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Joint IRI/NDI Pre-Election Assessment Delegation Releases Report on Preparations for Ethiopia 2021 Elections

Following a high-level virtual pre-election assessment delegation conducted from April 9 to 26, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI) announce the release of their joint report on the preparations for Ethiopia's elections scheduled for June 5, 2021.

The joint IRI/NDI delegation was led by: Ambassador Johnnie Carson, NDI Board Member and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; Honorable Constance Berry Newman, IRI Board Member and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs; and Honorable Ahmed Issack Hassan, former Chairperson of Kenya's Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC).

From the report's summary, the delegation found: *“Ethiopia's 2021 elections, scheduled for June 5, could be an opportunity for building on recent reforms and developing more inclusive, transparent and accountable governance in the country. However, significant difficulties, including widespread insecurity and ethnic conflicts, delays in National Election Board of Ethiopia's (NEBE's) candidate and voter registration procedures, poor cooperation from some state governments, boycotts and threats of boycotts by several political parties with broad constituencies, as well as the COVID-19 public health crisis, threaten the ability of voters and parties to participate in the process and, thereby, the potential for credible elections. Serious and concerted efforts prior to Election Day by all stakeholders are necessary to hold meaningful elections and lay the groundwork for national reconciliation and democratic progress beyond the elections.”* **(The report's full summary and recommendations are annexed below)**

Amb. Johnnie Carson, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs and NDI Board Member, added: “There is still the opportunity for these elections to be a positive step and to potentially serve as the foundation for more credible processes in the future. The delegation heard from those who support the elections going ahead as announced and those who oppose it. Irrespective of the timing of the elections, concerted efforts to improve the electoral environment are needed.”

“The NDI/IRI delegation offers this pre-election analysis in spirit of international cooperation and in the hopes of contributing to Ethiopian efforts at strengthening democratic institutions and effective election practices, and improving citizen engagement and accountability in Ethiopia,” said former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs and IRI Board Member Constance Berry Newman.

“Even with the limited time until election day, there are important actions Ethiopians can take and the international community can support to help ensure the 2021 elections and future elections move the country forward. In the hopes of contributing positively to Ethiopians' efforts to advance democratic development, the joint IRI/NDI delegation offers 12 priority recommendations that key stakeholders can take to make the June 5 elections more inclusive, transparent, and accountable.” stressed Ahmed Issack Hassan, former Chairperson of Kenya’s Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC).

The delegation was conducted as part of NDI/IRI’s International Election Assessment Mission for Ethiopia (IEAME) employing an adapted international observation methodology. The IEAME was organized in response to an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ethiopia and subsequent accreditation as observers and in accordance with the laws and directives of the NEBE. The goal of the delegation and the broader IEAME is to provide the citizens of Ethiopia and the international community with an impartial and accurate assessment of the pre-election environment, and offer constructive recommendations based on international and regional standards for democratic elections consistent with Ethiopian law. Due to the constraints imposed by the global health crisis, the delegation was conducted using systematic remote engagement. As an expression of popular sovereignty, it will be the Ethiopian people who ultimately assess the character of their elections and take advantage of any openings to engender further meaningful political change.

The IEAME also includes a limited management team already in Ethiopia; eight remote long-term analysts with diverse thematic expertise; and an additional limited in-country Election Day technical team if COVID-19 conditions permit. The IEAME will continue to analyze the electoral environment through the conclusion of the elections and will issue a final report soon thereafter. The IEAME is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). All of its activities are conducted on an independent, non-partisan basis in accordance with the precepts of the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct*. All findings and recommendations are solely those of the NDI and IRI.

Since their founding in 1983, IRI and NDI have collectively organized more than 400 international assessment and observation missions globally. The joint delegation’s full report is available from both [NDI](#) and [IRI](#).

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About IRI: The International Republican Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to advancing freedom and democracy worldwide. IRI enables political parties to become more issue-based and responsive, helps citizens to participate in government planning, and works to increase the role of marginalized groups in the political process. Since 1983, IRI has monitored 206 elections in 60 countries through international observation missions and assessments. *For more information, visit www.iri.org.*

About NDI: NDI is a non-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental organization that works in partnership around the world to strengthen and safeguard democratic institutions, processes, norms and values to secure a better quality of life for all. NDI envisions a world where democracy and freedom prevail, with dignity for all. Over the past 38 years, NDI has conducted more than 250 election observation missions in 70 countries. *For more information, visit www.ndi.org.*

Joint IRI-NDI Virtual Pre-Election Assessment Delegation Report Summary of Findings and Priority Recommendations

Ethiopia's 2021 elections, scheduled for June 5, could be an opportunity for building on recent reforms and developing more inclusive, transparent and accountable governance in the country. However, significant difficulties, including widespread insecurity and ethnic conflicts, delays in National Election Board of Ethiopia's (NEBE's) candidate and voter registration procedures, poor cooperation from some state governments, boycotts and threats of boycotts by several political parties with broad constituencies, as well as the COVID-19 public health crisis, threaten the ability of voters and parties to participate in the process and, thereby, the potential for credible elections. Serious and concerted efforts prior to Election Day by all stakeholders are necessary to hold meaningful elections and lay the groundwork for national reconciliation and democratic progress beyond the elections.

