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Report on the State of Civic Space During Ethiopia's 7th General Election

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**Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights
Organizations (CEHRO)**

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Abbreviations/Acronyms

CEHRO	Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations
CIVICUS	World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CSO	Civil Society Organizations
CSP	Civil Society Proclamation
EHRCO	Ethiopian Human Rights Council
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
NEBE	National Election Board of Ethiopia
SPS	Special Polling Stations

Executive Summary

This consolidated civic space assessment report highlights the state of civic space during Ethiopia's 7th General Election period. It primarily focuses on media, civil society organizations (CSOs), political actors, and citizens' engagement in the election period through exercising their right to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and peaceful assembly. The report also examines the key dynamics of civic space that shaped the participation of various actors in the electoral cycle. The findings of the assessment are based on CEHRO's systematic pre-election, election day and post-election observation finding analysis, complemented by media monitoring and document review.

The assessment indicates that the civic space during the 7th general election was characterized by both progress and continuing limitations. Efforts to promote civic and voter education, together with the engagement of CSOs, the media, and political parties in several areas, helped improve public awareness and foster better participation in the electoral process. Nevertheless, a range of legal, administrative, and practical constraints continued to limit the effective participation of CSOs and other civic space actors, affecting the transparency, inclusiveness, and overall quality of the electoral environment. Ensuring a more open and enabling civic space where citizens, CSOs, the media, and political parties can freely exercise their rights to participate, access information, express diverse views, and engage throughout the electoral process is critical to strengthening democratic elections in the future.

Key Findings at a Glance

Positive Aspects

- Voters demonstrated active engagement in the voting process, indicating an accessible and participatory electoral environment.
- CSOs engagement in civic and voter education initiatives enhanced public awareness of electoral rights, access to electoral information and enabled citizens to exercise their civic and political rights;
- Accredited election observers were able to access electoral information and polling stations without intimidation or threats, thereby strengthening transparency and public confidence in the election;
- Political parties' participation in election campaigns, election-day oversight, public communication and debate demonstrate their active engagement in political expression and access to information;
- An enabling electoral environment allowed media to access the electoral process, provide election coverage, organise political parties' debates, collaborate with CSOs, thereby contributing to electoral transparency and public access to election-related information;
- Increased engagement and coordination between NEBE, CSOs, and other stakeholders, strengthening cooperation, dialogue, and participation of civic actors throughout the electoral process;

Key Challenges and Areas of Concern

- Delay and gaps in the availability and dissemination of electoral information related to the place and voting day in Special Polling Stations (SPS) affected CSOs' election observation missions;
- Limited outreach of civic and voter education for IDPs affected equal access to election-related information and opportunities for informed civic participation;
- Reports of pressure, coercion, and perceived links between voter registration and access to services raised concerns regarding citizens' ability to exercise their political rights freely and voluntarily.
- Instances of interference and inappropriate assistance practice in some polling stations affected voters' ability to make independent electoral choices and violated the principle of ballot secrecy;

- Intimidation and restrictions that affected some opposition political parties ' ability to freely organise campaigns, communicate views and administrative barriers affecting timely registration of political parties;
- Financial, logistical, and administrative constraints reduced the capacity of CSOs to fully exercise their role in civic education, public awareness, election observation, and democratic accountability.
- Conflict and insecurity in some areas limited citizens' ability to exercise their civic and political rights and prevented equal participation in the electoral process.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Civic space is a cornerstone of functioning democracies. When civic space is open, citizens and CSOs can organise, participate, and communicate without hindrance. In doing so, they can claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them.¹ Open civic space in the electoral context requires a set of legal, policy, institutional, and practical conditions necessary for CSOs, the media, political parties, and voters to access information, express themselves, and participate in the electoral process.² Thus, protecting civic space is about fostering an enabling environment in which citizens and non-governmental actors can exercise their right to freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly.

Evidence from a range of CSOs and International Organisations indicated that government bodies and leaders at the national and local levels hinder the work of CSOs engaged in election-related activities, including denying accreditation, restricting their access to local communities, and disbanding informal CSO coalitions that monitor elections.³ Furthermore, the use of politically affiliated media and restrictions on access to information (through internet shutdowns) undermine the ability of CSOs to engage throughout the election process.⁴

The state of civic space in Ethiopia is also characterised by mounting restrictions that undermine the ability of CSOs to engage meaningfully in human rights and election-related activities. The CIVICUS 2025/2026 civic space monitoring report also confirmed that the growing restrictions and undue pressure narrowed the space for civic space actors to exercise their fundamental freedoms of expression,

¹ CIVICUS, *Civic Space*, available online at:

<https://monitor.civicus.org/about/how-it-works/what-is-civic-space/>, last accessed on 19 June 2026.

² OECD, *Practical Guide for Policymakers on Protecting and Promoting Civic Space*, OECD Public Governance Reviews, 2024, Pp. 8 & 9.

