

Ethiopian Election: One of Africa's Largest Democratic Event takes place this week!

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This weekend a major democratic exercise will take place on the eastern Africa.

Over 34.8 million citizens will march to election stations on May the 24th. That is over 97% of the citizens eligible to vote and much higher than the eligible citizens that were registered in 2010.

They will cast their votes in secret ballots located in about 50,000 electoral stations to elect legislatures for the House of Peoples Representatives and the regional councils.

The voters will select from around 6,000 candidates contesting for seats in the federal and regional levels. About 4000 of the candidates, representing some 60 political parties and running as independent, contest the seats in the House of People's Representatives while the rest run for regional councils.

According to the timetable, will be the voting date and the result will be announced on 22 June 2015.

This massive democratic exercise takes place in the second populous country of Africa. A country election turnout is remarkably higher than most European and other developed countries. That country is Ethiopia!

This massive electoral exercise is young, nevertheless. It is just two decades old and in the process of improving.

As Mrs. Wendy Sherman, Under Secretary for Political Affairs of the United States said last month:

"... in many ways Ethiopia is a young democracy and so every election, just as in our country, should be better and better and more open allowing for freedom of access making sure that every election is fair, free and credible and that opposition groups have the space to participate, that everybody's vote counts.

And in our country we make every election better than the last one in being inclusive, making sure everybody's rights are respected and we know Ethiopia is working to do that as well."

Indeed, Ethiopia's democracy is very young.

Over the past long decades Ethiopia had suffered under the unrelenting oppression of anti-democratic and despotic rulers, with its Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, unable to demand their rights and protect their interests by legal and peaceful means. The country never had a multi-party system, nor was there any sign of democracy. Fundamental group and individual human rights and freedoms were not respected. Instead, the Ethiopian people were long victims of wars and subjected to political crises and never-ending conflicts deliberately instigated and exacerbated by undemocratic rulers. In effect the Ethiopian Nations, Nationalities and Peoples have faced poverty, backwardness and under-development and, most importantly, oppression.

The opening of the democratic landscape began in 1991; months after the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) captured Addis Ababa ending the 17 years long brutal rule of the Military regime.

Freedom of assembly and freedom of expression were affirmed in the Transition Period Charter adopted on June 1991 by the Transitional conference attended by representatives of almost all political parties, trade unions and other associations, including public figures.

The historic Transitional Period Charter of Ethiopia declared:

Article One: Based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly by resolution 217 A (III) of 10 Dec. 1948 individual human rights shall be respected fully, and without any limitation whatsoever. Particularly every individual shall have:

- a) The freedom of conscience, expression, association and peaceable assembly;*
- b) The right to engage in unrestricted political activity and to organize political parties, provided the exercise of such right does not infringe upon the rights of others.*

Article Two: *The right of nations, nationalities and peoples to self-determination is affirmed. To this end, each nation, nationality and people is guaranteed the right to:*

- a) Preserve its identity and have it respected, promote its culture and history and use and develop its language;*
- b) Administer its own affairs within its own defined territory and effectively participate in the central government on the basis of freedom, and fair and proper representation;*

c) Exercise its right to self-determination of independence, when the concerned, nation/nationality and people is convinced that the above rights are denied, abridged or abrogated.

Dozens of privately-owned newspapers and magazines flourished overnight. The government didn't wish to delay the exercise of free press, even though an enabling legislation was not issued yet at the time.

It was a major turn towards an era characterized by peace, multiparty democracy and development.

Ethiopia escaped not only the immediate threats posed by the downfall of Dergue & the empty treasury and tens thousands of small arms scattered all over the country; but also managed the more fundamental threats that arise from centuries old national operation and denial of the farmers' fruits of labor.

Not only Ethiopia safely passed the looming threats of disintegration and communal conflict, it managed to set-up a multinational federalism that addresses the roots of the problem.

National and nationalities started governing themselves and for the first time they voluntarily renewed their commitment to live as one country by ratifying the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia through their elected representatives in 1995.

The 16 or more armed groups that existed at the time of the downfall of the Dergue were persuaded to lay down their arms and join the political process while their fighters either resumed their peaceful lives or joined the national army, militia and police in accordance with their qualification and skills.

The first electoral exercise was conducted in mid-1992 during the Transitional period, only a year after the downfall of the brutal military dictatorship. Wedera and Kebele administrations were organized by direct elections. Therefore, it was in June 1992 that Ethiopians exercised electoral democracy for the first time in history by determining the composition of local administrations through the ballot box.

The second occasion was the election of members of the Constitution Assembly.

The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia reiterated election as a defining feature of the state. The Constitution stipulated that:

Article 8 (3): "The sovereignty [of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia] shall be expressed through their representatives elected in accordance with this Constitution and through their direct, democratic participation."

Article 38 (1), the Constitution underlined that: "Every Ethiopian national [has the right] to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly and through freely chosen representatives".

In line with these Constitutional principles, Ethiopia conducted the first, the second, the third and the fourth general elections in 1995, 2000 and 2005. The public determined the composition of the House of Representatives and Regional Councils through secret ballot boxes.