Reforms introduced since 2018 have resulted in widespread political and social changes, including greater freedoms for citizens, CSOs, political parties and the media. Changes to election and political party related laws, have addressed a number of restrictive elements of the legal framework. The appointment of Chairperson Birtukan Mideksa, a highly respected opposition leader and former judge, has enhanced respect for the NEBE across the political spectrum, while changes to the NEBE's governing legislation have enhanced its organizational independence. Under her leadership the NEBE has commenced on the long process of building its capacity to conduct credible elections and earning public confidence. Her appointment and that of the Supreme Court president as well as the election of the federal president, demonstrate the vital role women can play in political life. Further, long repressed civil society is re-emerging and engaging in voter and civic education as well as independent impartial observation of the electoral process. More broadly, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has begun to address human rights violations. These trends are important, as they represent a break with the past and should be further encouraged.

At the same time, the electoral environment presents significant and acute challenges. Widely criticized elections in 2005, 2010 and 2015, and related political repression, have seriously hindered the capacities of not only the NEBE, but also political parties and CSOs, which affects their present efforts. The country faces multiple security crises related to long standing ethnic tensions resulting in instability or open conflict in many parts of Ethiopia. The security situation undermines the public's ability to freely and actively participate in elections and has resulted in some parties withdrawing from the process. Due to open conflict, elections will not take place in the Tigray regional state. The arrest of several prominent Oromo political leaders has resulted in political party boycotts in Ethiopia's most populous regional state. Insecurity particularly affects the ability of women, persons with disabilities (PWDs) and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to engage in electoral processes. While there is greater media freedom, traditional media remains dominated by pro-government voices and disinformation disseminated by individuals from across the political spectrum undermines the ability of voters to obtain accurate information. Hate speech has also undermined the electoral environment. Despite notable high-level appointments, women and other groups remain largely marginalized in the election process. Ethiopia's serious COVID-19 situation adds additional obstacles for credible elections and protecting public health in the process. These factors threaten electoral integrity and have already negatively impacted candidate nominations and voter registration processes.

Nonetheless, there is still the opportunity for these elections to be a positive step and to potentially serve as the foundation for more credible processes in the future. The delegation heard from those who support the elections going ahead as announced and those who oppose it. Irrespective of the timing of the elections, concerted efforts to improve the electoral environment are needed. Even with the limited time until election day, there are important actions Ethiopians can take and the international community can support to help ensure that the 2021 elections and future elections move the country forward. In the hopes of contributing positively to Ethiopians' efforts to advance democratic development, the joint IRI/NDI delegation offers 12 priority recommendations that key stakeholders can take to make the June 5 elections more inclusive, transparent, and accountable.

Priority Recommendations

Electoral Context

Federal and state security forces need to ensure a safe environment for voters and all stakeholders. Widespread insecurity is undermining the ability of Ethiopians to engage in the electoral process and threatens to undermine voting on election day. Federal and state security forces should work in coordination and in consultation with the NEBE to formulate a deployment plan to ensure a safe environment throughout the process and across the country for all stakeholders, including voters, election officials, candidates and their supporters, civic and voter educators and observers. Federal and state security forces should publicly commit to carrying out their duties in a non-partisan manner and to not interfere in the elections.

All political parties should refrain from violence, intimidation and hate speech, and publicly call for peace. While there are deep tensions in Ethiopian society, all citizens deserve the opportunity to safely participate in the democratic process regardless of their political affiliation. All parties, those participating in the elections and those declining, should publicly denounce violence and call for peace in the country.

The NEBE and political parties need to engage in enhanced dialogue to reduce tensions. To address concerns of electoral violence, intimidation and hate speech, the NEBE should regularly convene the Joint Council of Political Parties (JCPP) as a platform for resolving issues peacefully. Parties should publicly commit to the Electoral Code of Conduct and hold to account their members and supporters who contravene the Code.