³ ICNL, *Elections and Civic Space: Lessons from Africa, Africa Civil Society Consultation*, International Centre for Non-profit Law, July 2024, P. 1.

⁴ ICNL, *Internet Shutdowns and Disruptions Are a Pain for Electoral Democracy in Africa: The Key Issues, Trends, Practices and Consequences*, November 2025, Pp. 8 & 9.

association and peaceful assembly.⁵ Human rights defenders, journalists, members of CSOs and opposition figures face various human rights violations, including but not limited to physical abuse, intimidation, harassment, threats and digital surveillance.⁶

On 1 June 2026, Ethiopia held its 7th General Election, with over 54 million registered voters at 52,188 polling stations across the country.⁷ The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) accredited 42 political parties to contest in the election, 45 CSOs to observe the electoral process, and 169 CSOs to provide voter education for the 7th General Election.⁸ Furthermore, 1,814 journalists representing over 68 media outlets have been granted accreditation to provide impartial, responsible, and honest coverage of the electoral process.⁹

CEHRO played an active role throughout the election process through promoting the protection of civic space and strengthening independent election observation. As part of its election engagement, CEHRO has conducted pre-election, election-day and post-election observation on June 1, 2026. The observation mission addresses 79 polling stations in Addis Ababa, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Amhara Regions. Furthermore, on June 09, 2026, CEHRO undertook election day observation at Special Polling Stations (SPS) at Bambasi IDPs camp in Benishangul-Gumuz Region and has also been monitoring SPS in South Wollo Zone of Amhara Region. Ahead of the election day, CEHRO has also delivered civic and voter education in the IDP camps in Amhara Region.

CEHRO has also partnered with local and grassroots CSOs, media organisations, and election observers to enhance their capacity to identify, document, and respond to restrictions on civic space throughout the electoral process. To support this work, CEHRO developed a comprehensive Election-Time Civic Space Monitoring Tool to systematically assess the state of civic space before, during,

⁵ CIVICUS, *Civic Space Monitoring Report*, available online at: <https://monitor.civicus.org/country/ethiopia/>, last accessed on 3 August 2026. Sisay Sahilu, *Latest CIVICUS report highlights narrowing civic space in Ethiopia*, March 22, 2025.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ NEBE Reports Strong Election-Day Operations as Millions Cast Ballots at 50,188 Polling Stations Nationwide, available online at: <https://www.fanamc.com/english/nebe-reports-strong-election-day-operations-as-millions-cast-ballots-at-50188-polling-stations-nationwide/>. Last accessed on 19 June 2026.

⁸ NEBE Accredits 45 Local Election Observer CSOs, available online at: <https://nebe.org.et/en/node/1215>, last accessed on 19 June 2026.

⁹ 1,800+ Journalists Accredited to Ensure Transparent Coverage for Ethiopia's 7th General Election, available online at: <https://www.ebc.et/english/Home/NewsDetails?NewsId=5166>, last accessed on 19 June 2026.

and after the elections. Drawing on this tool, CEHRO delivered extensive training to local and grassroots CSOs, media organisations, and election-time observers, equipping them with standardised methodologies for monitoring and reporting incidents affecting fundamental freedoms.

Throughout the electoral process, CEHRO coordinated election-time civic space monitoring across multiple locations by deploying the Election-Time Civic Space Monitoring Tool, collecting and analysing information on the enjoyment of the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, as well as the broader enabling environment for democratic participation. The findings presented in this report are, therefore, based on this systematic monitoring and provide an evidence-based assessment of the state of civic space during the election period.

1.2 Scope and Methodology

This consolidated election-time civic space assessment report examines the electoral environment and the factors that enabled or restricted civic space throughout Ethiopia's 7th General Election. The assessment encompasses the pre-election, election-day, and post-election periods, providing a comprehensive analysis of the opportunities and constraints affecting civic participation across the electoral cycle. It examines the key dimensions of civic space, covering foundational freedoms (freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression), enabling environment (safety and security of civic actors), meaningful participation, and access to information. By doing so, the report further highlights the key challenges, trends, and good practices that shaped the state of civic space during the 7th Ethiopian general election.

The report is based on data collected during the pre-election, election day, and post-election periods through CEHRO's Election-Time Civic Space Monitoring Tool and media monitoring efforts, which track developments affecting freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, as well as the broader enabling environment for democratic participation. In addition, the report incorporates findings from CEHRO's election-day observation missions conducted on 1 June 2026 in the Benishangul-Gumuz, Somali, and Amhara regions, as well as Addis Ababa. It also draws on observation findings from the Special Polling Stations

observed on 9 June 2026 in Assosa Zone (Bambasi IDP camps) in the Benishangul-Gumuz Region and in South Wollo Zone, Amhara Region.

