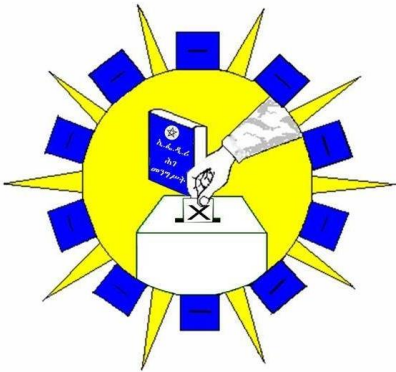


The Countdown to the Fifth National Elections in Ethiopia has begun



Historical background

Ethiopia's democratic constitution, which was adopted in 1995, is the outcome of a comprehensive dialogue among the many nations and nationalities of Ethiopia. The Constitution has created a political platform to enable the people of Ethiopia to fully exercise their democratic rights. It offers **all** Ethiopians the opportunity to realise their vision of building a society founded on the rule of law, capable of ensuring lasting peace and sustainable economic and social development.

Over the last 24 years, the people of Ethiopia, as a matter of priority, have been engaged in building democratic institutions and putting in place a legal framework, which clearly states the rules that have to be observed by all political stakeholders in exercising their democratic rights.

The Ethiopian parliament, which comprises the House of People's Representatives and the House of Federation is tailored to address the specific political reality in Ethiopia. However, it has learnt from the experience of developed democracies, in pursuit of installing democratic principles in its day-to-day operations.

One of the political landmark measures taken in Ethiopia, to ensure a democratic political dispensation, is to have an independent electoral board. The electoral board, which has undergone continuous reform on the basis of best practice, is accountable to the House of People's Representatives and is independent of any political affiliation. It has the responsibility of ensuring that electoral activity is governed by electoral law that meets international standards. It has to ensure, through the election process and beyond, that the right of the Ethiopian people to freely express their will on the basis of equal popular suffrage is fully implemented.

Previous elections

The process of building a democratic society in Ethiopia has been accompanied by notable successes and by some challenging situations. Four National Elections have been held in the past twenty-four years, and the fifth election is due on 24th May this year - 2015. Experiences gained from the past four elections will provide valuable inputs to make this year's elections better than ever before.

Out of the 75 political parties existing in the country, 58 have registered for election to the House of People's Representatives, which has 547-seats. A record number of 36,830,000 people have registered to vote. This represents an increase of 15.3% above the number of registered voters in the 2010 elections.

No effort has been spared to ensure that the 5th National Elections in Ethiopia will be free, fair, peaceful and credible. Codes of Conduct governing the activities of participating parties, have been signed, mechanisms to address complaints have been put in place, local and foreign observers are ready to monitor the elections, the materials and equipment required for the elections have been prepared.

The participation of women voters is one of the most important barometers of the democratic nature of any election. The gender parity of this year's election points towards significant improvement. Out of the 36.83 million registered voters, 17.87 million - which amounts to 48.5% - are women. This figure compares favourably with the 15.2 million female voters who registered in 2010. Regarding female candidates, their number has reached 301, an increase of 149 or 98% compared to the last election.

Preparations for the election

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia has announced that it has finalized preparations to ensure the successful conclusion of the elections. Logistical arrangements have been made to ensure the availability of election officials and the necessary election materials have been distributed to over 45,202 polling stations. Training has been given to law enforcement officers, election officials and leaders of mass organizations, in order to enable them to assist with the peaceful conduct of the elections.

Ensuring Free, Fair and Credible Elections

Funds amounting to 30 million Birr – equivalent to 1.5 million US dollars - have been disbursed to help contesting parties cover their campaigning costs. A total of 600 hours of television airtime - to be used across 5 television channels and 16 radio stations - and 700 newspaper columns across 11 newspapers, in a range of local languages, have been allocated free of charge. The cost of this media campaign would amount to 128 million Birr – or 6.4 million US dollars.

In addition, nine televised debates have been conducted to enable contesting parties to express their unrestricted views on the ruling party's record in office and to put across their own policies. The issues selected for debate were

- Multi-party democracy
- Good governance and the rule of law
- Federalism
- Agriculture and rural development
- Urban development industrial policy
- Education and health
- Infrastructure
- National security and
- Foreign policy

The presence of observers is crucial for the credibility of any election. So 250,000 election observers have been nominated by people in every constituency, and will be deployed in all polling stations. The Union of Ethiopian Civic Organizations will also dispatch forty thousand observers. The African Union, which has already assigned monitors to observe the pre-election process, will dispatch 50 election observers who will be led by the former President of Namibia and this year's winner of the Mo Ibrahim Prize, His Excellency Hifikipunye Panama.

As mentioned earlier, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia has done its best to ensure that the 5th National Election will be free, fair, peaceful and credible. The lively election campaign will continue until two days before Election Day.

On Sunday 24th May, 36.8 million Ethiopians will march towards the country's 45,202 polling stations to cast their votes. This will mark a major milestone in the history of building democracy in Ethiopia.

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