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Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society
Organizations for Elections



FINAL OBSERVATION REPORT ON THE SOUTH ETHIOPIA REFERENDUM AND THE REFERENDUM RERUN IN THE WOLAITA ZONE

www.cecoe.org

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About CECOE

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) is a non-profit and non-governmental civil society organization with more than 175 member organizations. The coalition was licensed by the F.D.R.E. Authority for Civil Society Organizations (ACSO) in 2019 with registration number 4748 under the Civil Society Organizations Proclamation 1113/2019.

CECOE was established with the aim of augmenting and coordinating the role of Ethiopian CSOs in election observation – monitoring, voter education and preventing post-electoral conflicts.

Disclaimer

This report is made possible by the generous support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Embassy of Denmark, the Embassy of Ireland, and the European Center for Electoral Support. The contents of this report are the responsibility of the Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Embassy of Denmark, the Embassy of Ireland, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), or other partner organizations.



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Acronyms

CECOE	Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections
CSO	Civil Society Organizations.
ECES	European Centre for Electoral Support
EDF	Eritrea Defence Forces
ENDF	Ethiopia National Defence Force
EPRDF	Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
FRDE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
NDI	National Democratic Institute.
NEBE	National Election Board of Ethiopia.
SNNPR	Southern Nation, Nationalities, and Peoples Regional State.
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front
USAID	United States Agency for International Development



Acknowledgment

CECOE commends the 91 observers who observed the pre-referendum activities and the voter registration process that preceded the referendum, the 434 stationary observers and the 76 mobile observers who observed the referendum voting day and the 50 observers for the post-referendum, for their commitment and dedication in volunteering to observe and document the whole process. Additionally, appreciation is extended to the master trainers, and the 20 data clerks who worked at the Referendum Observation Situation Room.

CECOE further thanks the project team and management for their dedication, consistency and commitment to the project activity implementation. Specifically, CECOIE board members for their oversight, Mr. Abera Hailemariam, the Executive Director, for his leadership and guidance; Biniam Abate for the excellent leadership; Eyuel Zelalem, Yisihak Ababayehu, and other CECOIE staff for their commitment and dedication at the secretariat. CECOIE memeber organizations who helped recruit observers deserve commendations as well.

The observation of the referendum in the SNNPR was made possible with the financial and technical support from the Embassy of Denmark and Embassy of Ireland through the European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES), and United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOIE)

Executive Summary

Overview

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 and other parliamentary proclamations have a provision on right to self-determination, secession for nations, nationalities and peoples. The Constitution further indicates that for a referendum to be conducted, the request must be approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned, and the demand is presented in writing to the State Council; after this it is sent to NEBE for ratification and a referendum held within a year.

The South Ethiopia referendum was the third to be conducted by NEBE since 2018. The first one was the Sidama referendum held in 2019 and the second was the South West Regions referendum held in 2021. The South referendum was occasioned by the petitioning to the Zonal and special woreda councils of the Six zones and five special woredas by the Committee of Peace Ambassadors, a committee established by the Prime minister to come up with a recommendation for the growing demand for statehood in SNNP region¹, and , consequently, to the House of Federations, which accepted and instructed NEBE to conduct a referendum. NEBE set out February 6, 2023 as the referendum date.

In line with this, CECOE prepared and observed the referendum processes from a holistic perspective by observing the pre- referendum general political environment as well as voter registration, referendum voting day and the post referendum period. The following section summarizes the major findings of each observation.

Summary of findings

Pre-referendum environment and Voter registration phase

- CECOE observers monitored the voter education, campaign and the overall civic space during the pre-referendum phase. Though observers reported that there were voter education activities by CSOs, these activities were hampered by technical and financial capacity limitations to employ various modalities and ensure accessibility of voter education to rural areas. The NEBE's referendum calendar gave a two-month period for the conduct of voter education. This timeline limited the provision of voter education in all areas. The alternatives of the referendum as represented by the 'Dove' and 'Hut' symbols were not equally presented to the public during campaigns.

¹ Ethiopia Insight. (2020, October 10). Splitting the Southern Nations region into four can promote peace. Retrieved from <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/10/10/splitting-southern-nations-region-into-four-can-promote-peace/>

- Only 10% CECOE observer reports indicated that observers came across debates organized by CSOs, the NEBE or other stakeholders.
- Three CECOE observers were arrested and restricted from observing the pre-referendum environment despite being duly accredited by NEBE. It took the intervention of the CECOE secretariat and the NEBE to have the observers released. These instances took place in Gamo and South Omo Zones.
- The voter registration process ahead of the referendum was generally conducted according to the electoral regulations though there were irregularities and illegalities in some polling stations. In 35 (8%) of registration centers observed, potential registrants were not allowed to register as voters despite presenting identification documents. Similarly, in 24 (5%) of registration centers observed, at least one or more registrants were registered without proving their identity; while in 22 (5%) of registration centers observed, some registrants did not prove their residence. CECOE observers noted the visible absence of participation of PWDs as registration officials with no report of any PWDs official at the registration centers observed. On participation of women, CECOE observed that in 438 registration stations that were observed, at least one registration official was a woman.

Referendum Day phase

- For the referendum day observation, CECOE deployed a total of 510(434 stationary and 76 mobile observers) for the SNNPR referendum voting day. Despite challenges, such as a lack of timely accreditation, mismatched names and photos of observer badges, and one incident of denying observers access to polling stations on referendum day that was later resolved, almost all CECOE observers were permitted to observe the entire referendum day process.
- CECOE observers reported that the referendum day processes were mostly carried out in accordance with NEBE directives, but a few reports indicated that polling stations were located in prohibited areas and campaign activity was conducted within 200 meters of polling stations.
- 362 (88%) polling stations opened by 9 am with 48 (12%) polling stations opening before 6:00 a.m., which is against the electoral law.
- In 410 (100%) polling stations observed, the ballot boxes were shown empty and placed in a visible location.
- For the most part, the voting and counting processes were carried out in accordance with the NEBE directive without interruption at polling stations observed. However, in 6 (1%) polling stations observed, contrary to NEBE regulations, there were unauthorized persons at polling stations.
- In 14 (3%) polling stations observed, there were reports of illegal voting where persons who were not on the voter roll were allowed to vote; while in 52 (12%) polling stations observed, indelible ink was not used to mark voters' fingers.
- In addition, in 398 (97%) polling stations observed there was no violation of the secrecy of voting.

Post referendum phase

- CECOE deployed 50 observers in the immediate post referendum to monitor the political environment, public opinion on the referendum result and limitation and restriction on the civic space. In general observers reported that there were no incidents of violence, riots, demonstration or limitation on the freedom of movements. However, there were some reports of citizens expressing their personal opinion about the referendum results being unfair or unacceptable.

Key Recommendations

- NEBE should consider providing adequate time for voter education. Additionally, in the future, the NEBE should increase the number of CSOs who will be accessing the funds for voter education. Although NEBE made funds available for three CSOs who provided voter education for the South referendum, CECOE found this to be inadequate. Similarly, the international partners should make funds readily available for civic and voter education to address CSOs' funding gaps.
- The quantity and quality of debates and campaigns should be enhanced to allow an adequate number of debates to be organized by CSOs, NEBE and the Media as part of civic education exercises. Campaigns in referendums should be conducted in a manner that addresses both sides of the alternatives to the referendum.
- Few incidents of restriction on operations of political parties, arrest of accredited observers deployed by CSOs and limitations on NEBE's poll workers activities were observed as a result of lack of awareness on the part of local administration officials. To tackle this the NEBE should raise the awareness of local government officials to play a supportive role in the electoral and referendum processes.
- There were instances where poll workers were registering voters without proving their identity and residence through documents. In addition, poll workers were observed registering voters through prohibited modes of registration, including door to door and after church days. Irregularities in Voter Registration led to cancellation of registration in 24 centers. To tackle these, the NEBE should revisit the capacity, independence and impartiality of poll workers in its recruitment process
- NEBE should revise the recruitment process of its poll worker to ensure that they are of high integrity and competence. NEBE should consider recruiting poll workers from outside the areas where the referendum was going to take place.

Introduction

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

CECOE was established in May 2020 with three main objectives. These are: to help facilitate the capacity of its members to undertake voter and civic awareness, and increase voter participation in the electoral processes; to mobilize and provide the necessary support to its members to actively participate in monitoring and observation of all electoral processes and referendums; and to collect, organize, document, and share information related to the electoral process. In all its electoral and referendum observation activities, CECOE takes a three-phase approach of the electoral cycle process: pre-election/referendum, during voting, and the post-election/referendum.

CECOE observed the 2019 Sidama Referendum, the 2021 General Elections of Ethiopia as well as the mop up elections for the areas that did not conduct the elections during June 2021 election day due to security and logistical concerns, and the 2021 South West Ethiopia Referendum. CECOE's engagement in elections is not limited to observation, but also extends to other critical areas revolving around elections, mainly voter education and media monitoring. During the 2021 general elections, CECOE, through its member organizations, led a voter education campaign using social media and mainstream media outlets. Additionally, CECOE established a Media Monitoring Unit (MMU) where selected media outlets were monitored in relation to the coverage they provided towards the election. Following the Sixth General elections, CECOE has been engaging in capacity building for its member organizations, advocacy on electoral reforms, inclusive political process.

CECOE employs systematic citizen observation methods that utilize scientific sampling and technology-based data collection in its observation activities. These were employed in CECOE's observation of the pre-referendum political environment monitoring, the voter registration observation (VR), referendum day and post-referendum observation.

This report contains CECOE's referendum observation findings of the South Ethiopia Referendum which took place on February 06, 2023 and the subsequent referendum rerun in the Wolaita Zone on June 19, 2023. It is a comprehensive report on the findings gathered from CECOE's observation of the pre-referendum, referendum day and post-referendum processes.

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Section 1: Observation of the South Ethiopia Referendum



Image: NEBE

Chapter 1: Recent Political Developments Ahead of the Referendum

The South Statehood Demands

The South Referendum is one among the series of referendums that have been conducted in the former Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPR), notably, in Sidama, and South West Ethiopia Regional State. Due to the growing demand for statehood in the regional state, the committee of Peace Ambassadors headed by Abadula Gemedu, an EPRDF veteran, was formed to discuss with the public and southern elites, and then table recommendations. The peace group presented its report with a proposal to Southern Nations zonal and special woreda heads for deliberations in the Prime Minister's Office on 9 June 2020. The proposal was to split SNNP region into three geographic cluster regions—namely, Omotic, South Central, and South West regions.

However, splitting SNPPR into clusters received stiff resistance from the Wolaita and Gurage zones. The Wolaita Zone Council unanimously voted for a statehood and submitted its decision to the Regional Council on 19 December 2018.² Their demand for statehood was accompanied by actions including staging massive demonstrations in the Zone's capital city of Sodo as well as boycotting "the ten-days central committee meeting of the Southern Ethiopian Democratic Movement (SEPDM) in July 2019."³ Similarly, the Council of Gurage Zone, "rejected the government's proposal to be organized in clusters to pave ways for two more new regional states."⁴ Residents in Wolkite city, the capital of Gurage zone staged their protests by boycotting routine activities including civil service works and business activities in opposition against the cluster restructuring.⁵ On the other hand, the House of the Federation (HoF) "accepted the request of Wolaita, Gamo, Gofa, South Omo, Konso and Gedeo zones along with Derashe, Amaro, Burji, Ale, and Basketo special woredas to be reconstituted into one regional state."⁶ In tandem with this, the HOF also "decided to hold a referendum on the request to form a new regional state. Direction was given to the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) to conduct the referendum and notify the House of the outcome."⁷ In line with this NEBE organized the referendum in the six zones and five special woredas on February 6, 2023. The two alternatives provided for the referendum were supporting "the formation of the six zones and the five special woredas into one common region", which was represented by the symbol "white dove" while those who didn't support the formation of the six zones and five special woredas into a common region" which was represented by 'hut'. Critiques, however, raise questions whether the alternatives provided are indeed choices for voters in the proper sense of the term as well as highlight the alternative lacks clear-cut answer to the question what if those who didn't support the formation of the six zones and five special woredas into a common region outvote those who are in favor of the formation of the six zones and five special woredas into a common region.

2 FESSHA, Yonatan. "Internal Secession and Federalism in Ethiopia." IACL-IADC Blog, 15 July 2019, <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/2019-posts/2019/7/15/internal-secession-and-federalism-in-ethiopia>.

3 FESSHA, Yonatan. "Internal Secession and Federalism in Ethiopia." IACL-IADC Blog, 15 July 2019, <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/2019-posts/2019/7/15/internal-secession-and-federalism-in-ethiopia>.

4 Addis Standard. "News update: Gurage Zone Council declines new cluster restructuring, stick to earlier request." 11 August 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-update-gurage-zone-council-declines-new-cluster-restructuring-stick-to-earlier-request/>.