The civic space monitoring was conducted through deploying structured and standardised civic space monitoring checklists, media monitoring, and document reviews. CEHRO deployed 18 monitors and collaborated with grassroots CSOs that had participated in the civic space monitoring training. To ensure consistency in data collection and reporting, a standardised monitoring checklist and reporting template were developed based on the Election-Time Civic Space Monitoring Tool and distributed to CEHRO civic space monitors.

The standardised civic space monitoring checklists contained a set of questions that covered various pre-election, election-day, and post-election civic space situations. The conditions and developments assessed through the checklists were based on three fundamental human rights: freedom of expression, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly, alongside meaningful citizen engagement. In addition, a media monitoring methodology was employed by tracking media reports, public statements, and online information related to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and broader democratic participation during the 7th Ethiopian general election. The findings were validated through cross-checking multiple sources, reviewing supporting documents, and triangulating monitoring reports with media reports and official information.

1.3 Overview of Ethiopian Electoral Laws and Civic Space

Democratic elections require the involvement of political parties, independent candidates, CSOs, media institutions, and citizens, who are the key actors throughout the electoral cycle.¹⁰ In this report, civic space refers to the legal, institutional, and practical environment that enables individuals and organised groups to exercise fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of peaceful assembly, access to information, and participation in public affairs.¹¹ An open and healthy civic space allows civic space

¹⁰ Sy Mamabolo, Democracy, Elections and Citizen Participation: The South African Experience, *Journal of African Elections*, Vol. 23 No. 1, 2024.

¹¹ OHCHR, *what is civic space*, available online at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space>, last accessed on 3 August 2026.

actors to communicate political ideas, monitor the electoral process, organise collectively, and meaningfully participate in the electoral process.¹²

Elections and civic space are closely related and interdependent. An open, free, and inclusive civic space is a prerequisite for democratic elections, and civic freedoms can only exist within a resilient democracy.¹³ At the same time, effective regulation provides an important foundation for the exercise of civic freedoms. Therefore, examining the legal and regulatory framework governing elections and civic space is important to clearly understand the civic space environment in the electoral context.

1.3.1 Ethiopian Electoral Laws on Civic Space

Ethiopia enacted its latest constitution in 1995, which paved the way for a multiparty system and enshrined fundamental human rights.¹⁴ The constitution provides the fundamental right to vote and to be elected at periodic elections to any office at all levels of government.¹⁵ It also protects key civic freedoms, including freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, which form the foundation for democratic participation.¹⁶

The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) is entrusted with the authority to administer and execute impartially any election conducted in accordance with the FDRE Constitution and Ethiopian electoral laws.¹⁷ Since the adoption of the FDRE Constitution, Ethiopia has conducted seven general elections, with the most recent being the 7th General Election held on June 1, 2026. While the constitutional framework establishes important guarantees for electoral participation, the extent to which these rights are realised depends on the effectiveness of electoral institutions, regulatory frameworks, and implementation practices.

¹² OECD, *Civic space*, available online at: <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/open-government-and-citizen-participation/civic-space.html>, last accessed on 3 August 2026.

¹³ Civic Space and Democracy, available online at: <https://www.solidar.org/news-and-statements/our-position-on-civic-space-and-democracy/>, last accessed on 22 June 2026.

¹⁴ Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). (1995). Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Proclamation No. 1/1995, Federal Negarit Gazeta, 1st Year, No. 1, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

¹⁵ Ibid. Art. 38.

¹⁶ Ibid, arts. 29 – 31.

¹⁷ The FDRE Constitution, Art. 102.

The Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Election Ethics Proclamation No. 1162/2019 (with its amendment Proclamation No. 1394/2025) is the main legal instrument regulating the electoral system in Ethiopia.¹⁸ The proclamation provides comprehensive procedures and requirements for political parties' registration, participation, campaign activities and engagement of voters.¹⁹ Through recognising political pluralism and multiparty competition, the proclamation creates opportunities for political actors to communicate their political views, present alternative policy platforms and participate in the democratic system.²⁰

In practice, simply having electoral laws does not guarantee an open and equitable electoral environment. Instead, political parties and candidates need access to information, fair chances to reach voters, the freedom to organise campaign activities, and protection from unwarranted restrictions.²¹ The way electoral rules are enforced, the independence of regulatory bodies, and the overall political climate greatly affect whether these rights are practically upheld.²²

Electoral campaigns provide one of the most important avenues through which citizens receive information concerning public affairs and alternative political viewpoints. In this regard, the electoral framework contributes to the realisation of Article 29 of the FDRE Constitution and Article 19 of the ICCPR, which protect freedom of expression and the right to seek, receive, and impart information.²³ The ability of opposition parties to publicly criticise government policies and present alternative visions of governance is particularly important for maintaining an open civic space.²⁴ In particular, the ability of opposition parties and candidates to criticise government policies and present alternative visions of governance is essential for meaningful political competition and an informed electorate.

