The 5\textsuperscript{th} National Election: Another Landmark in Ethiopia's democracy

Woldemariam Nega

03-22-15

The fifth National and Regional Election is now half way through, as per the timetable laid out by the National Election Board.

The timetable, which was approved by the Board after a series of consultations with political parties, set the 24th of May for casting ballots and the 22nd of June for the official announcement of the results. So far, several phases of the process have been completed.

Among those; registration of eligible voters, registration of candidates, assigning of election symbols of parties and private candidates, training for election officials, preparation of basic election materials, and allocation of free airtime on the public radio, television and columns newspapers for election campaigning.

Now, this month, the competing parties have officially started election campaign using the allotted free air time and televised debates as well as other means of communications; such as road-side announcements and holding rallies.

This is all a new experience for Ethiopia, as Ethiopia embarked on the process of building a system of government based on democracy, respect of human rights and rule of law just two decades ago in 1991. Nonetheless, Ethiopia has made much progress compared to where it started two decades ago.

Historically, Ethiopia never had a multi-party system, nor had there been any sign of democracy. 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.

Fundamental individual and group rights and freedoms were not respected. Instead, the peoples of Ethiopia were long victims of wars and subjected to political crises and never-ending conflicts deliberately instigated and exacerbated by undemocratic rulers. Therefore, the peoples of Ethiopia suffered through decades of poverty, backwardness and under-development as well as, most importantly, oppression.

As a result, bitter struggles were made in different parts of the country, which finally resulted in the overthrow of the eras of dictatorships in May 1991. For the first time in her history, Ethiopia was able to establish a Government guided by democratic principles in July 1991, a month after the fall of the dictatorial Derg regime.

The July 1991 "Peaceful And Democratic Transitional Conference Of Ethiopia", which was attended by most political groups, trade unions and other associations, including public figures, led to the approval of a Transitional Government and set forth guidelines for drafting a new constitution, establishing a system of regional decentralization, holding democratic elections, and ensuring basic human rights.

The historic sections of the "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.*

These principles were immediately translated into actions; in terms of free press, the right to assembly, the freedom to organize, etc. However, the electoral aspect of the democratic experience unfolded about a year later.

Therefore, Ethiopia's first encounter with electoral democracy was in mid-1992, when elections for Wedera and Kebele administrations were conducted. It was the first time in history that Ethiopians exercised electoral democracy by determining the composition of their local administrations through the ballot box. The next electoral experience was the election of representatives for the Constitutional assembly in 1994.

These democratic and electoral beginnings were incorporated in the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia which was the ultimate recognition of the achievements of the long and bitter struggle of the Nation, Nationalities and Peoples. The Constitutional Assembly ratified the final text of the Constitution on the 8th of December 1994, which came into effect on the 21st of August 1995.

The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia acknowledged in Article 8 (3) and 38 (1) 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):**

"Every Ethiopian national [has the right] to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly and through freely chosen representatives”.

Since then, four National and Regional Elections as well as local elections, referendums and other supplementary elections have been held in a free and fair manner and in accordance with the law, in a total of 547 electoral districts and about 45 thousand polling stations throughout the Country.

The first National and Regional elections were held in May 1995 and the FDRE's new parliament was inaugurated on the 21st August bringing the Transitional period to an end. The second, the third and the forth took pace in May 2000, May 2005 and May 2010, respectively.

Now, Ethiopia is conducting the 5th National and Regional Elections. Indeed, as this year's electoral exercise benefits from the experiences of the last two decades, it is demonstrating all the signs of a strengthening democratic electoral exercise and deepening sense of ownership among electoral stakeholders.

The differences are observable by comparing the on-going electoral process with the last election.

In this election, over 34.8 million voters had taken their election cards in preparation to cast votes in the election. That is over 97% of the eligible voters. That is much higher than that of 2010 election, when around 32 million of the 37 million, or 86%, of the eligible citizens were registered. It should be noted, nonetheless, both figures are remarkable and higher than most European and other developed countries.
In the last National and Regional election, just 63 out of the 79 legally registered political parties, or 79%, had presented candidates. Now, the proportion of actively participating parties has increased. In the on-going election, 57 out of the 60 currently registered political parties have fielded candidates to compete for seats in the federal parliament and regional councils. That means a 95% participation rate.

The increased participation rate is reflected much more robustly in the number of candidates.

In this election, according to the data from the Election Board, more than 6,000 candidates including 11 private contestants have been registered for this election. Of the total candidates, 1,884 will contest seats in the National Parliament, the House of People’s Representatives and 4,166 will contest seats in the Regional Councils of the nine Regional States. That is 15-20% higher than the number of candidates in election 2005.

The rise in the number of candidates to more than 6,000 candidates necessitated the implementation of some provisions that haven't been put much to use for years. That is the provisions limiting the maximum number of candidates in any one constituency to 12.