5 Addis Standard. "News update: Gurage Zone Council declines new cluster restructuring, stick to earlier request." 11 August 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/news-update-gurage-zone-council-declines-new-cluster-restructuring-stick-to-earlier-request/>.

6 Addis Standard. "Breaking: Six zones and five special woredas to hold a referendum." 18 August 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/breaking-six-zones-and-five-special-woredas-to-hold-a-referendum/>.

7 Addis Standard. "Breaking: Six zones and five special woredas to hold a referendum." 18 August 2022, <https://addisstandard.com/breaking-six-zones-and-five-special-woredas-to-hold-a-referendum/>.

Political Developments

Ethiopia's brutal war in the Northern regions of Tigray, Amhara and Afar, which claimed more than 600,000 civilian lives,⁸ and leaving millions in severe need of food and threatening the stability of Africa's second-most populous country⁹ came to an end on November 2, 2022 through a peace accord signed between Ethiopia's federal government and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) in Pretoria, South Africa. The Pretoria agreement was complemented by the subsequent Nairobi Declarations on November 12, 2022.¹⁰ Following the cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of Eritrean Defense Forces (EDF) from Tigray, TPLF forces handing over heavy weaponry to the national army, restoration of services, such as bank, electricity, telephone, resumption of flights and unexpected meeting between the Ethiopia's Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed with Tigray leaders on February 3, 2023 have been observed. On another note, insurgencies in Oromia, Benishangul/Gumuz, and Gambela regions have continued to challenge the regional governments. Civilians have not only been targeted but also continued to suffer from the broader worsening of the humanitarian situation in the country.¹¹

The split within the rank of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was the most recent crisis, which surfaced when "three Oromo archbishops of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church announced the formation of an Oromo Orthodox Church Synod, with 26 patriarchs appointed to lead the synod across Oromia. However, before too long, the Holy Synod of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (EOTC) and the breakaway archbishops have announced that they resolved their differences ending a near month-long schism that threatened the unity of the church through "constructive discussion" and according to "the canon of the church."¹²

Chapter 2: Legal Framework for the Referendum and Election Observation

FDRE Constitution

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 envisions a multinational state with the right to self-determination, including secession, granted to the country's nations, nationalities, and peoples.¹³ The Constitution further states in Article 47 sub 2 that nations, nationalities, and peoples within the states enumerated in sub-Article 1 of Article 47 have the right to establish at any time, their own regional states." To this end the constitution under Article 47 sub 3 provided the following conditions;

8 Reuters. "Ethiopia sets out on long road to peace after two years of war." 5 January 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethiopia-sets-out-long-road-peace-after-two-years-war-2023-01-05/>.

9 Teshome, Moges and Swoboda, Hannes. "Ethiopia's Bumpy Road to Peace and Lessons from the Western Balkans." IIP Vienna, January 23, 2023. <https://www.iipvienna.com/new-blog/2023/1/23/ethiopias-bumpy-road-to-peace-and-lessons-from-the-western-balkans>.

10 Teshome, Moges and Swoboda, Hannes. "Ethiopia's Bumpy Road to Peace and Lessons from the Western Balkans." IIP Vienna, January 23, 2023. <https://www.iipvienna.com/new-blog/2023/1/23/ethiopias-bumpy-road-to-peace-and-lessons-from-the-western-balkans>.

11 Raleigh, Clionadh. "Multiple Complications Threaten to Result in a Dangerous Re-escalation." ACLED, 2022, <https://acleddata.com/10-conflicts-to-worry-about-in-2022/ethiopia/mid-year-update/>.

12 Addis Standard. "News Analysis: Ethiopian Orthodox Church leaders resolve schism through dialogue, restore Church unity "based on church's canon"." February 16, 2023, <https://addisstandard.com/news-analysis-ethiopian-orthodox-church-leaders-resolve-schism-through-dialogue-restore-church-unity-based-on-churchs-canon/>.

13 Berhe, M. G., & Gebresilassie, F. H. (2021). Nationalism and self-determination in contemporary Ethiopia. Nations and Nationalism, 27, 96-111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12647>BERHEANDGEBRESILASSIE11

- The demand for statehood has been approved by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality or People concerned, and the demand is presented in writing to the State Council;
- When the latter has organized a referendum within one year to be held in the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand;
- When the demand for statehood is supported by a majority vote in the referendum and the State Council will have transferred its powers to the Nation, Nationality or People that made the demand; and
- When the new State created by the referendum without any need for application, directly becomes a member of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.”¹⁴

Proclamation No. 251/1995

The Proclamation enacted for the Consolidation of the House of the Federation and the Definition of its Powers and Responsibilities empowers the House of the Federation (HoF) to decide on matters relating to the rights of nations, nationalities, and peoples to self-determination.¹⁵ The right of self-determination may be granted if any nation, nationality, or people who believe that its self-identities are denied, its right of self-administration is infringed, the promotion of its culture, language, and history are not respected, in general, their rights enshrined in the constitution are not respected or, violated for any reason, may present their application to the House through the proper channel.¹⁶ The proclamation provided the following requirements to form its own state:¹⁷

- the question for statehood has been approved by a two-thirds majority vote of the members of the Council of the Nation, Nationality, or People in question, and the request thereof is presented in writing to the State Council;
- the Council that received the claim has organized, a referendum to the Nation, Nationality or People that presented the request, within one year;
- the request is supported by majority vote in the referendum of Nation, Nationalities of People on the question of state formation;
- The State Council has transferred its powers to the Nation, Nationality or People that claimed statehood.

If the above-mentioned requirements are satisfied, then “a new State which is formed by the referendum shall directly be a member of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia without any need for an application.” The question of statehood should be resolved within one year, beginning with the date the statehood request is approved.¹⁸ If the state formulation is not implemented within the time frame specified, stakeholders may file an appeal with the House¹⁹ Following this appeal the house shall make a final decision within two years on issues presented to it.²⁰ As provided in the proclamation, any claims shall be presented to the house in writing by the council of the nation, nationality, or people that claimed for the formation of the state.²¹

¹⁴ Proclamation No. 1/1995 Proclamation to Pronounce the Coming into Effect of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Article 39. Available at: <https://chilot.me/2013/11/proclamation-no-1-1995-proclamation-to-pronounce-the-coming-into-effect-of-the-constitution-of-the-federal-democratic-republic-of-ethiopia/>. accessed 19, July, 2023

¹⁵ Proclamation No. 1/1995 Proclamation to Pronounce the Coming into Effect of the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Article 39. Available at: <https://chilot.me/2013/11/proclamation-no-1-1995-proclamation-to-pronounce-the-coming-into-effect-of-the-constitution-of-the-federal-democratic-republic-of-ethiopia/>. accessed 19, July, 2023

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid article 19(3)

¹⁸ Ibid article 19(3)(1)(b)

¹⁹ Ibid Article 19(3)(2)

²⁰ Ibid article 19(3)(4)

²¹ Ibid article 19(3)(3)

Proclamation No.1162/19

This proclamation endeavors to ensure the participation of every Ethiopian in all-inclusive, fair, and peaceful elections held at every level on the basis of equal popular suffrage.²² It also enables political parties with different views to participate by expressing their opinions to the electorate in a lawful and peaceful manner, and that enables the people to elect their representatives based on informed decisions and free expression of their will.²³ As one type of election, a referendum is mentioned in Article 6 (5) of the proclamation.²⁴ The proclamation also gave the mandate to organize a referendum to the national election board of Ethiopia if the appropriate body decides based on the constitution or other laws.²⁵ Details for the conduct of the referendum such as organizing polling stations in a way convenient to execute the referendum, determining the polling date, voter's criteria to participate, the choice to put on the ballot paper and the types and contents of campaigns relating to a referendum shall be decided by the board in consultation with the constitutionally authorized body.²⁶

The same proclamation also works towards availing the election environment to local CSOs so that they can observe the election process.²⁷ Those CSOs have to follow the following requirements in order to get accreditation:

- *Must be local CSO with a legal personality;*
- *Must be non-partisan, non-profitable, and not part of a government organ;*
- *Leaders and board members must not be members of any political party;*
- *Deployed individuals must be capable of impartially observing the election.*

If the Board rejects a request to observe elections on the ground of failure to meet the requirements set out under sub Article 1 “it shall notify in writing the applicant of the decision within 30 days of receiving the request. An applicant aggrieved by the decision of the Board may appeal to the Federal High Court within 14 days.”²⁸ If the Board finds “an election observer is engaged in activities in violation of the code of conduct and the commitments it made”, depending on the condition of the case, it may “issue a warning to the organization and its representative, pointing out the error and telling them to make amends, or may suspend the individual or the organization from observing the election.”²⁹ The proclamation also gave the accredited election observers the right to move around the polling station to monitor the election process.³⁰ If they encounter any irregularities, they have the right to report it to the board.³¹

Chapter 3: Methodology

Elections and/or Referendums are not a single-day event but rather a process. CECOIE approached the 2023 SNNPR referendum observation following the electoral cycle approach in its programming. As such, it observed the pre-referendum, referendum day, and post-referendum periods. The main objective of observing the referendum holistically was to contribute to the inclusiveness, transparency and accountability of the South Ethiopia referendum. Moreover, the observation had the specific objectives of providing systematic and objective information on the conduct of the referendum process. The methodologies that CECOIE employed during the observation of the referendum cycles are detailed below.

22 The Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Elections Code of Conduct Proclamation No.1162/19

23 Ibid

24 Ibid article 6(5)

25 Ibid article 11(1)

26 Ibid article 11(2)(3)

27 Ibid article 115(1)(a)(b)(c)(d)

28 Ibid Article 115(2)

29 Ibid Article 115(3)

30 Ibid article 116 (1)

31 Ibid article 116(2)

Zone. Special Woreda	Number of Pre-referendum Observers	Number of Referendum day observers	Number of Post-referendum observers
Ale	2	4	1
Amaro	2	11	1
Burji	1	5	1
Bakseto	2	6	1
Derashe	1	10	1
Konso	3	14	2
Wolaita	29	143	15
Gamo	21	74	9
Gofa	9	36	4
Gedeo	14	92	10
South Omo	7	39	5
Total	91	434	50

Pre-Referendum

Long term Observation

CECOE deployed a total of 91 long-term observers to monitor the general political environment and voter registration exercise in the pre-referendum phase. CECOE recruited, trained, and deployed long-term observers from its member organizations to observe the credibility, transparency, and inclusiveness of the pre-referendum process in order to promote citizen participation.

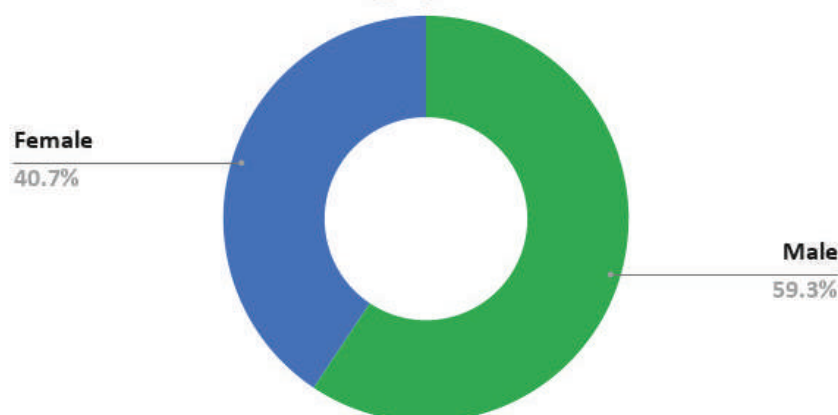
CECOE implemented a proportional observation methodology, which focused on the deployment of trained and accredited observers covering all the zones and special woredas proportional to the distribution of polling stations established by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. The long-term observers were deployed between December 1, 2022 and January 30, 2023.

Voter Registration

In addition to observing the general political environment, the long-term observers also observed voter registration, which occurred between December 20, 2022 and January 4, 2023. Each of CECOE's voter registration observers observed an average of 6 registration centers and reported twice per week.

The chart below summarizes the pre-referendum observer's Gender Aggregation

Distribution of the Pre-referendum Observers by Gender Aggregation



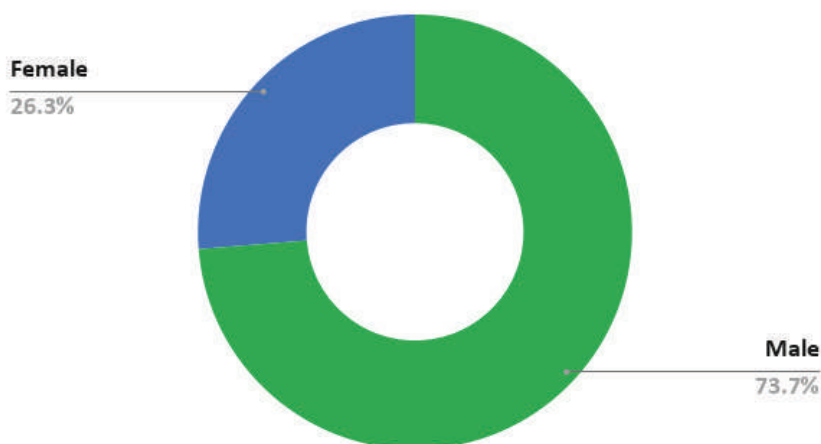
All observers were given the necessary training to collect and document factual, independent, and objective information on the pre-referendum political environment and voter registration process using standardized checklists developed by CECOE to analyze the voter registration process, including any critical incidents that could have a significant impact on the overall referendum process.