¹⁸ Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (2019). Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Election's Code of Conduct Proclamation No. 1162/2019. *See also*, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (2025). Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Elections Code of Conduct (Amendment) Proclamation No. 1394/2025.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Preamble.

²⁰ Proclamation No. 1162/2019, Art. 43.

²¹ OSCE, *Handbook for Observation of Election Campaigns and Political Environments*, Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2021.

²² Oliver Joseph, *Independence in Electoral Management Electoral Processes Primer 1*, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2021.

²³ The FDRE Constitution, Art. 29. *See also*, UNGA, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 999, p. 171, 16 December 1966, Art. 19.

²⁴ Chebii Zephaniah Kiprono, The Role of Opposition Political Parties in Enhancing Good Governance: A Case of Selected Countries in Africa, *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)* Vol. IV, Issue VI, June 2020.

The freedom of peaceful assembly is another crucial aspect in ensuring civic space during elections. Thus, political parties, their candidates and agents obtain the chance to organise campaigns, political events, or consultations.²⁵ Even though the proclamation recognises this right in the election context, the way this right is protected and how authorities handle election campaigns and political events affect political participation, political parties and civic space

A particularly significant contribution of the Proclamation to civic space is its recognition of local and international election observers as well as civic and voter education activities.²⁶ Election observation provides an essential accountability mechanism through which civil society organisations monitor compliance with electoral laws, detect irregularities, and strengthen public confidence in electoral outcomes. Similarly, voter education initiatives contribute to informed political participation by enhancing citizens' understanding of electoral processes and democratic rights.

The legal framework further recognises the important role of the media in promoting electoral transparency and informed public debate. The Electoral Proclamation and related regulations provide for media access during election periods and impose obligations concerning fair electoral coverage.²⁷ These provisions are complemented by the Media Proclamation No. 1238/2021, which protects the rights of journalists and media institutions to gather and disseminate information.²⁸ Together, these legal instruments create the normative foundation for an informed electorate and democratic accountability. In addition, access to information provisions contribute to electoral transparency by enabling citizens and civic actors to obtain relevant public information.

²⁵ OGP, *freedom of assembly*, available online at: <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/open-gov-guide/civic-space-freedom-of-assembly/>, last accessed on 3 August 2026.

²⁶ Voter Education Accreditation and Code of Conduct Directive No. 4/2020.

²⁷ Proclamation No. 1162/2019, *The Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Elections Code of Conduct Proclamation*, 25th Year No. 97 Addis Ababa 16th October 2019, Art. 44.

²⁸ Proclamation No. 1238/2021 Media Proclamation, 27th Year No. 22 Addis Ababa, 5th April 2021.

1.3.2 The Regulatory Environment for Civil Society Organisations in Ethiopia

CSOs play a crucial role in the electoral process, including voter education, Election observation, human rights monitoring, public awareness and accountability initiatives. Thus, understanding the regulatory environment for CSOs is essential for assessing the enabling or restricting legal frameworks which may directly affect CSOs' access to electoral information and election observation.

The FDRE Constitution enshrines the right to freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression, creating a foundational legal framework for civic space and democratic participation. These rights create an enabling environment for CSOs to actively and freely engage in the electoral process.²⁹ The constitutional recognition, however, is not a standalone foundation for effective exercise of these rights. Rather, the administrative procedures, subsidiary legislation, the political context, security conditions, and the extent to which institutions uphold these rights may affect the civic space and restrict CSO participation in the electoral process.

In February 2009, the Ethiopian government enacted the Proclamation to Provide for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies (CSP), Ethiopia's first comprehensive law governing CSOs.³⁰ It prohibits local CSOs that receive more than 10 per cent of their funding from abroad from undertaking human rights activities. This funding restriction significantly affected the ability of many CSOs to engage in election-related activities, including election observation, human rights monitoring and advocacy initiatives.³¹

A decade later, the adoption of a new CSO Proclamation in 2019 marked a shift toward a more enabling legal environment for civil society. The CSOs' Proclamation No. 1113/2019 replaced the restrictive Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009, contributed to the opening of civic space, increased the number of CSOs, and fostered a more collaborative working environment.³² The reform

²⁹ Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. (1995). *The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*. Proclamation No. 1 of 1995, Art. 38. Ibid. Arts, 29 – 31 & Art. 38.

³⁰ Charities and Societies Proclamation of 2009, Proclamation No. 621/2009, *Federal Negarit Gazeta*, Year 15, No. 25.

³¹ Amnesty International, *Ethiopia: The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation as a serious obstacle to the promotion and protection of human rights in Ethiopia*, Amnesty International's written statement to the 20th Session of the UN Human Rights Council (18 June – 6 July 2012), P. 2.