Each election had been a learning opportunity.

As Under Secretary Mrs. Wendy Sherman, said:

Ethiopia is a democracy that is moving forward in an election that we expect to be free, fair, credible open and inclusive in ways.

Ethiopia has moved forward in strengthening its democracy every time there is an election. It gets better and better.

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The Secretary-General stated that the experiences of the last four elections have helped the board to carry out the process in such a way as to make the election peaceful, fair and credible.

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) disclosed that it has finalized its preparations for the upcoming election. According to NEBE Secretary-General, Nega Dufisa, the dispatching of over 90 percent of the documents and materials necessary for voting is completed. The materials would reach all the 46, 000 electoral stations 10 days before the election date.

In general, the Pre-election phase of the 5th general elections is said to be encouraging in fulfilling the standards of holding free, fair, democratic and credible election.

As Chairperson of NEBE, Professor Merga Bekana, noted the Board has been exerting relentless efforts in providing capacity building trainings to politicians, election observers, voters, returning officers, and judiciary and law enforcement bodies during the last five years. As Mr. Merga said:

“Election materials are now being distributed to all polling stations in the country with the logistic support of the Ministry of Defense and other partners. The overall preparations of this year's general election are done in an extraordinary and successful manner in comparison with the past four consecutive general elections”.

Nonetheless, there had been shortcomings which were observed by scholars.

For example, Addis Ababa University Assistant Professor of School of Journalism Dr. Negeri Lencho pointed out his observation that overgeneralization, lack of clarity, wearing false mask, disinformation, among others, were witnessed during the election campaigns apart from not using effectively the allotted time for the debate.

Dr. Negeri also said:

“For instance, when the ruling party talks about its political programmes and achievements as well as on how to multiply the achievements in the next term, the other contesting parties are not seen taking the occasion to present their alternative policies using their time properly”.

Despite these shortcomings, the election campaign by large went well.

It was learnt that out of 1,185 activities related to the election campaign, 1,165 were aired and printed out to the general public. The remaining 20 were banned due to their violent nature. The incumbent has used 98 per cent of the allotted free airtime and newspaper space while other contesting political parties have only used 51 per cent.

The ballot day is now less than seven days away. The general public as well as stakeholders are getting ready for this historic events of the continent.

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civic Associations (CECAs) has disclosed that it will deploy 40,000 of its members to observe the election.

The coalition, which comprises of 14 national associations and has a total of 17 million members, stated that it strongly opposes the kind of chaos that followed the 2005 election.

Its observers will watch vigilantly and neutrally the election so that the voices of the more than 36 million voter citizens would be respected.

The African Union has similarly announced that it will deploy observers to observe the election.

Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma has approved the deployment of nine African Union Long -term Observers (LTO) and fifty Short-term Observers (LTOs) to Ethiopia to observe the election.

The Long -term Observers arrived in Addis Ababa yesterday and will be deployed to the various regions of Ethiopia after briefing and they will remain in Ethiopia until June 7, 2015.

Additional 50 Short-term Observers will join them from 17th to 28th May 2015 to observe and report on the Election Day activities.

The LTOs have a mandate to observe, collect and analyze data in the lead up to the 24th May 2015 Parliamentary Elections in line with relevant African Union and International instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy,

Elections and Governance, the OAU/AU Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa, the African Union Guidelines for Election Observation and Monitoring Missions, the International Covenant on Civil (ICCPR), Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the national laws of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

Nevertheless, it should be noticed that the main witness to the fairness, freeness and democratic nature of the election are the Ethiopian people. There is a common view in most of developing nations including Ethiopia that few individuals and political parties may think and miscalculate in a wrong way that only foreign monitors' observation could make the election process free, fair, peaceful and democratic to enhance the credibility and legitimacy of election. However, more than any external observation, nationwide public observers' active, responsible and transparent observing mechanisms could make Ethiopian national election 2015 freer, fair, peaceful and democratic.

Equally importantly, the contesting political parties are discussing and solving their problems in the Joint Consultation Councils of political parties which have been instituted in all Federal and Regional election zones to solve complaints, perceived irregularities and other issues of common interest.

Come Sunday, 35 million Ethiopians will head to the voting booth to take part in the largest electoral exercise of Africa and elect their representatives for the next five years.

Many friends of Ethiopia wish a successful completion of the process and will congratulate the peoples for the tremendous progress made so far, others will predictably launch smear campaigns driven by ideological bias and embellishing

the limitations that are natural to a transitional democracy and developing country.

But the Ethiopian government and public will have no interest in such short-sighted arguments. The peoples of Ethiopia know it is time to consolidate the gains made in democracy and development. Moreover, they had learnt in the past two decades that election is the sole means to ascertain their gains from the development and strengthen their say in the governance of the nation.

Therefore, it is expected that, the people will take advantage of the next election - turning out at record rates - to exercise their Constitutional rights and determine their rights.

Ethiopia, however, will endure the pace towards expanding and deepening the electoral exercise with unwavering democratic commitment.