Referendum voting Day

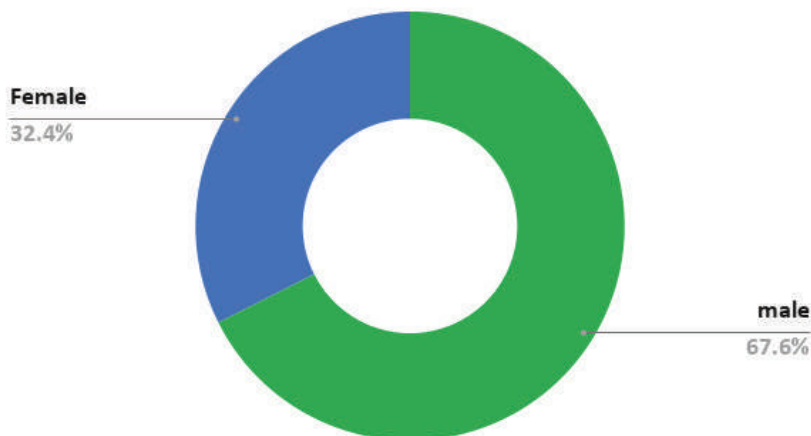
Field observation

On the referendum day, CECOE recruited, trained, and deployed observers in all six zones and five special woredas. It employed two complementary observational methodologies, mobile observation and stationary observation. CECOE deployed a total of 510 observers of which 76 were mobile observers that were deployed using convenient methods. Each mobile observer was expected to visit 5 polling stations. The remaining 434 were stationary observers. CECOE made significant efforts to employ the proportional method. However, the proportional method was not successfully implemented as a result of dropout of observers. These observers were instructed to arrive at 5:30 am so that they could witness the opening and setup process, and remain at the polling station to observe the voting, closing and counting processes until the results were announced. The chart below summarizes the referendum day observers Gender Aggregation

Distribution of the Stationary Observers by Gender



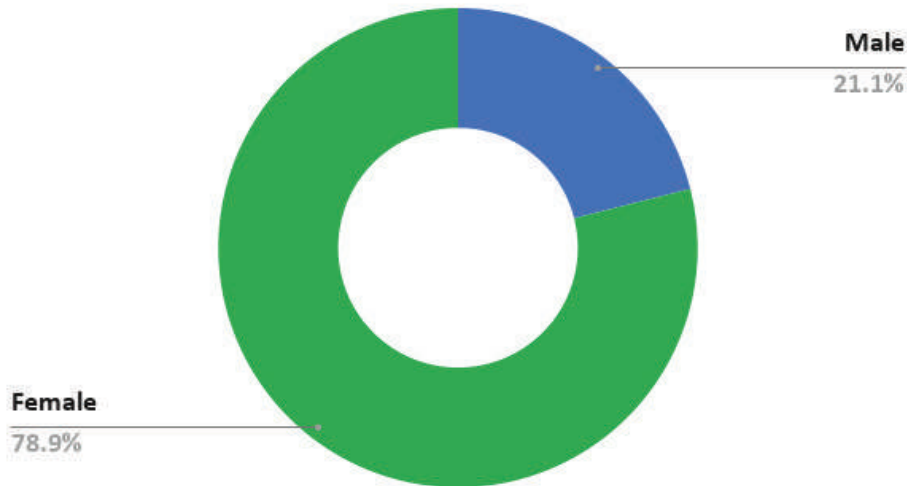
Distribution of the Mobile Observers by Gender



Data Centre

In order to ensure the integrity, accuracy and quality assurance of the information reported by observers, CECOE established a data center in Addis Ababa. The data center consisted of 20 data clerks and a few data managers. The main objective was to verify the information reported from the observers and to follow up on any partial or missing information and receiving critical incidents

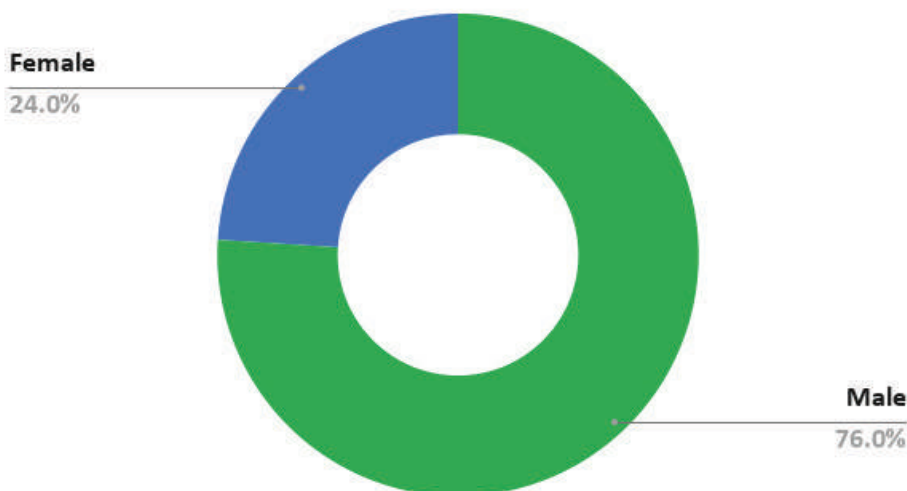
Distribution of the Data Centre operators by Gender



Post Referendum Observation

After the referendum day, CECOE deployed a team of 50 observers to collect and collate information on the general political environment, public opinion on the results of the referendum, and civic space in SNNPR beyond the referendum day. These observers sent their observation reports twice a week (every Monday and every Friday) for a period of one month, from February 7, to March 4, 2023.

Distribution of Observers for the Post-Referendum by Gender



Chapter 4: Observation Findings

A) Pre-referendum observation findings

The below findings are based on observation data collected from observers that CECOE deployed in the period running between December 1, 2022 and January 30, 2023. These observers observed and reported on the pre-referendum political environment and the voter registration process using separate checklists. CECOE received 456 reports submitted by observers on the pre-referendum political environment from December 1, 2022 to January 30, 2023. Additionally, CECOE deployed observers who observed 438 voter registration centers between December 20, 2022, and January 4, 2023.

Voter education

In the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, voter education is one of the primary responsibilities of NEBE. Proclamation 1133/2019, Article 7(2), gives the NEBE powers, including granting permission, following up and supervising civil society organizations that are conducting voter education and conducting voter education itself.³² NEBE issued a request for expressions of interest from CSOs to provide voter education as part of its preparations to hold the referendum.³³ Following the call, the NEBE accredited 16 CSOs to engage in voter education for the referendum.³⁴

As part of the pre-referendum political environment scanning, CECOE Observers scanned and reported the availability, the mode of delivery, the accessibility, and any major challenges to voter education activities. The following summary is based on 555 observer reports.

Availability of Voter education activities

- 468 (84%) observer reports indicated that the observers witnessed voter education activities in their areas while in 87 (16%) reports, observers claimed to have not witnessed any voter education activities in their area. The majority of those that reported having not witnessed or heard of voter education in their areas were located in the Gedeo Zone where 50 of 86(58%) observers reported that they did not witness delivery of voter education.
- 370 (67%) observer reports showed that voter education was inclusive of both genders, internally displaced people, and people with disabilities, while 185 (33%) observer reports indicated that the voter education activities that were carried out were not inclusive of gender, PwDs and the internally displaced.
- The observers were requested to rate the quality of voter education provided. Out of a total of 555 reports, on average observer reports rated the quality of the voter education as below satisfactory.

Mode of Delivery of Voter Education

The mode of delivery is very crucial in voter education. Correspondingly, CECOE observed different delivery modes by different stakeholders. These included face-to-face, use of billboards, and print media; street fairs; local media (radio or television); social media; and information technology, as well as a combination of different methods.

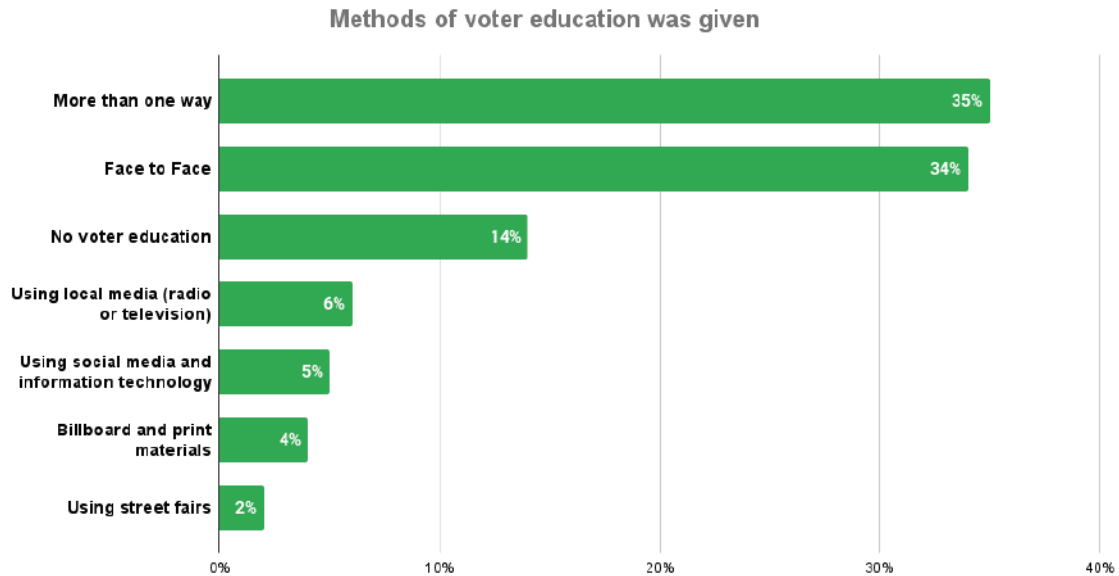
32 Article 7(2) of proclamation 1133/2019

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34 የኢትዮጵያ ብሔራዊ ምርጫ ቦርድ በደቡብ ብ/ብ/ሕ ክልል በሚገኙ ስድስት ዞኖችና አምስት ልዩ ወረዳዎች ላይ ለሚካሄደው ሕዝብ ውሳኔ የሥነ ህጋዊ የመራጮች ትምህርት ለመስጠት በቦርዱ ፈቃድ የተሰጣቸው የሲቪል ማህበረሰብ ድርጅቶች, የኢትዮጵያ ብሔራዊ ምርጫ ቦርድ. Available at: <https://nebe.org.et/am/node/804> (Accessed: February 27, 2023).

Accordingly,

- 186 (34%) reports indicated that voter education was conducted face-to-face, 34 (6%) reports showed voter education was conducted through local media (radio and television), and 25 (5%) reports indicated voter education was conducted through social media and other digital technologies. On a positive note, 193(35%) reports show that voter education was conducted in more than one way

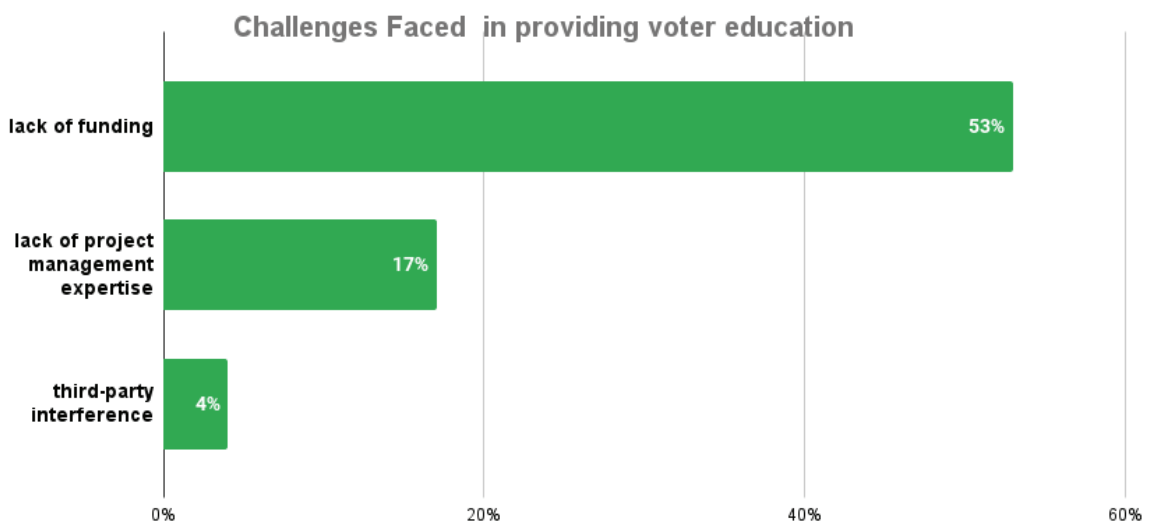


Accessibility of Voter education

- 329 (59%) observer reports indicated that voter education was easily accessible in their areas including rural areas. However, reports from observers in Gedio and South Omo Zones reported very low accessibility at 13 (22%) and 23 (47%) observer reports form each of the two zones, respectively.