³² Zigiju S Samuel, Reclaiming Civil Society Space in Ethiopia: An Analysis of Civil Society Trends, Structural Challenges, and Distribution Gaps, *African Journal of Leadership and Development*, 2025. P. 79.

removed previous restrictions on foreign funding sources and expanded opportunities for CSOs to engage in human rights, governance, advocacy, and public participation activities.

Despite these enabling legal reforms, the state of civic space and CSOs continues to depend on the broader political and institutional conditions.³³ These challenges are related to the implementation of the existing regulatory frameworks, administrative processes, access to funding and information, which affect the ability of CSOs to operate effectively.³⁴

These pressures have been compounded by the adoption of the new draft CSP proclamation in 2025, which dramatically tightens state control over the operation and funding of CSOs. The first draft of the proclamation restricts access to foreign funding, particularly for CSOs engaged in democratic advocacy or election-related work.³⁵ In the latest draft version, however, the provision prohibiting foreign-funded CSOs from engaging in election-related activities has been lifted. Even though the draft proclamation was not approved, the proposed changes highlighted continuing debates regarding regulation, accountability, and the conditions necessary for effective civic participation in the lead-up to the 7th General Election.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Abdata Abebe, A Critical Analysis of the Regulation of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) Engagement in Income-Generating Activities under Ethiopian Laws, *Hawassa University Journal of Law (HUJL)* Vol. 8, July 2024.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Ethiopia: Proposed Legal Changes Threaten Civil Society: Draft Amendments Would Grant Sweeping Powers to Federal Government*, July 29, 2025, available online at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/29/ethiopia-proposed-legal-changes-threaten-civil-society>, last accessed on August 2026.

2. The State of Civic Space During Ethiopia's 7th General Election: A Pre-Election, Election-Day, and Post-Election Assessment

2.1 Civic Space and Citizen Participation in the Electoral Process

Citizen participation is an indispensable component of credible elections, democratic governance, and a fundamental manifestation of an open civic space.³⁶ It reflects the extent to which citizens can freely associate, express opinions, access information, and meaningfully engage and contribute to the country's democratic governance. Therefore, it must encapsulate access to information and adequate civic and voter education, which in turn shape their participation in the electoral process.³⁷ Voting is the most visible form of direct citizen engagement in the election process. It goes beyond casting a ballot and includes ongoing interaction between citizens and state institutions in shaping public decisions.³⁸ This section highlights the key civic space monitoring findings on citizens' ability to exercise their electoral rights and participate in Ethiopia's 7th general election freely, safely, and without fear, interference, or discrimination.

2.1.1. Access to information: Civic and Voter Education

Access to information is a key indicator of civic space. Civic and voter education serve as an important mechanism for realising citizens' rights to access information and facilitating their meaningful participation in the electoral process.³⁹ Conversely, insufficient voter education initiatives undermine the active engagement of citizens in democratic governance and may expose citizens to misinformation, which

³⁶ Tamirat Dela & Takele Teshome, Active Political Participation of Citizens and Its Impact on Building a Democratic Government System: The Case of Wolaita Zone, *Journal of Political Science and International Relations*, 20201, Pp. 125 & 126.

³⁷ Sy Mamabolo, Democracy, Elections, and Citizen Participation: The South African Experience, *Journal of African Elections*, 2021, P. 20.

³⁸ Waiphot Kulacha, *Factors Influencing Voting Decision: A Comprehensive Literature Review*, online available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/12/9/469>, last accessed on 25 June 2026.

³⁹ Dunia Mekonnen, Why Access to Information is Essential for Democratic Elections in Africa, CIPESA, January 2021.

directly affects civic space and electoral integrity.⁴⁰ The UN Human Rights Committee noted that voter education and registration campaigns are necessary to ensure the effective exercise of the right to vote by an informed community. Furthermore, any abusive interference with registration or voting, as well as intimidation or coercion of voters, should be prohibited by law and strictly enforced.⁴¹

During the pre-election period, NEBE conducted voter registration and voter education initiatives to improve voters' awareness of the electoral procedures and relevant timelines.⁴² Accordingly, NEBE accredited 143 CSOs to provide voter education for the 7th General Election.⁴³ The accreditation of diverse CSOs to conduct voter education demonstrates the recognition of the important role of CSOs in enhancing voters' access to information on electoral procedures and promoting electoral integrity. It also ensures citizens' access to information from diverse sources. CSOs' engagement in civic and voter education also plays a key role in prompting informed participation, increasing public confidence, and creating space for dialogue in the election process.

However, CEHROs' civic space monitoring findings indicate that the realisation of citizen participation and access to information in the 7th General Election varied across regions and constituencies.

CEHRO's civic space monitoring findings indicate that civic and voter education activities were conducted in the monitored areas, contributing to increased public awareness of the electoral process. However, the observations also identified various challenges and information gaps in the implementation of pre-election procedures. Even though CEHRO and other CSOs have also engaged and contributed to providing civic and voter education in some IDP camps,⁴⁴ monitoring findings suggest that access to voter education remained uneven across several displacement settings observed during the monitoring period.