COVID-19 preventive measures need to be systematically adhered to ensure Ethiopians can participate safely in the process. The COVID-19 pandemic remains serious in Ethiopia and may worsen during the lead up to the elections due to popular gatherings. While the public health officials and the NEBE developed safety protocols for use during voter registration, it is not clear if there is widespread adherence to these, particularly in rural areas. Clear guidelines for social distancing should be enforced during political party campaign events and at polling stations; wearing of masks should be required at the polls, and soap/sanitizer should be distributed for required use at polling stations.

Federal and state authorities, the NEBE and all stakeholders should take measures to enhance women's electoral participation. In recognition that violence and insecurity, constraints thrust on families by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as social and cultural barriers, challenge the electoral participation of women from all sectors of society, governmental and electoral actors should include gender experts in developing measures to address electoral challenges, make public

statements and take robust measures to encourage women to register, vote, become electoral officials, candidates, election observers, and otherwise engage in the elections.

Election Preparations

Federal and state governments should coordinate and provide the NEBE with all required support and resources to enhance preparations for the elections. Substantial concerns remain about the NEBE having adequate support and resources to conduct the elections. In the spirit of democratic elections and national and subnational cooperation, Federal and regional state authorities should make every effort to assist the NEBE and its regional and constituency offices in organizing and administering all aspects of the election process. In all instances, authorities should act impartially and in ways that foster wide voter confidence in the election process.

Concerted efforts should be made to ensure all eligible Ethiopians, including IDPs, have a meaningful opportunity to register and to vote. The NEBE has experienced significant challenges opening all polling stations for voter registration. The NEBE is mandated to provide for registration and voting by IDPs. However, limited cooperation from regional governments has inhibited the ability of the NEBE to establish polling stations in IDP areas and to register IDPs to vote. Both federal and regional governments must provide access to ensure all eligible Ethiopians, including IDPs can fully participate in the elections.

NEBE should provide political parties and CSOs with detailed information on voter registration. There is suspicion of national and regional registration figures in part due to the dramatic increase in registration rates. The NEBE is encouraged to go beyond the requirements of the law and enhance public trust by providing political parties and CSOs with more detailed registration information broken down by date and district (“woreda”) and disaggregated by gender and age as well as potentially providing copies of the voters’ lists in electronic form in accordance with principles of the Open Election Data Initiative (openelectiondata.net).

Civil society voter education initiatives should be enhanced for marginalized communities impacted by insecurity and where access to information is under threat. To ensure that all Ethiopians have the opportunity to participate in the elections, enhanced voter education efforts are required. Voter education is urgently needed in communities where voter registration has been delayed and in areas of insecurity. Specific efforts should be made to include women, young people, PWDs, IDPs and other marginalized groups.

Media should make a concerted effort to provide balanced election coverage and strengthen fact-checking systems to combat disinformation. All parties, including those choosing not to participate, should receive equitable coverage from state-controlled media. Private media, similarly, should strive to offer a diversity of political perspectives. Media organizations and journalists should redouble efforts to verify sources and strengthen fact checking mechanisms to expose disinformation in social and traditional media to ensure citizens receive accurate information on the electoral process and the candidates.

Election Day and Immediate Post Election

Observers need unfettered freedom to observe and share their findings with the public. Accreditation procedures and guidelines for observers are unduly bureaucratic and restrictive. Independent non-partisan observers, particularly citizen observers from Ethiopian civil society,

play a critical role in building public confidence in elections by both safeguarding the process and publicly sharing their findings. The NEBE should streamline and expedite accreditation procedures and allow observers to publicly share their findings in a timely manner.

The NEBE should ensure the results tabulation process is inclusive, transparent and accountable. Widespread distrust of past election results requires that vote tallies from polling stations be securely and quickly transmitted for tabulation. To enhance public confidence, the NEBE should explain to the public and all stakeholders how the results tabulation process will function. All systems should be tested well before Election Day and the findings shared with stakeholders. To enhance public confidence in the results, all polling station results should be published electronically on the NEBE's website and in a timely manner.

Beyond these short-term recommendations, significant longer-term efforts will be needed after the elections to enhance the legal framework, strengthen the NEBE, foster representative political parties, promote vibrant civil society, ensure the full participation of women, youth, PWDs, IDPs, and other marginalized communities, and provide balanced and accurate traditional and social media. Further, credible elections and democratic transformation in Ethiopia are ultimately dependent upon addressing the country's political and security challenges. In this regard, an inclusive process to meaningfully address historical grievances, and to promote justice and national reconciliation will be necessary to heal the deep-seated societal divisions and ethnic tensions that threaten the country's unity.