Challenges Faced

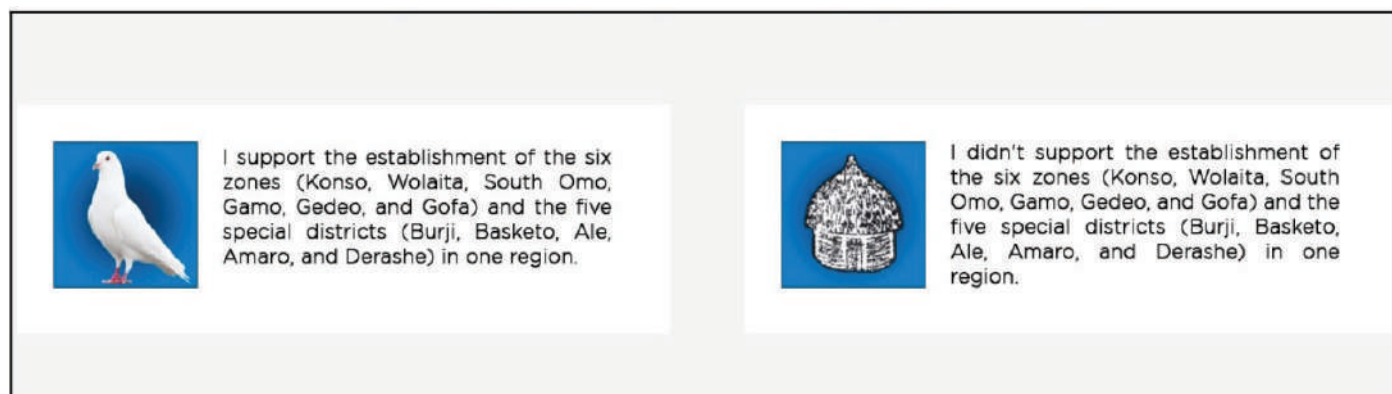
- According to our observational findings, the main challenge to voter education was a lack of funding. 290 (53%) reports show that the main issue for voter educators was a lack of funding. The second and third challenges in terms of limiting the reach of voter education projects were a lack of project management expertise in 93(17%) and third-party interference in 24(4%)



Campaigns and debates

Campaigns are an important process in electoral and referendum processes in that they allow voters to explore the different alternatives for the ballots they will be casting. Thus, the existence of a fair, accessible, and equal campaigning environment in the pre-referendum period is crucial for the overall electoral process. CECOE's observers were asked to monitor the campaign during the south referendum from the start of campaign activities, accessibility of the campaigns to the public, and equal opportunity given to the alternatives of the referendum in campaign activities.

During the South Ethiopia Referendum, there were two symbols that represented the alternatives. A “white dove” symbol representing the establishment of the new South Ethiopia Region while a “Hut” symbol representing support for the continuation of the six zones and five special woredas under the existing SNNP regional state.



Referendum Alternatives

CECOE observers made the following observation findings in relation to campaign activities.

- 433 (78%) reports indicate that there were campaign activities related to the referendum. Additionally, 275 (50%) reports showed that campaigns lacked accessibility to the public.
- Only 54 (10%) reports indicated that there were one or more referendum debates conducted either by NEBE or any other registered civil society organization in the areas they observed. The debates were reported in Wolaita, Burji, Gamo, Gofa, South Omo and Amaro.
- Almost all reports provided that campaigns that took place over the referendum did not address the available options to the public. These campaigns were in support of the dove alternative in the referendum which represented establishment of a new regional state.
- 528 (95%) of observer reports indicated that there was no violence, conflict provoking, distorted information, and hate speech being made in relation to referendum campaigns, while 26 (5%) reports indicated the observers did not know about it.

Civic Space

Having a conducive civic space that accommodates civil society organizations, political parties, the media, and other interest groups is essential in any electoral process. Taking note of this, CECOE's pre-referendum observation monitored the existence of a conducive civic space by checking whether undue restrictions and limitations were imposed on civil society actors, political parties, the media, and journalists.

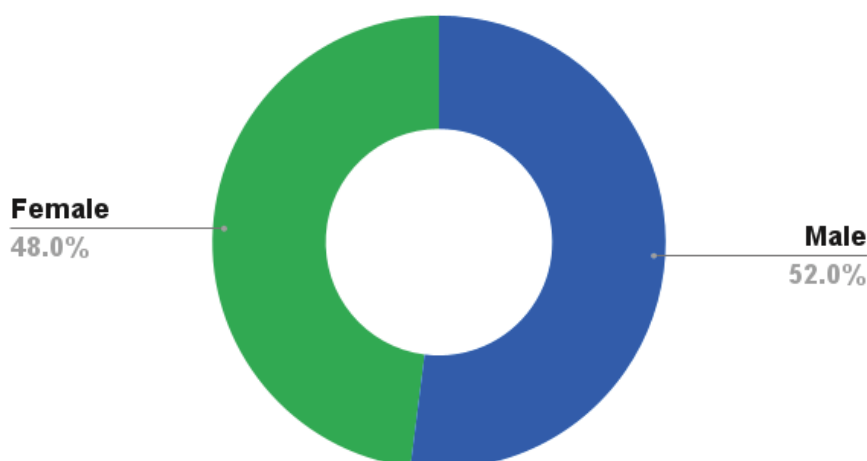
CECOE gathered the following key findings in relation to civic space;

- All, 555 (100%), observer reports indicated there were no reports of arrests, intimidations, harassment, or killings of media professionals. On restrictions over political parties' participation, there was one incident in South Omo where opposition political parties were not allowed to participate in campaign activities by the officials from the ruling party, Prosperity Party.
- CECOE received three reports indicating restrictions on the activities of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). These instances occurred in the Gamo zone (Two incidents in Deremalo Woreda in Gammu Zone) and one incident in South Omo Zone, Benaytsemay Kebele. In these incidents, zonal administrators and local police prohibited duly accredited observers deployed by CECOE from conducting their monitoring duties. The officials claimed that the accreditation badges were illegal and needed further communication from federal, regional, and zonal governments. These led to the arrest of one of CECOE's observers, who was later released through the intervention of the CECOE secretariat, and the NEBE.
- Restrictions on the operations of the NEBE. In Derashe Special Woreda, local administration officials prohibited NEBE's workers from delivering electoral materials in the area.
- On the role of Civil Society Organizations in the referendum
 - **Presence:** 307 (55%) reports showed that CSOs had played a key role in the referendum. Reports of a lack of significant contributions by CSOs are especially received in Amaro and Konso with over 60% of their observer reports reporting that there were no CSOs activities in the areas.
 - **Reach:** 310 (56%) reports indicate that the CSOs' activities in the referendum were not accessible to peripheral areas (rural areas).

Registration of voters

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia scheduled the registration of eligible voters in polling stations across the six zones and five special woredas between December 15, 2022 and January 4, 2023. However, NEBE postponed the commencement date for voter registration to December 20, 2022. During the registration period, NEBE announced that irregularities were reported in the voter registration process at 10 polling stations in Wolaita and Gofa Zones. A total of 3,769 polling stations were established to conduct voter registration in the Six zones and five special woredas of SNNPR. According to the NEBE, a total of 3,028,770 people were registered to vote at 3,769 polling stations, and 493 of these voters were persons with disabilities. The total number of registrants aggregated by gender is 1,575,371 males and 1,453,399 females, with 296 males and 197 females with disabilities.

Number of Registered voters by Gender



The Coalition deployed 76 observers for voter registration that took place between December 20, 2022 and January 1, 2023. However, in some polling stations registration of voters has been extended until January 4 due to irregularities in voter registration. The following summary of findings are based on information collected from 438 registration centers.

On the observation of voter registration, CECOE wanted to observe their adherence to national, regional and international standards, the accessibility of the centers, including distance and shielding from weather such as sun or rain; and the location of the centers among others.

Setup and accessibility of registration centers

Per the election proclamation, voter registration can only be conducted at designated polling stations. The set-up and accessibility of registration centers are important for ascertaining the inclusion of various segments of society and the transparency of the registration process. CECOE's observations of the voter registration process looked into the setup and accessibility of registration centers. Voter registration observers reported the following findings on setup;

- 400 (96%) registration centers that CECOE observed were easy to travel to and accessible while 16 (4%) registration centers were somewhat easy.
- On the basis of location of the registration centers that were observed, 254 (58%) registration centers were established in urban areas, while 101 (23%) registration centers were set up in semi-urban areas, and 83 (19%) registration centers were in rural areas.
- In 192 (44%) registration centers, registration of voters took place inside buildings, 54 (12%) in tents, and 192 (44%) in other locations (not buildings or tents).
- 52(12%) registration centers were not easily accessible to enter without need for assistance for persons with disabilities or mobility challenges (elderly, women carrying small children, etc.)
- According to NEBE, all registration centers should have some form of protection from the sun and rain. However, 230 (53%) registration centers did not have any of these protections.
- Contrary to the electoral law, there were registration centers established in political party buildings (2 polling stations with polling station IDs 790601364505 and 790601364502) and in private homes (2 polling stations with polling station IDs 790704141703 and 790501128402).

Poll workers

Article 15(9) of the Electoral Act states that the Board shall “consider gender representation” in its activities. Directive No. 6/2021 Article 7(1) stipulates that in a voter registration committee at least one member should be a woman. In line with these regulations, CECOE's observers monitored the fulfillment of these requirements across polling stations.

- Consistent with NEBE regulations, on average 3 registration officials were present, of these it was reported that on average one registration official was a woman.
- With regards to the participation of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs), CECOE's observers reported that they didn't observe PwDs who were serving as registration officials

Voter registration rules and procedures

The NEBE provides multiple sets of rules and procedures that must be followed during the registration of voters at polling stations. The law prohibits the conduct of registration outside of polling stations, door to door registration or roving registration. The law on voter registration provides that government working hours

should serve as the timeline for registration. Furthermore, citizens seeking to register as voters must provide proof of his/her age, identity and residence as requirements. Accordingly, CECOE monitored the occurrence of these incidents in the registration centers that were observed.

- In line with the voter registration directive, at most registration centers observed, 437 (99.7 %), registration of voters started between 8:30 AM and 9:30 AM. In 1 registration center in Gamo zone the registration did not begin until 12:30PM. The registration in this polling station was delayed because the officials believed that no registration was supposed to occur on Sunday when voters were to attend church services.
- The electoral law allows for temporary closing of the registration process for 1-hour lunch break given to the registration officials. In most polling stations, 429 (98%), the registration was not interrupted while in 9 registration centers (2%) the registration process was interrupted for more than 30 minutes, outside of the one-hour lunch breaks. These 9 registration stations are situated in Wolaita Zone (2 centers), Ale Special Woreda (4 centers), Gedeo Zone (2 centers) and South Omo (1 center). With regards to the interruption of the registration process for lunch breaks by polling stations officials, the registration process was interrupted in only 2 polling stations in Alle Special woreda for more than one-hour contrary to the electoral law which provides a one-hour lunch break for polling station workers.
- According to the electoral law, registration of voters is possible when persons seeking to be registered bring documents attesting to their identity and residence to registration centers. Accordingly, CECOE has reached the following findings
 1. In 35 (8%) registration centers observed citizens were not allowed to register as voters despite bringing identification documents, contrary to the electoral law. These incidents were reported from registration centers situated in Wolaita zone (19 registration centers), Burji special Woreda (4 registration centers), Konso zone (2 registration centers), Gofa zone (1 registration center), Gamo zone (3 registration centers), and South Omo Zone (6 registration centers).
 2. In 24(5%) registration centers observed voters were registered without proving their identity. These polling stations are located in Konso Zone (1 center), Wolaita Zone (8 centers), Gamo Zone (6 centers), Gedeo Zone (5 centers), Gofa Zone (1 center), South Omo Zone (1 center) and Burji Special woreda (2 centers),
 3. In 22(5%) registration centers observed, voters were registered without proving residence. These registration centers are located in Konso Zone (1 registration center), Wolaita Zone (8 registration centers), Gamo Zone (9 registration centers), Gofa Zone (2 registration centers), and Burji Special Woreda (2 registration centers).
 4. CECOE observed the presence of security officials at the registration centers. In 209 (48%) registration centers observed security personnel were not present outside the registration center during the registration process.