⁴⁰ Shah Mohammad & Omer Faruqe Jubaer, Electoral Integrity and Democratic Legitimacy: Safeguarding Free and Fair Elections in the Modern Era, *Election Law Journal Rules Politics and Policy*, March 2026.

⁴¹ United Nations Human Rights Committee, General Comment 25, paragraph 11.

⁴² IGAD Election Observation Mission to the 7th General Election of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Held on Monday June 1, 2026.

⁴³ *NEBE Accredits 143 CSOs to Provide Voter Education for the 7th General Election*, online available at: <https://nebe.org.et/en/node/1196>, last accessed on 25 June 2025.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

IDPs often reside in remote camps or settlements where Election Management Bodies (EMBs) and CSOs fail to deliver targeted voter education.⁴⁵ As a result, displaced communities may experience greater barriers in accessing election-related information through ordinary communication channels. Furthermore, IDPs may have higher levels of political disillusionment and may be more subject to intimidation, and therefore, more efforts may be needed to promote engagement.⁴⁶

CEHRO's civic space monitors identified significant gaps in the availability of information for voters. These limitations reduced the ability of some IDPs to make informed decisions regarding their participation in the electoral process. In particular, at *Kutaber* and *Gerado* Camps, IDPs reported that they had no clear information about the election procedures, and information about the election day was communicated to them on the eve of June 09, 2026. A report by the *Ethio Insider* also revealed that in IDP camps located in *Debre Birhan*, there was no civic and voter education, and no election campaigns were conducted to enable voters to know the electoral process and political parties' commitments.⁴⁷ These findings suggest that some displaced communities may not have received sufficient information to effectively exercise their electoral rights.

The monitoring findings also reveal that in most polling stations, voters do not have sufficient information on the voting procedures. These information gaps were also evident on election day, where the voters frequently requested assistance from the election officials due to the lack of sufficient information on how to cast their vote. This increased reliance on election officials may affect voters' confidence and independence in the voting process, particularly where voters require repeated guidance to complete their ballots. These types of informational disparities limit the civic space for citizens to actively exercise their right to vote and their ability to make fully informed electoral choices.

⁴⁵ IFES, Internally Displaced Persons and Electoral Participation: A Brief Overview, IFES White Paper, September 2016.

⁴⁶ Tetyana Durnyeva, *et al*, IDPs' Electoral Participation Gap, Journal of Internal Displacement, Vol. 9, Issue 1, January 2019, P. 5.

⁴⁷ Ethiopia Insider, የተፈናቀሉበት አካባቢ ያሉ ዕጩዎችን ለመምረጥ እንደተገደዱ የደብረ ብርሃን ተፈናቃዮች ገለጹ, June 5, 2026, online available at: <https://ethioelections.com/2026/06/18231/>, last accessed on 6 July 2026.

2.1.2 Voter Registration

Voter registration is the gateway through which citizens can directly participate in elections. It is also a key prerequisite for citizens' meaningful participation in the electoral process. The Electoral, Political Parties Registration, and Election Ethics Proclamation No. 1162/2019 under Article 20 provides that voter registration shall be conducted only at the polling stations and prohibits conducting voter registration through door-to-door mechanisms, except in situations expressly provided by the law.⁴⁸ This procedural safeguard is drawn from the cardinal principle that citizens' participation in the electoral process is genuinely voluntary and free from undue influence.⁴⁹ The proclamation also stressed that voting or participating as a candidate in a particular election is not a legal obligation; instead, it is the right of the citizens to vote or be elected without any intimidation.⁵⁰

Against this legal framework, CEHRO's monitoring findings identified instances where voter registration practices did not fully align with the principles established under electoral law. CEHRO's pre-election civic space mentoring revealed that, during the voter registration period, polling station officials in some areas conducted door-to-door campaigns urging citizens to register as voters. These reported practices appear inconsistent with the voter registration procedures established under the Electoral Proclamation. It is clearly against the electoral legislation and the constitutional guarantee that citizens have the right to participate in democratic governance freely. The NEBE itself, in its press release in April 2026, publicly acknowledged receiving reports of interference in the voter registration process.⁵¹ CEHRO's civic space monitors and the NEBE press release also indicated instances in which individuals were pressured to register, voter registration was linked to access to public services, and employees were allegedly threatened with salary deductions, loss of employment, and denial of services if they failed to obtain voter registration cards.⁵²

⁴⁸ The proclamation under Art. 20 (2) provides that in pastoralist areas, voter registration may be conducted by establishing mobile registration stations or conducting door-to-door voter registration as necessary.

⁴⁹ What are free and fair Elections? Online available at:

<https://civicsacademy.co.za/what-are-free-and-fair-elections/>, last accessed on 25 June 2026.