Directive on the Registration of Candidates, (No. 1/ 2009, as amended) stipulates on Article 18 that:

1. *The number of candidates running for election to the House of Peoples’ representatives in a constituency shall not exceed twelve.*

2. *The number of candidates in a constituency and their priority shall be determined in the following manner:*

   a. *Where the number of candidates exceeds twelve, political parties shall be made to register first;*

   b. *Where the number of candidates nominated by political organizations exceeds twelve, priority shall be given to not more than six political parties that received the highest votes in the previous election. The remaining political organizations shall be determined by lot.*
c. Where the number of candidates nominated by political organizations is less than twelve, the remaining places shall be filled by private candidates who received the highest votes in the previous election.

d. If there are candidates who obtained equal number of votes in the previous election, it will be decided by lot.

Therefore, in Addis Ababa where a total of 328 candidates were fielded for 23 constituencies by 25 political parties, the Board had to arrange lots to be drawn by candidates to bring the numbers candidates for each constituency down to twelve.

The increase in the level of electoral participation of women is another remarkable aspect of election 2015.

In 2010, the proportion of women candidates running for the House of Peoples' Representatives was just over 11%, while the proportion of those running for regional councils was 15% of the total number of candidates.

In this election, however, more than 1,308 of the total about 6,000 candidates are women. That is about 22%. Moreover, more than 16.7 million women registered to vote, which is more than 48% of the total registered voters.

This upsurge in the level of participation is not coincidental rather a result of sustained efforts to enhance the participation of citizens and parties in general and women in particular in elections. In addition to, the special support and incentive provided to for instance, for parties that offer additional women candidates, private women candidates and organization that contribute to build the capacity of women considering candidacy.

Similar facilitations are made to other disadvantages groups to ensure the inclusiveness and participatory nature of the election. The election law that stipulates that voters with disabilities should be given support to reach voting stations and, in cases where voters cannot cast their ballots in the ballot boxes, persons of their choice will assist them as needed; have been implemented in the nationals elections held so far.
Beyond registrations of candidates, there are several mechanisms in place to ensure their election campaigning rights are respected.

A key aspect of the process is the provision of enabling conditions for candidates of political parties in times of elections, or any other, to present, explain and discuss their programs objectives and goals in free radio and television airtimes. Political parties have been facilitated to campaign freely in public squares, or in any other legitimate way, and present their manifestos.

Another vital component of the process is the provision of free access to free airtime on the public radio and television stations and columns in newspapers to the political parties participating in the election, in accordance with the Amended Ethiopian Electoral Law Proclamation No. 532/2007 and the directive on Use of Government Mass Media during Elections, which stipulate free and equitable access to state-owned media.

As in the past, in this election, the Government has provided equal access to free airtime on the public radio and television stations and columns in newspapers to the political parties participating in the elections. All political parties have been given air time based on criteria crafted by the Joint Council of the Political Parties.

Moreover, a televised debate on nine subjects has commenced this month so as to help voters make informed decisions in choosing as to whom to cast their ballot for. The nine debate agenda were set by the political parties themselves in the Joint Council.

The subjects to be covered, in the series of televised debates, which has started this month, encompass a wide range of issues. Mainly; The Multi-Party System and Building Democracy; Federalism; Agricultural and Rural Policy; Urban Development and Industrial Policy; Good Governance and the Rule of Law; National Security; Foreign Policy; Infrastructure; and Education and Health.

In general, several legal and institutional frameworks that have been put in place and improved throughout the past two decades have created a conducive environment for the conduct of free and fair elections possible.
Among the key legislations:

- Proclamation no. 662/2009 - A proclamation to provide for the electoral code of conduct for political parties
- Proclamation no. 532/2007 - A proclamation to amend the electoral law of Ethiopia
- Proclamation no. 573/2008 - Political parties registration proclamation
- Code Of Conduct for the Mass Media and Journalists on the Manner of Reporting about Elections Regulation Number 6/2010
- Regulation Concerning the Procedure for Determining the Apportionment of Government Financial Support to Political Parties Regulation
- Organization and Procedure of Grievance Hearing Committees Established by the Board at Every Level During Elections Regulation Number 1/2009 (As Amended)
- Directive on the Registration of Candidates Number 1/2009 (As Amended)
- Directive for the Registration of Electors number 2/2009 (As Amended)
- Directive Concerning the Procedure for the Activities of Public Observers and Representatives of Political Parties and Private Candidates Number 3/2009

Furthermore, Joint Consultation Councils of political parties have been instituted in all Federal and Regional election zones to solve complaints, perceived irregularities and other issues of common interest.

Come May, 34 million Ethiopians will head to the voting booth to take part in one of the biggest electoral exercise of the continent and elect their representatives for the next five years.

While many friends of Ethiopia would wish a successful completion of the process and 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 as a pretext.
Ethiopia, however, will endure the pace towards expanding and deepening the electoral exercise with unwavering democratic commitment.