Referendum Day Voting

CECOE deployed a total of 434 stationary observers for the referendum day observation. However, due to various challenges, CECOE received complete information from only 410 stationary observers. The following information is based on information from the 410 polling stations.

Opening of polling stations

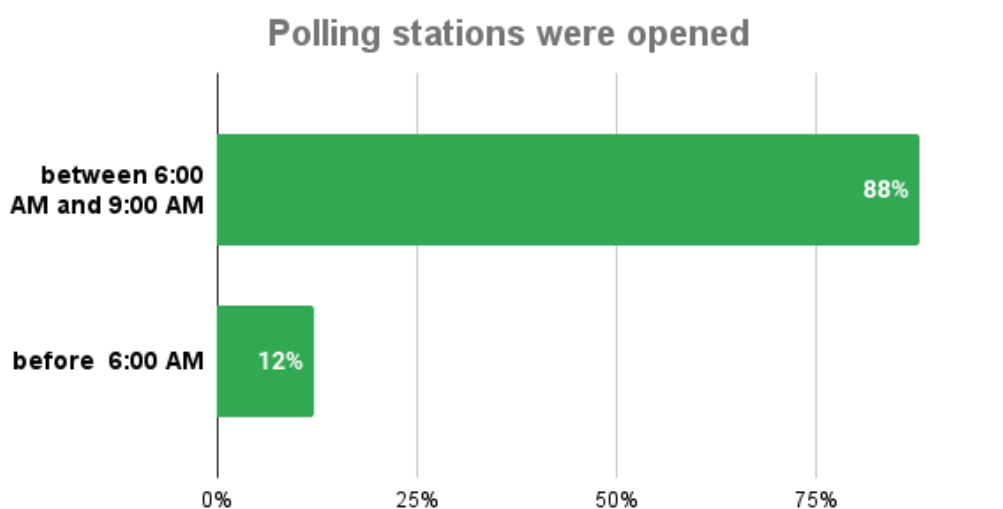
The polling stations in Ethiopia are required to open at 6:00 AM and close at 6:00 PM on voting day. CECOE observers arrived at the polling stations at 5:30 am so that they could witness the setup of polling station processes. These are findings on the opening process.

• Commencement of Voting

NEBE officials were expected to be present at polling stations before the opening time in order to set up for voting to begin at 6:00 A.M. In 400 (98%) polling stations observed, polling officials were present when observers arrived at polling stations by 5:30 AM.

In 409 (99%) polling stations observed, observers were permitted to enter polling stations to observe. However, in one polling station in Gamo Zone, a CECOIE observer was not permitted to observe as detailed in the critical incidents section. Later, the polling station officials allowed the observer to enter the assigned polling station following intervention by the CECOIE secretariat.

In relation to the opening of polling stations, in 362 (88%) polling stations observed, 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 observed were established in places permitted by the electoral law. However, a few were located in prohibited areas. These are detailed in the critical incidents section.

• Accessibility of polling stations

Ensuring the participation of persons with disabilities (PwDs) is a universally recognized right. As such, polling stations need to be set in locations that are easily accessible to all persons, especially those with mobility challenges. However, 17 (4%) polling stations observed were not convenient for persons with disabilities (PwDs).

• Availability of critical electoral materials

Except for 4 polling stations where the results and reconciliation form were missing, in 410 (100%) polling stations observed, the following materials were present before the 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. Additionally, in 93 (23%) polling stations observed, the polling station chairperson was a woman.

Voting Process

• Priority Voting

In 408 (99%) polling stations observed, officials gave priority in the queue to persons living with disabilities, the elderly, the frail, pregnant women and parents of young children. However, in 2 (1%) polling stations observed by mobile observers, priority was not given to the groups of voters specified above. In all, 410 (100%), polling stations, persons with disability were allowed to receive support from a personal assistant of their choosing

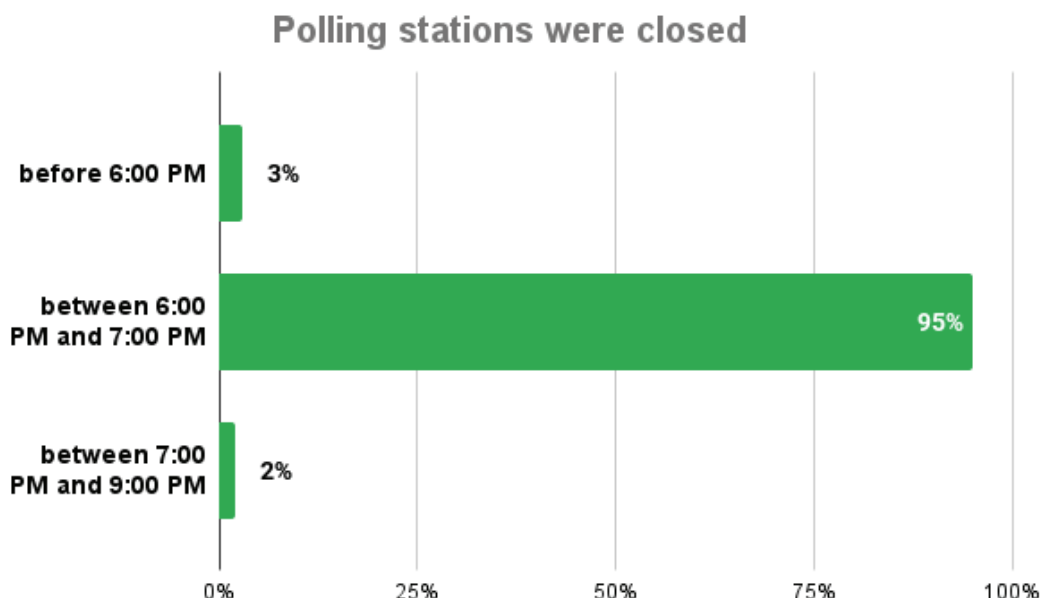
• Adherence to Voting procedures

In 358 (87%) polling stations observed, 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. Meanwhile, 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 14 (3%) polling stations observed, on average, 5 people who were not on the electoral roll were allowed to vote and in 6 (1%) polling stations, there was a presence of an unauthorized person(s) inside the polling stations at some point during voting. These instances are detailed in the critical incidents section.

In one polling station, voting was suspended at some point during the day as detailed in the critical incidents section.

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 when polling stations will be closed should be allowed to vote.

In all, 410 (100%), polling stations observed, the polling officials stamped on all the ballot papers before giving them to the voter; ballot boxes were placed in a visible place at all times

• **Security at the Polling station**

In 344 (84%) polling stations, security personnel were present outside the polling station at all times during voting. Moreover, in 57 (14%) polling stations, security personnel were present outside the polling stations at some point ; while in 9 (2%) reported there were no security personnel.³⁵

Counting

In 375 (91%) polling stations observed, copies of the reconciliation and results forms were posted outside the polling station. Additionally, in all 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 was reported at the polling stations observed. The polling station chairperson clearly displayed the ballot papers during the counting; 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 could have an effect on the referendum processes and outcomes. Observers were instructed to report critical incidents immediately to the CECOE Referendum Situation Room. CECOE staff at the Situation Room would undertake further follow-up and verification. CECOE observers reported a total of 24 incidents, as detailed below: -

Missing Electoral Material

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 Locations

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. Manawude Gerese polling station 01 in Gamo Zone Gerese woreda, an unauthorized person entered the polling station alleging they were coordinators.
5. Kuleti polling station in Gofa zone, Sawla town, an unauthorized person entered the polling station to hoist a flag.
6. At Kolatega polling station in South Omo, Turmi town, there was an unauthorized person who entered the polling station to take pictures.
7. Mokonisa polling station in Gedeo zone, Gedeb Woreda, woreda administration officials were present in the polling station at the time of Ballot counting.

³⁵ Security officers were not present in polling stations that CECOE 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,

8. Galam polling station 02 in Gofa zone, Sawla Ketema, political party members from the Prosperity Party were present throughout the whole voting process.
9. Backe polling station 02 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. At Zefene Ketema polling station 01 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 Duche Dbusha in Gamo Zone, Gerase woreda, an observer reported that during the counting process, station officials stuffed unused ballots.

Illegal Voting

12. Chora tare 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. Tadisa polling station 01 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 Derashi Leyu Wereda Tabiya 3, 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. At Derashe kebele 01 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. At a polling station with 0790301059601 ID 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. At the Chora tare polling station in Wolaita Zone, Chora Tare keble, 12 persons whose names were not in the voters' roll were allowed to vote.
18. Polling station with 0791001054003 ID 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. Tuguna Fango 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. 01 Kebele derashe 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 Woyde Woreda where a kebele official was watching while voters were marking symbols which they voted for.

Interruption of the voting process

23. Polling station with 0790702379803 ID 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. Kefakeru Gido polling station 3 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.

Post-referendum observation

CECOE deployed a total of 50 observers for the post-referendum observation to scan the political environment, public opinion, and civic space for a period of one month amounting to 6 reporting periods. The following information is based on 300 observer reports collected from 50 post-election observers.

Post-referendum riots and protests

- All 300 (100%) observer reports indicate there were no restrictions on movement or assembly rights, mass protests or public riots related to the referendum process and results. Additionally, there were no incidents of arrests, intimidations, harassment, or killings of media professionals, political parties/ political party members nor hate speech, abusive or threatening speeches.

Public opinion on the results of the referendum

- 4% (11) of the reports received indicate that there were serious doubts about the results of the referendum. These were highly reported from Wolaita, Gammo, and South Omo zones.
- All 300 (100%) observer reports indicated there were no exaggerated distorted facts or false information regarding the result of the referendum in the media.
- Almost all observers' reports indicated that citizens expressed their personal opinion about the election results being fair or acceptable. While 4 reports from South Omo show that citizens expressed their personal opinion about the election results being unfair or unacceptable.

Limitation on the civic space

- All, 300 (100%) observer reports indicate no journalists, observers, civil society workers, or citizens were arrested in connection with the referendum, and neither security nor law enforcement agencies took steps to stop and/or prevent incidents of violence, damage, hate speech, or false information.

Results Analysis

After the referendum voting on February 6, 2023, NEBE proceeded with the aggregation of the results from all the polling stations in the Six zones and the Five special woredas. The aggregation took place at the region's tallying center at ArbaMinch City coordination office. The first batch of the results were released on February 7, 2023, and subsequent results were announced later. However, the referendum results for Wolaita Zone were put on hold as NEBE could not verify the legitimacy of the process. Subsequently, the board ordered an investigation into the scope of the violations and the stations that were affected; and announced that it would communicate the final decision on the matter as soon as the investigation was completed.³⁶

According to the results announced by NEBE, excluding the Wolaita zone and the other 81 polling stations spread in the other zones or woredas, 1,646,425 citizens voted to form the new region while 78,970 voters voted against the creation of a new zone. The board excluded results from the entirety of the Wolaita Zone where a serious violation of the electoral law took place. In general, 95% of the people who voted in referendum were in favor of the creation of the new state within the SNNPR region. Amaro Kelle had the highest percentage of support with almost 100% supporting the creation of a new state while the least was in Gofa where 95% supported the creation of the new state.

The table below summarizes the official referendum results as released by NEBE.

No	Zone/ Woredas	Registered voters	Citizens voted	% Turnout	Total number polling stations	Included polling station	Excluded polling station	For (Against new state)	For (Support to new state)	% Support of New State
1	Alle	29,950	23,520	79%	64	61	3	412	22,395	98%
2	Amaro Kelle	94,233	91,382	97%	93	91	2	216	90,377	100%
3	Basketto Liyu	32,639	29,912	92%	64	64	0	1,133	27,674	96%
4	Burji	36,123	29,943	83%	39	27	12	765	28,460	97%
5	Derashe liyu	56,801	53,155	94%	85	78	7	453	51,467	99%
6	Gammo	630,340	602,133	96%	805	784	21	9,682	583,757	98%
7	Gedeo	372,754	300,994	81%	626	603	23	49,749	241,695	83%
8	Gofa	289,307	264,665	91%	329	319	10	12,306	243,327	95%
9	Konso	111,561	105,292	94%	135	131	4	1,890	101,114	98%
10	South Omo	297,948	266,991	90%	64	61	3	5,364	256,159	98%
	Total	1,951,656	1,767,987		26,656	2578	81	78,970	1,646,425	95%

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

The South Ethiopia referendum was generally peaceful. However, there were numerous irregularities in the voter registration process and on referendum day. This has resulted in the cancellation of voter registration at 24 polling stations. Additionally, results have been canceled in 81 polling stations and the entirety of the Wolaita Zone where a serious violation of the electoral law took place.