⁵⁰ Proclamation No. 1162/2019, The Ethiopian Electoral, Political Parties Registration and Elections Code of Conduct Proclamation, Art. 5 (2).

⁵¹ ከኢትዮጵያ ብሔራዊ ምርጫ ቦርድ የመራጮች ምዝገባ ሂደት ላይ የተከተለ የሕግ ጥሰትን አስመልክቶ የሰጠ መግለጫ፡ details available at: <https://www.bbc.com/amharic/articles/czx9eerg120o>, last accessed on 25 June 2025. NEBE reminded the public that voter registration is a matter of individual choice and that any attempt to compel citizens to register constitutes an unlawful interference with the electoral process.

⁵² Ibid.

These incidents raise important civic space concerns, as meaningful political participation is measured not solely by the number of registered voters but also by the extent to which citizens can exercise their electoral rights freely and without coercion. An enabling civic space requires individuals to decide whether and how to participate in electoral processes based on their own preferences and political convictions.⁵³ Where public officials or other actors exert pressure on citizens to register, participation risks becoming performative rather than genuinely voluntary. This type of incident was also documented in CEHRO's civic space monitoring, where IDPs have reported that their participation in the electoral process was not driven by a sense of civic duty; rather, it was motivated by a fear of potential repercussions from local authorities. Such practices undermine individual autonomy, distort the principle of free political choice, and create an environment in which electoral engagement is influenced by fear, pressure, or perceived consequences rather than informed and independent decision-making. A healthy civic space, however, requires voter registration processes that should not only maximize participation but also ensure that participation remains voluntary, informed, and free from actual or perceived coercion.

2.1.3 Civic Space and Citizen Participation in the Voting Process

Voting day is when voters cast their ballots to elect their chosen candidate from a list of political party candidates and independent candidates who are registered and competing democratically.⁵⁴ Civic space on election day is not only about the procedural compliance of the voting process, but also the extent to which voters can cast their ballot without any intimidation, undue influence, or any other threat that undermines their free choice.⁵⁵ Election day provides an opportunity for citizens to examine whether the electoral environment enables or restricts citizens' participation during the election day. As election day is a critical stage in the electoral cycle, it is important to assess citizens' participation through a civic space lens.

⁵³ UN, *Human Rights And Elections: A Handbook on International Human Rights Standards on Elections*, United Nations, Professional Training Series No. 2/Rev.1, 2021.

⁵⁴ NEBE, Electoral Cycle, online available at: <https://nebe.org.et/en/electoral-cycle>, last accessed on 26 June 2026.

⁵⁵ Sofia Jaramillo & Sarah Morsheimer, *Just Security: The Essential Role of 'Civic Space' in Safeguarding Electoral Integrity: How a Decision in Africa Can Reverberate*, October 3, 2024.

The UN Human Rights Committee under CCPR General Comment 25 clearly requires the EMB to ensure that persons entitled to vote have a space that allows them to vote freely for any candidate for election and are free to support or to oppose the government, without undue influence or coercion of any kind, which may distort or inhibit the free expression of the elector's will.⁵⁶ Voters should be able to form opinions independently, free of violence or threat of violence, compulsion, inducement, or manipulative interference of any kind.⁵⁷ The AU Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa also reaffirms this principle and requires states to ensure an open and enabling civic space for voters to cast their ballots without intimidation.⁵⁸

One of the key aspects of meaningful participation of citizens on election day is the availability of sufficient space to cast their ballot within the secrecy booth. Any practice that undermines the ballot secrecy creates a risk that a voter's choice may be observed, disclosed, or influenced.⁵⁹ In other words, any interference with the voters' ballot secrecy or situations that force voters to reveal their choice is a factor that undermines the free participation of citizens in the electoral process.⁶⁰ CEHRO's findings show that in most polling stations (87.5%) where the monitoring was conducted, the voters were able to vote freely without any intimidation in the secrecy booths. This suggests that, in the majority of monitored polling stations, voters were generally able to exercise their voting rights in an environment free from overt intimidation or interference.

However, the findings also revealed that practices compromised the secrecy of the ballot and voters' ability to exercise their political rights independently. The principle of the secret ballot is a fundamental safeguard against intimidation, coercion, and undue influence.⁶¹ CEHRO civic space monitors reported repeated instances of election officials entering secrecy booths without voters requesting assistance, and officials were observed marking ballot papers on behalf of voters.

⁵⁶ UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), *CCPR General Comment No. 25: Article 25 (Participation in Public Affairs and the Right to Vote)*, *The Right to Participate in Public Affairs, Voting Rights and the Right of Equal Access to Public Service*, CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7, 12 July 1996, Para. 19.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Declaration on the Principles Governing Democratic Elections in Africa, AHG/Decl.1 (XXXVIII), 2002, Sec. III.

