBE's requirement for signed pledge form for observer accreditation is onerous as it did not take into account the recruitment and deployment methodology, transportation accessibility barriers, and internet connection problems.
2. Respective 13 digit codes (ID) of designated polling stations were not made public. Having the polling stations codes with names would facilitate CECOIE and other observer groups to fully implement systematic approach, for example, proportional, to observation through deployment of observers.
3. The integrity of some election officials calls for revisiting the recruitment process as some of the poll workers were involved in ballot stuffing; violating the secrecy of the voting process; allowing persons who were not in the voter register to vote; as well as failing to take action on woreda and kebele official who were present in polling stations contrary to the stipulation of the electoral law.

CECOIE commends NEBE for collaborating with it, accrediting CECOIE members, and also ably organizing this referendum voting exercise; and also commend the security agencies for providing security to residents, voters, observers and poll workers and ensuring that the referendum voting took place in a generally peaceful environment. CECOIE commends its members for volunteering to observe the referendum, serve their community and the country. CECOIE commends the residents/voters in the Six zones and Five woredas where referendum voting took place for the generally peaceful manner in which they conducted themselves.

CECOIE continues to observe the post-referendum voting environment with 50 deployed observers. CECOIE will compile a comprehensive observation report including the pre-referendum, referendum and post-referendum findings as well as recommendations and share with the NEBE, key stakeholders and general public.

Finally, CECOIE acknowledges its partners the National Democratic Institute (NDI), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Embassy of Denmark, Embassy of Ireland, and the European Center for Electoral Support (ECES) for their continuous technical and financial assistance to enable it to carry out this observation activity as an independent citizens election observer group.

For more information, contact Mr. Yoseph Mekonnen, CECO Communication Officer at 0913923542.