³⁶ National Election Board of Ethiopia.(n.d.). Retrieved from <https://t.me/NationalElectionBoard-NEBE/863>

Recommendations

CECOE forwards the following recommendations to key stakeholders who played prominent roles in the referendum based on data collected during the pre-referendum, referendum day, and post-referendum phases.

Voter education

Very few CSOs engaged in voter education activities compared to the size of the zones and special woredas. Consequently, voter education activities were deemed inadequate especially in rural areas. Low funding was experienced as well as low technical capacity by CSOs. Tight schedules for conducting voter education were also attributed to the inadequate delivery of voter education. Below is set of recommendations to improve voter education:

- CSOs should enhance their institutional capacity in area of project management more specifically voter education project management
- There is a need for more CSOs to engage in democracy, governance and elections. CSOs should actively work on areas of civic engagement in the provision of civic and voter education to enhance participation of citizens in political processes. CSOs should use innovative approaches in the delivery of voter education. This will be easy to capture for the younger generations. In addition to the face to face approach they should start utilizing multiple mediums, in particular radio and social media, to reach as many people as possible.
- CSOs also revisit not only their approach but also the quality of the voter education provision which is rated unsatisfactory.
- NEBE should consider providing adequate time for voter education
- NEBE made funds available for the CSOs that provided voter education for the South referendum. While commending the initiative, NEBE should increase the number of CSOs that will access the funds for voter education.
- NEBE's advertisement on the national broadcasters is commendable. It should also consider using local languages to ensure that citizens in rural areas receive voter education.
- Donors should make funds readily available and timely for civic and voter education to address CSOs' funding shortage.

Debates

- An adequate number of debates were not organized by CSOs, NEBE and the Media. They should organize debates as part of civic education exercises to educate the public.
- The media is a very key stakeholder in enabling information sharing and spread. They should collaborate with the CSOs and NEBE to conduct debates for referendums and elections. These will go a long way towards ensuring that all the citizenry have access to information.

Civic space

- A few incidents of restriction on the operations of political parties, arrest of accredited observers deployed by CSOs and limitations on NEBE's poll workers activities were observed as a result of lack of awareness on the part of local administration officials. To tackle this:
- NEBE should raise the awareness of local government officials to play a supportive role in the electoral processes.

Registration of Voters

- Notably, most registration centers observed by CECOE were accessible for PwDs, women carrying children and persons with mobility challenges. However, there were still accessibility challenges in some registration centers. Hence, the NEBE should take the necessary measures to improve accessibility of registration centers for PwDs, women carrying children and persons with mobility challenges.
- There were instances where poll workers were registering voters without proving their identity and residence through documents. In addition, poll workers were observed registering voters through a prohibited mode of registration through door to door and after church. Irregularities in voter registration led to cancellation of registration in 24 centers. To tackle these, the NEBE should revisit the capacity, independence and impartiality of poll workers in its recruitment.

Referendum day

The referendum day was generally peaceful. However, irregularities were observed during the voting process such as incidents related to missing electoral materials, the opening of polling stations in forbidden locations, the entering of unauthorized persons at polling stations , conduct of campaign activity within 200 meters of polling station , stuffing of ballots, illegal Voting, not showing emptiness of ballot boxes, the interference of election officials in the voting process, cases of voting by persons who are not on the voter roll, non-inking of voters, violation of secrecy of voting, and interruption of the voting process. To prevent these incidents from occurring in the future;

- The Board should ensure proper training of its staff to ensure they follow all procedures and regulations on the election day such as ensuring all voters are checked and are present in the voter register, inking all voters, and upholding the secrecy of voting. Necessary steps should be taken to tackle challenges of inaccessibility of polling stations and abuse of voting procedures.

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Section Two: Observation of the Referendum Rerun in the Wolaita Zone



Chapter 6: Introduction

Following the announcement of the results of the referendum voting that took place on February 06, 2023, in the Six Zones (Konso, South Omo, Wolayta, Gamo, Gedeo, and Gofa) and Five Special Woredas (Burji, Basketo, Ale, Amaro, and Derashe) of the SNNP region, the NEBE canceled the results of the referendum in the totality of the Wolaita zone as a result of serious irregularities that occurred in the voter registration and the voting day processes. Consequently, the NEBE announced its decision and informed key stakeholders that a referendum rerun will take place in the Wolaita Zone. On May 08, 2023, the NEBE issued a draft electoral timetable where the implementation plan for the electoral activities of the referendum were outlined in detail. Based on the plan, the rerun was scheduled to take place on June 19, 2023.³⁷ Following this, the NEBE held a series of discussions with various stakeholders that were later on engaged in a variety of electoral activities such as citizen observation, voter education and human rights monitoring. Stakeholders from 12 Civil Society Organizations and the Ethiopia Human Rights Commission were consulted by the NEBE.³⁸

The referendum rerun in the Wolaita zone was conducted as per the election proclamation 1162/2019 Article 10 (a) based on the “decision of the NEBE to cancel an election result and order a re-election on the basis of the powers conferred to it by proclamation 1162/2019 and proclamation 1133/2019”.

Prior to the referendum day, two political parties (Wolaita People Democratic Front and Wolaita National Movement) in the Wolaita zone submitted a petition to the Federal High Court.³⁹ The petition was submitted against the decision of the House of Federation (HoF) to include the Wolaita zone in a new region along the other zones and special woredas.

Despite the proclamations stipulating that a new voter register will not occur in cases of re-elections, the NEBE conducted voter registration simultaneously with the referendum voting on June 19, 2023. A total of 849,896 (418,565 Female and 431,331 Male) voters registered for the referendum.⁴⁰

Consistent with its mandate, CECOE observed the referendum rerun in the Wolaita Zone along the electoral cycle (pre-referendum, referendum day, and post-referendum). To this effect, CECOE mobilized member organizations to recruit, train and deploy six long-term observers (LTOs) in 16 woredas and 6 city administrations from June 10 to June 19, 2023 and from June 20 to June 30, 2023 to monitor the pre-referendum and post-referendum environment respectively.

For the referendum rerun day, CECOE recruited 181 observers from seven of its member organizations operating outside the Wolaita zone and deployed a total of 148 observers (28 mobile and 120 stationary) in all woredas and city administrations to monitor the entire process of the voting day. Of this, 36% were women observers. While stationary observers were deployed proportionally, mobile observers were tasked to observe five polling stations each. This report is based on reports from 117 stationary observers (32% female and 68% male). Moreover, CECOE established a data center on the referendum rerun day at its office in Addis Ababa to collect, clean, and verify observation reports including critical reports.

37 የኢትዮጵያ ብሔራዊ ምርጫ ቦርድ በደቡብ ብ/ብ/ሕ/ክልል በሚገኘው የዎላይታ ዞን ላይ የሚካሄደው የድጋሚ ሕዝብ ውሳኔ የትግበራ አፈጻጸም ዝርዝር ዕቅድ ማሳያ ረቂቅ የጊዜ ሠሌዳ.” National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. Accessed on July 1, 2023. <https://www.nebe.org.et/am/node/216>.

38 የኢትዮጵያ ብሔራዊ ምርጫ ቦርድ በወላይታ ዞን የሚካሄደውን የድጋሚ ሕዝብ ውሳኔን ምርጫ በተመለከተ ከሲቪል ማኅበራት ድርጅቶችና ከኢትዮጵያ ሰብአዊ መብት ኮሚሽን ጋር ምክክር አካሄደ. National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. Accessed on July 1, 2023. <https://www.nebe.org.et/am/node/22>.

39 Ethiopia Insider. ሁለት የወላይታ ፖለቲካ ፓርቲዎች በፌዴሬሽን ምክር ቤት ላይ ክስ መሰረቱ፤ (Accessed on July 26, 2023). <https://ethiopiainsider.com/2023/11133/>.

40 National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. “Wolaita Zone Referendum.” (Accessed on July 26, 2023). https://www.nebe.org.et/sites/default/files/wolaiya_Zone_Referendum.jpg.

Chapter 7: Pre-referendum rerun observation findings

This report provides an overview of the general political environment, in the Wolaita Zone, in the period leading up to the voting day on June 19, 2023. CECOIE approaches every election process from an electoral cycle approach. Prior to voting day, CECOIE recruited, trained, and deployed six Long Term Observers (LTOs) from June 10 to June 19, 2023, in the 16 woredas and six cities of the Wolaita Zone. The LTOs covered various aspects of the electoral process, including civic and voter education, campaign activities, civic space, and security situations. The following sections present the analysis of the observational findings.

Voter education

Prior to the Wolaita referendum rerun, seven CSOs that were funded by the NEBE to deliver voter education held a meeting with the board on June 2, 2023. The CSOs expressed their resolve to reach all districts of the zone through voter education and to share out the 16 districts and six city administrations of the new structure.⁴¹

Detailed findings

Availability of Voter education activities

- All, 12(100%), observer reports indicated that they witnessed voter education activities being conducted in their respective deployment areas.
- 3(25%) observer reports showed NEBE provided voter education every day through local radio. 1(8%) observer's report indicated that voter education was conducted weekly, while 8(67%) observers witnessed that it was done only once during the period.
- All, 12(100%), observer reports indicated that voter education covered the date and the voting options of the referendum rerun, identification documents for voter registration and voting, and the fact that registration and voting would occur on the same day.

Mode of Delivery of Voter Education

Different stakeholders used various methods to conduct voter education. These included face-to-face, use of billboards, and print media; street fairs; local media (radio or television); social media; as well as a combination of different methods.

Accordingly,

- 11(92%) reports indicated that voter education was conducted in more than one way, while 1(8%) report showed voter education was conducted through Billboards and Prints only.

Accessibility of Voter Education

- 8(67%) reports indicated that voters residing in both urban and rural areas had easy access to voter education. However, 3(25%) reports showed that only urban areas had easy access, while 1(8%) report provided that only rural areas had easy access.
- 10(83%) observer reports showed that voter education was inclusive of both genders, and persons with disabilities.
- 10(83%) observer reports showed there was equal involvement of women, persons with disabilities, and others in providing voter education.

⁴¹ <https://nebe.org.et/am/node/868>

Challenges Faced

- 6 (50%) reports illustrated that the main challenge for voter educators was limited accessibility for women, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups. 4 (33% of) observer's reports showed challenges in language and cultural barriers, and 2 (17%) observer reports cited a lack of funds.
- CECOE observers rated the quality of voter education provided; and how the effectiveness of the message based on the following parameters:
 1. Accessibility: The extent to which voter education was accessible to all members of the community, including people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and remote areas;
 2. Accuracy: The accuracy of the information provided in voter education materials;
 3. Clarity: Clarity of language and messaging used in voter education materials;
 4. Participation: community participation in voter education programs.

Accordingly, observers were asked to rate the quality of the voter education.

- 7(58%) as Fair,
- 2(17%) as Weak,
- 2(17%) as Good and
- 1(8%) as Very Good.
- Observers were asked to rate the effectiveness of the message used in the provision of voter education. All 12 (100%) observers rated the message used in voter education as Moderately effective.

Campaign

One of the key aspects of any electoral or referendum process is the campaign, which enables voters to learn about the different options they will have on the ballot. Therefore, having a fair, accessible, and equal campaign environment before the referendum is essential for the overall quality of the process. CECOE's observers were tasked to monitor the campaign environment during the Wolaita referendum rerun. They monitored the accessibility of the campaigns to the public and the equal treatment of the referendum options.

The referendum rerun had two symbols that represented the choices. A "white dove" symbol stood for the creation of a new South Ethiopia Region, while a "Hut" symbol indicates support for maintaining the current status of the six zones and five special woredas under the existing SNNP regional state.

Accordingly,

- All, 12(100%), observer reports indicated that there were campaign activities related to the referendum.
- 6(50%) reports indicated that the campaign was carried out in a way that was accessible to the general public. However, 6(50%) reports showed that campaigns were not accessible to the general public. This was caused owing to the limited modalities that were used to conduct campaigns which were mainly on-road campaigns and the posting of printed materials. Furthermore, the locations where the campaigns were conducted were concentrated in urban areas. On top of this, the campaign did not sufficiently cover the referendum alternatives.
- 10 (83%) of observer reports indicated that there was no violence, conflict-provoking information, distorted information, or hate speech being made in relation to referendum campaigns, while 2 (17%) reports indicated some incidents. According to reports from CECOE's observers, there were incidents on social media, specifically on Facebook, where some activists were observed propagating inciting statements against Zonal and Woreda authorities. According to CECOE's long-term observers, some activists attempted to sway public opinion by claiming that the options presented in the referendum did not truly represent the interests of the Wolaita people.

- 8(67%) of observers' reports showed that campaigns that took place over the referendum did not address the available options to the public equally. These campaigns were skewed in favor of the dove alternative in the referendum which represented the establishment of a new regional state.
- There were no reports indicating any limits or restrictions on pre-referendum campaigns.

Debates

Another crucial part of the electoral or referendum process is the debate, which provides choices for the referendum and informs and engages the public. The debate section should cover the following aspects: all speakers have a fair chance to express and share their views, the debate moderator must be neutral and fair throughout the debate, and the rules for holding debates related to the referendum are clear and consistent for both sides before the debates start, and they are followed properly.

Accordingly

- 10 (83%) observer reports indicated that there were no debates prepared by the NEBE or civil society organizations related to the referendum.
- However, 2 (17%) observer reports indicated there was a debate transmitted on Wolaita Wogeta FM 96.6 local radio station. Findings from observers in relation to this debate are the following:
 1. Participants in the debates representing the two referendum alternatives were not given equal opportunity to speak and present their thoughts.
 2. The moderator leading the debate was partisan throughout the debate. The questions posed by the moderator were unbalanced in that the questions did not sufficiently highlight the issues revolving around the referendum.
 3. The debate did not adequately address the referendum's options.

Civic Space

An electoral process requires a civic space where different groups can participate and express themselves freely. CECOE observed the pre-referendum situation and assessed if there were any obstacles or constraints for civil society actors, political parties, the media, and journalists.

- All, 12 (100%), observer reports indicated that there was no violence, threats, arrests, or killing of media professionals during the observation period.
- 11 (92%) observers' reports indicated that no political party experienced any violence, threats, arrests, or killings during the observation period. However, a report from one observer indicated that one person was arrested by police for spreading the 'hut' posters in Boloso Sore Woreda.
- All 12 (100%) observer reports indicated no civil society organizations experienced being pressured, banned, jailed, or assassinated during the referendum rerun.
- All, 12 (100%), observer reports indicated no incidents occurred that hindered the Board's operation and preparations in the run-up to the referendum.
- On the Role of Civil Society Organizations in the Referendum
 1. Presence: 6 (50%) reports showed that CSOs had played a key role in the referendum in the role of election observation and voter education.
 2. Reach: 2(17%) reports indicate that there were no CSOs' activities in the rural areas.)
- 8(67%) observer reports illustrated that there were direct or indirect promises, intimidations, and use of incumbency power to influence citizens' votes during the pre-referendum period. These reports show that Woreda and kebele authorities in some woredas and city administrations intimidated the voters by saying that they would lose safety net programs, health care, and the best seeds and fertilizers if they did not choose "Dove". They also promised that Wolayta would become the regional capital, solve its budget issues, build industrial parks, and create jobs if they voted for "Dove".

Chapter 8 : Referendum Day Observation Findings

The primary goal of observing the referendum rerun was to contribute to increased transparency and accountability in the conduct of the referendum rerun in the Wolaita Zone by providing systematic and factual objective information on the conduct of the electoral processes in the referendum rerun. Accordingly, CECOE's stationary observers arrived at their assigned polling stations by 5:30 a.m. and observed and reported all voting processes at their assigned polling stations until the results were announced, while mobile observers observed multiple polling stations and reported critical incidents to CECOE's data center. The following are the major findings based on this observation:

Arrival at Polling Stations

1. NEBE officials should arrive at polling stations before the opening time to ensure that they set up the polling stations ready for voting to begin at 6:00 AM. In 97% of the polling stations observed, an average of 5 polling officials were present when observers arrived at polling stations by 5:30 A.M.
2. In all polling stations observed by CECOE, observers were allowed to enter and observe the registration and voting processes.

Opening of polling stations

3. According to the Ethiopian electoral law, polling stations must be open at 6:00 A.M. Reports that came from all polling stations where CECOE deployed its observers indicated that the registration and voting processes commenced between 6:00 AM and 7:00 AM.
4. The electoral law prohibits the establishment of polling stations in some locations such as military camps, private residences, police stations, religious buildings, health facilities, recreational centers, and political party offices. Accordingly, 99% of polling stations where CECOE observed were set up in locations that are not prohibited under the electoral law. However, one polling station situated in Offa woreda, Gesuba -1 Kebele 07 was established in a health center contrary to the electoral law.
5. With regard to campaigning activities during voting day, the electoral law strictly prohibits any kind of campaign activity inside or near 200 meters from polling stations. No campaign activities or materials were observed within a 200-meters radius of the polling stations where CECOE observers were deployed.

Setup of Polling Stations

6. On the location of the polling stations observed by CECOE's observers, 22% were established in urban areas, whereas 9% were set up in semi-urban areas. On the other hand, 69% of the polling stations were established in rural areas.
7. The availability of shades outside of polling stations that provide shelter to voters from rain and sun is an important element in the setup of polling stations. CECOE observers reported that 33% of polling stations observed had shelters that protected voters from direct sunlight and rain.
8. Availability of electoral materials in polling stations is a requirement under the electoral law for the appropriate setup of polling stations. Observers were asked whether electoral materials such as ballot papers, electoral rolls, the official NEBE stamp, results and reconciliation forms, indelible ink, ballot boxes, ballot box seals, and grievance submission forms were available in polling stations. Except in 2% of the polling stations where grievance submission forms were missing, all electoral materials were available in all polling stations CECOE observed.

9. In all polling stations observed by CECOE observers, the polling station head demonstrated that the voter rolls were empty before the registration and voting processes began.
10. The electoral law requires the polling station head to show that the ballot boxes are empty prior to the commencement of the registration and voting process. In all the polling stations observed by CECOE observers, the polling station head demonstrated that ballot boxes were empty before the registration and voting processes began.
11. As per the electoral law, a minimum of 3 polling station officials must be present in polling stations. For the referendum rerun in Wolaita Zone, the NEBE increased the number of polling station officials from 3 to 5 per polling station. According to observers' reports, only 3 polling stations, which were situated in Sodo Zuria woredas had less than five polling station officials. These were: Humbo Larena Polling station Humbo Larena - 3; Kera Polling station- 1 and Weshi Gale polling station Weshi Gale 'A'.
12. The electoral law establishes grievance hearing committees in polling stations. Accordingly, in 20% of the polling stations where CECOE observers were deployed, grievance hearing committees were established, whereas the committees were not established in 80% of polling stations.
13. In relation to the presence of observers in polling stations, in 8% of the polling stations observers other than those deployed by CECOE were present, while in 92% of the polling stations observed, there were no other observers.

Participation of women in electoral processes

14. An average of 5 officials were present in polling stations CECOE observed, of which on average, 2 were women.
15. 31% of polling stations observed had a woman polling station chairperson. Notably in one polling station situated in Sodo Ketema, Kera Kebele polling station 09, all five polling station officials were female.
16. Reports from CECOE observers show that 30% of stations had women security officials.

Accessibility of polling stations for People with disabilities, the elderly, nursing mothers, and pregnant women

17. Another crucial matter in setting up polling stations is their accessibility to voters with mobility challenges, such as the elderly, voters carrying children, and persons with disabilities. 90% of the polling stations observed were accessible, while 10% of them were not accessible.
18. Related to this is the accessibility of polling stations to both genders (male and female). 99% of polling stations observed were easily accessible to both male and female voters.

Registration of voters and Voting process

19. No observer of CECOE was asked to leave polling stations during the registration and voting processes.
20. Officials gave priority to persons with disabilities, the elderly, the frail, pregnant women, and parents with young children in 99% of the polling stations observed.
21. Persons with disabilities were allowed to receive assistance from a personal assistant of their choice in 92% of the polling stations observed, while no one needed assistance in 8% of the polling stations.
22. The electoral law requires voters to show proof of their residence or identity in order to register and/or cast their votes. Voters who fail to bring proof of their identity or residence should not be allowed to take part in the registration and voting processes. In accordance with this, CECOE observers reported the following information:
 - In 35% of polling stations observed, 1-10 voters were not allowed to register and vote for failing to bring proof of their identity or residence
 - In 6% of polling stations observed, 11-20 voters were not allowed to register and vote for failing to bring proof of their identity or residence

23. While the registration and voting were in progress, NEBE instructed its poll workers not to accept kebele ID cards issued in less than 6 months preceding the registration and voting day of the referendum rerun. Also, in polling stations CECOE observed, NEBE denied registering persons who appear to be underage voters although they possess kebele ID cards.
 - In 13% of polling stations, 1-10 voters were not allowed to register and vote despite bringing proof of their identity or residence
 - In 1% of polling stations, 11-20 voters were not allowed to register and vote despite bringing proof of their identity or residence
 - In 1% of polling stations, more than 20 voters were not allowed to register and vote despite bringing proof of their identity or residence
24. The electoral law requires indelible ink to be applied to voters' fingers before he/she is allowed to vote. In 98% polling stations, indelible ink was marked on voters, while between 1 and 10 voters were not marked with indelible ink in 2% polling stations.
25. Since NEBE conducted the voter registration and polling on the same day, no voter was allowed to vote without registering in all polling stations CECOE observed.
26. The electoral law requires polling station officials to stamp all ballot papers before handing them over to voters. Only in one isolated incident (in Sodo City Tome Gerara polling station 4) where one person voted without a ballot paper being stamped. However, the poll workers, contrary to the electoral law, later validated the ballot paper by stamping on it during the ballot counting.
27. The secrecy of the vote was respected throughout the day at 96 % of polling stations.
28. Ballot boxes were visible all the time in all of the polling stations that CECOE observed.
29. At some point during voting, there was the presence of an unauthorized person(s) in 1% of the polling stations CECOE observed. The incident is described in detail in the critical incidents section.
30. At 1% of the polling stations CECOE observed, at some point during the day, registration and voting processes were suspended. This was reported in one polling station following the instruction given to polling station officials by NEBE not to register voters whose identification cards were issued in less than six months preceding the day of the referendum rerun. This caused brief interruptions in the registration and voting processes.
31. In one polling station (1% of the polling stations), there was a case of intimidation and harassment. The incident is described in detail in the critical incidents section.
32. CECOE did not receive any reports where women participating in the referendum as voters, polling station officials, political party agents, and observers faced any form of intimidation and harassment.
33. In 82% of the polling stations observed, security personnel were present outside the polling stations at all times during voting. In 9% of polling stations, security personnel were present outside the polling stations at some point, whereas there were no security personnel at all in 9% of the polling stations.
34. The official closing time for the polling stations is at 6:00 PM. However, NEBE extended the closing of polling stations until 7:00 P.M. Of the polling stations CECOE observed, 7.7% were closed before 6:00 P.M. 71.8% were closed between 6:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M., while 20.5% of the polling stations were closed after 7:00 P.M.
35. All voters who were in line at the polling stations at the closing time of the polling station at 7:00 PM (as per the decision of NEBE) were permitted to cast a ballot in 39% of the polling stations, whereas in 61% of them, there was no line at 7:00 PM

Counting

36. Observers were not asked to leave the polling station during the counting time in all the polling stations CECOE observed.
37. The electoral law states that the counting of votes must occur in polling stations. In all polling stations, CECOE observed, counting was conducted at the polling stations.

38. The counting process was not interrupted in all polling stations observed.
39. There was interference, harassment and/or intimidation during the counting process in 1% of the polling stations.
40. The polling station chairperson clearly displayed the ballot papers during the counting in all polling stations observed.
41. The polling station chairperson consistently used the same criteria to determine whether ballot papers were valid or invalid in all polling stations observed.
42. Except for 4% of the polling stations (5 polling stations), copies of the reconciliation and results forms were posted outside the polling stations. The name of the polling stations where copies of the results and reconciliation forms were not posted are: Gido polling station 02, Tadiisa polling station 05, kodo polling station Kodo, Gido polling station 01, Werbira Suke polling station Suke “A”²

Critical Incidents

Critical incidents are serious irregularities that could have an impact on the referendum processes and outcomes. Observers were instructed to immediately report critical incidents to the CECOE Referendum Situation Room. CECOE staff in the Situation Room would conduct additional follow-up and verification. CECOE observers reported a total of 8 incidents from stationary observers and mobile observers, which are detailed below:

Polling stations established in prohibited locations

1. Offa Gesuba Woreda 01, Kebele polling station 07 was set up in a medical facility (a health station), contrary to the electoral law.

Voters prohibited to register and vote

2. In Damot Gale district, Buge Kebele Buge “U” polling station, 29 voters (20 males and 9 females) who went to the polling stations to vote were prevented from voting on grounds that they carried national IDs which were issued in less than six months time to the date of the referendum rerun as well as they looked like under the age of 18. However, on further scrutiny, although the IDs showed that they were issued in 2021 and 2022, in reality, they had new photographs and handwriting.
3. In Okoto Sere polling station in Boroda Wocha, 22 voters were prevented from voting because their IDs were issued in May 2023. Moreover, the birth date indicated in some of these voters’ ID cards, when deducted from the date of the referendum day, reveals that they are under 18 years of age.

Unauthorized persons in polling stations

4. In Boditi town Checha B polling station, a female Kebele official brought three young men without ID into the polling station and attempted to put pressure on the poll workers to allow her and the three young men to register and vote.
 - An unidentified person (later who turned out to be a municipal employee) put pressure on CECOE’s observer deployed in the same polling station. This individual entered the polling station and tried to unduly influence CECOE’s observer by saying, “Haven’t you yet heard that the result is already known? You guys have turned back many voters. Allow them to vote.” However, the poll officials did not take any corrective measures against him.
 - In the same polling station, a young man attempted to cause a disturbance by exploiting a disagreement between Kebele staff and elected officials. Aside from the fact that there were no security officials in the area at the time, the CECOE’s observer reported that the security officials did not respond well to the poll workers’ reports.

Suspension on voter registration and voting processes

5. In Boloso Sore Woreda, Warmuma Kebele, Betalo “U” 7 Polling Station, the voting process was suspended for a few minutes after citizens, who possessed IDs issued in less than six months, were prevented from voting.
6. In Kindo Koysha District, Tulcha Kebele, “U” 2 Polling Station, the election process was interrupted because of rain for about 40 minutes as there was no shelter to protect voters against rain and sun.

Nonavailability of electoral materials

7. In Damot Gale woreda, Buge Kebele, Buge ‘U’ polling station observers reported that complaint forms were not available.

Chapter 9: Post-referendum rerun observation findings

From June 20 to June 30, CECOE deployed 6 long-term observers to scan the general political environment, public opinion, and civic space and collected 24 reports. The following findings are based on these reports.

Post-referendum rerun riots and protests

- All 24(100%) observer reports indicate there were no restrictions on movement or assembly rights, mass protests, or public riots related to the referendum process and results. Additionally, there were no incidents of arrests, intimidations, harassment, or killings of media professionals, political parties/ political party members nor hate speech, abusive or threatening speeches.

Public opinion on the results of the referendum rerun

- All 24(100%) observer reports indicated the tone and content of media coverage related to the result of the referendum rerun was Neutral.
- 4 (17%) observer reports indicated there were community discussions (such as hall meetings) on the result of the referendum rerun.
- 1 (4%) observer report indicated there were exaggerated reports, distorted facts, and falsehoods about the result of the referendum rerun. This incident was reported following a social media (Facebook) exchange of opinions between a member of a Wolaita Social Democratic Party member and a social media activist where the activist was contending that the referendum alternatives don’t have any real meaning for the people while the member of the Wolaita Social Democratic Party was calling the people to vote for the ‘Hut’ alternative arguing that the

Limitations on the civic space

- All 24 (100%) observer reports indicate no journalists, observers, civil society workers, or citizens were arrested in connection with the referendum, and neither law enforcement agencies took any measures to prevent incidents of violence, damage, hate speech, or dissemination of false information.
- 20 (83%) observer reports indicate that the level of engagement and participation of civil society organizations in the post-referendum rerun period was low.

Chapter 10: Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusions

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE) observed the pre-referendum, referendum day, and post-referendum electoral processes of the referendum rerun in the Wolaita zone, with 6 Long term observers, 117 stationary and 28 mobile observers.

Pre-referendum observation

During the referendum rerun of the Wolaita zone, there were voter education activities that were observed across all the woredas and city administrations of the Wolaita zone. CECOE's observation findings show that civil society organizations operating in the zone attempted to divide the zone amongst themselves to provide voter education. Moreover, various modalities of delivery were employed to provide voter education in the zone. The content of voter education covered important aspects such as the date and the voting options, identification documents, and the fact that registration and voting would occur on the same day. However, there were challenges faced in conducting voter education such as limited accessibility for marginalized groups, language and cultural barriers, and lack of funding, which have adverse impacts on the quality and effectiveness of voter education.

Observers reported having shown that there were campaigns in the pre-referendum period. However, the campaigns were not accessible in that they were only conducted using limited modes of delivery using mainly roadside campaigns and posting of printed materials. Also, the campaigns were conducted in predominantly urban areas and did not sufficiently cover the referendum alternatives. In addition, the campaigns that took place over the referendum did not address the available options to the public equally. CECOE's observation findings show that the campaigns were predominantly in favor of the Dove alternative in the referendum which represented the establishment of a new regional state.

CECOE's long-term observers reported that there were no debates prepared by the NEBE or civil society organizations related to the referendum. Be that as it may, a debate was organized and broadcasted on a local radio station. However, the debate had major deficiencies in relation to the lack of equal opportunity given to the participants of the debate to present their positions; partisanship of the moderator which was reflected in the questions the moderator posed; inadequacy in addressing the referendum alternatives and inability to communicate the guidelines for conducting referendum-related debates before the commencement of the debates.

Generally, there were no restrictions, prohibitions, intimidations, or attacks on political parties, media, and civil society except an incident that occurred in Boloso Sore Woreda where a person posting campaign materials for the 'Hut' was arrested by police. With regard to the Role of Civil Society Organizations in the Referendum, CECOE's observation has shown that CSOs played a major role in election observation and voter education. These roles, however, were concentrated in urban areas. On another note, there were direct or indirect promises, intimidations, and use of incumbency power that was employed by Woreda and city administration officials to influence citizens' votes during the pre-referendum period. Withholding of safety net programs, health care, and provision of agricultural inputs was used to intimidate citizens to give their votes to the 'Dove' alternative. Moreover promises to make the Wolaita zone the capital of the new regional state, the building of industrial parks, create jobs, and solve budgetary problems were made to influence citizens to vote for the 'Dove'

Referendum day

CECOE identified several noteworthy improvements regarding the general conduct of the referendum rerun, NEBE's preparations as well as compliance with the electoral laws, and creating an enabling environment for the peaceful conduct of the referendum rerun. In addition, CECOE observed the below:

1. NEBE's preparation in terms of security and logistics, and recruitment of the majority of polling station officials from outside the Wolaita zone is recognizable
2. The fact that NEBE deployed five (5) polling station officials in almost all polling stations is seen by CECOE as a strength.
3. The registration and voting processes started within the timeframe provided by the electoral law; as well as NEBE's decision to extend the closing time by one hour to provide voters the chance to cast their votes is commendable.

Notwithstanding the above, however, CECOE also noticed some gaps that NEBE should consider addressing. Drawing lessons from the referendum rerun in Wolaita Zone CECOE recommends the following:

Issues related to conducting voter registration and voting simultaneously, problems related to proof of identity, i.e ID cards issued in less than six months of the date of the referendum rerun and underage voting were the main challenges election officers faced in the Wolaita zone referendum rerun. The increasing number of these incidents prompted NEBE to issue an instruction to poll workers that prohibit voters from carrying ID cards issued in less than six months of the date of the referendum rerun pursuant to Article 18 (1) (c) of Proclamation No.1162/19, which entails a person can be legible to get registered as a voter if she/he "has been residing within the constituency for at least 6 months."

This has caused a brief interruption in some of the polling stations where CECOE observed. While some of the potential voters who carried ID cards less than six months after the date of the referendum went back home, others invoking Article 21(4) of Proclamation No.1162/19 got registered and voted "based on the testimonies of three individuals." CECOE's observers found out that in some instances those who were denied to get registered became witnesses of one another and managed to get registered and vote. While CECOE appreciates NEBE's efforts to enforce the electoral law and thereby prevent electoral fraud, there is still a legal loophole that can easily be exploited by culprits who are dogged to beat the law.

Post-referendum Observation

The post-referendum environment was generally peaceful and did not see restrictions on movement or assembly rights, mass protests, or public riots related to the referendum process and results. Additionally, there were no incidents of arrests, intimidations, harassment, or killings of media professionals, political parties/ political party members nor hate speech, abusive or threatening speeches. The opinion of the public on the results of the referendum rerun was assessed using the tone and content of media coverage, statements made by political parties, the conduct of community discussions, and the existence of exaggerated reports, distorted facts, and falsehoods about the result of the referendum rerun. Based on these criteria, CECOE's findings show that the tone and content of the media coverage of the results were neutral and did not side with any of the alternatives.

Recommendations

Voter education, Campaign and Debates

Noting the impactful importance of the pre-referendum environment in the overall electoral process and outcomes, CECOE seeks to make recommendations aimed at strengthening the provision of voter education, the conduct of campaigns, and the organization of debates during the pre-electoral phases. Accordingly, CECOE forwards the following recommendations ;

- Observation reports revealed that accessibility of voter education to women, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups was limited. To some extent language barrier was also impeded to impart messages to voters. CECOE recommends that both the NEBE and CSOs should devise mechanism that overcome language barrier and make sure voter education is accessible to women, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups
- Despite time constraints the effort made by the NEBE and CSOs in delivering voter education is encouraging. On the other hand, the majority of observers, in the areas they observed, witnessed that voter education was given only once during the pre-referendum rerun period. For all intent and purposes this is far from being adequate. Moreover, slightly more than half of the observers' report rated the quality of voter education as fair which implies that it is neither very good nor very bad. In other words, both the frequency of delivery and quality of voter education leaves much to be desired. CECOE recommends that the NEBE and CSOs alike should work hard to ensure the delivery of adequate and quality voter education to citizens that empowers them to make an informed decision.
- Noting the importance of a fair campaign environment, the NEBE should create mechanisms to check that campaigns are conducted by advocates of both alternatives during referendums. Advocates of referendum alternatives should take proactive measures to engage in campaigns representing their chosen alternative.
- Debates form a crucial section in electoral processes in raising awareness among citizens of political options that are presented for voting. Given this, the media, civil society organizations, NEBE and other interest groups should make the necessary efforts to organize debates in future electoral processes. These debates should provide equal opportunity for all interested parties to present their positions and argue.

Conducting Voter registration and Voting Simultaneously

CECOE found out that conducting voter registration and voting on the same day, which should have been carried out separately as per the electoral law, shrinks the constitutional rights of voters. This kind of practice should not be repeated again.

In relation to Kebele Identification cards

- NEBE, as much as possible, conducts registration separately from the activities to be performed on voting day so as to have adequate time to screen IDs and identify legal documents from fake ones.
- While conducting training NEBE should constantly remind its poll workers the need for implementing Article 21(4) and (5) of Proclamation No.1162/19, which permits voters to get registered “based on the testimonies of three individuals”, in conjunction with Article 20(3) of Directive 6 to address challenges that may arise in the event voter registration and voting take place simultaneously and during the legally provided voters registration period.

- Investigate and prosecute actors involved in issuing kebele ID cards in contrary to the law.
- Lobby the executive to expedite the process of issuing National ID card that has been underway for years

In relation to underage voting

Even though the electoral law set the voting age to be 18 years and above, merely looking at an individual's physical appearance may not be the best way to determine the person's age. CECOE observers reported that voters have been barred from registering and voting based solely on their physical appearances. A person may look underage as a result of stunted growth. CECOE's observers reported that election officers prevented considerable numbers of voters who look underage from voting based on the physical appearances of these voters. This approach is not legally defensible, equally, NEBE is also duty-bound to ensure underage voters should not exercise the right which is not accorded to them by law. Accordingly, CECOE recommends the following:

- Devise a mechanism that minimizes election officials from capricious decisions of denying voters based on the appearance of a person. One way of achieving this end is to request suspected underage voters to produce birth certificates or any other evidence to this effect before voting.
- Create awareness among the electorate as well as politicians through its voter education program the consequence of encouraging persons who are below the voting age to participate in the electoral process. Educating politicians and political actors that participate in or encourage such an act, could lead to the cancellation of results collated from the affected polling.

In relation to Grievance Hearing Mechanism (GHC)

CECOE believes that the Grievance Hearing Committees (GHC) mechanism established under the electoral law is too ambitious to be achievable. As a result, CECOE had recommended in its previous observation reports the need for addressing problems impeding the establishment of GHC as envisioned in the electoral law. Since the right to be heard is the constitutional right of voters, and candidates, creating the forum (GHCs) for exercising this right cannot be postponed indefinitely. As usual, in the Wolaita referendum, rerun GHCs were missing for the most part in the polling stations observed. CECOE's observation findings show GHCs were established only in 20% of the polling stations it observed. What's more, there is no information on how members of the GHCs established were selected and placed, and whether they have received training on how to handle the complaints, among other functions of the GHCs. Once again CECOE would like to recommend the following:

- The NEBE should assess and identify challenges impeding the establishment of GHCs in all polling stations across the county; benchmark countries with similar development stages and literacy levels and initiate legal reform on the existing GHC mechanism.

The Role of CSOs

CSOs played limited roles in the February 2023 referendum held in the six zones and five special woredas, as well as in the June 2023 Wolaita referendum rerun. Aside from general elections, CSOs should actively participate in other electoral activities such as referendum observation and awareness-raising activities because referendums allow citizens to directly participate in democratic processes.



CECOE

**Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society
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