⁵⁹ Alan S. Gerber *et al*, *Is There a Secret Ballot? Ballot Secrecy Perceptions and Their Implications for Voting Behaviour*, British Journal of Political Science, July 2012.

⁶⁰ OSCE, *Alternative voting methods and arrangements, Benefits, Risks and Practical Considerations in Light of International Standards And Good Practice*, P. 6.

⁶¹ Dowling CM, Doherty D, Hill SJ, Gerber AS, Huber GA (2019). *The voting experience and beliefs about ballot secrecy*. PLoS ONE 14(1): e0209765, online available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0209765>.

Two or more voters were observed entering the secrecy booth together to discuss and cast their votes, while many voters cast their ballots outside the secrecy booth without being directed by election officials to use it.

These observations indicate a lack of effective protection of ballot secrecy and the consistent application of voting procedures across some polling stations. While these observations do not necessarily evidence direct intimidation, they significantly compromised the safeguards protecting voters from coercion and undue influence and thus undermined the effective exercise of political participation and the overall openness of civic space on election day.

Furthermore, preliminary election observation reports conducted by other CSOs on the 7th general election also reveal instances where the voters were forced to vote for a particular party in 13 polling stations.⁶² These types of incidents affect voters' genuine preferences and instead become acts of compliance, transforming elections from instruments of representation into a mechanism of control. It significantly affects the civic space by reducing participation to a procedural exercise instead of a substantive and genuine expression of voters' preferences.

A recent report by *Ethiopian Insider* has also highlighted that IDPs residing in Debre Birhan IDP camps alleged that they were pressured to vote at SPS and are required only to vote for candidates from their place of origin.⁶³ Such practices also represent a fundamental effect on open civic space, as it could undermine voters' freedom to make independent political choices and participate voluntarily in the electoral process. Despite the challenges across the monitored polling stations, no incidents of actual attacks, threats, intimidation, or harassment targeting election officials, election observers, or political party agents were reported.

⁶² The Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Coalition for Elections (Coalition for Elections) Preliminary Observation Report. June 03, 2026, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. P. 6.

⁶³ *IDPs in Debre Birhan IDP camps are forced to vote for political parties and candidates in the place of their origin*, available at: <https://ethioelections.com/2026/06/18231/>.

2.2 Civic Space and CSOs' Engagement in the Electoral Process

2.2.1 CSO Engagement in Election Observation and Voter Education

CSOs play a crucial role in the functioning of a democratic society based on the rule of law and respect for fundamental rights. The contribution of civil society is also a key aspect of a democratic election and an enabling environment for CSOs to engage actively throughout the electoral cycle.⁶⁴ The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) accredited 55 CSOs to observe the electoral process and 169 CSOs to provide voter education for the 7th General Election.⁶⁵ As mentioned under section 2.1.1, the accreditation of several CSOs for election observation and to provide civic and voter education represents an important enabling factor for civic space.

CEHRO's civic space monitoring findings revealed that the pre-election electoral environment remained conducive to CSOs actively engaging in civic and voter education and conducting advocacy for peaceful elections. Their participation deepened transparency at the grassroots level while strengthening local accountability mechanisms around polling stations and constituency processes. CEHRO was also engaged in civic and voter education in IDP camps in the Amhara Region, without undue force or intimidation. According to the Ethiopian Human Rights Council election observation preliminary report, civic and voter education conducted by EHRCO in different parts of the country was also conducted without interference.⁶⁶ CEHRO's civic space monitors also reported that NEBE has effectively coordinated and engaged CSOs throughout the pre-election process. These findings revealed that the ability of CSOs to conduct civic and voter education and advocacy activities without interference contributed to a more open civic space through enabling citizens to access electoral information and engage in the democratic process.

⁶⁴ EU, Civic Space Update: Enabling civil society to uphold EU values and strengthen democracy, 31 March 2026, online available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2026/civic-space-update>.

⁶⁵ NEBE Accredits 45 Local Election Observer CSOs, available online at: <https://nebe.org.et/en/node/1215>, last accessed on 19 June 2026.

⁶⁶ EHRCO, Ethiopian Human Rights Council Election Day observation report, 2 June 2026, P. 1.

CSOs also play a dominant role in the electoral process by engaging as election observers, thereby ensuring electoral integrity.⁶⁷ Proclamation No. 1162/2019 and NEBE Directive no. 5/2020 recognised the key role of local election observers in the execution of free and fair elections.⁶⁸ Accordingly, various CSOs deployed their observers to observe the conduct of the 7th general elections. It is an important safeguard for transparency and strengthens civic space by enabling independent actors to monitor electoral processes, identify irregularities, and contribute to public confidence in election outcomes.

The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organisations for Elections (CECOE), one of the CSOs coordinating the role of Ethiopian CSOs in election observation, monitoring, voter education, and preventing post-electoral conflicts.⁶⁹ According to the CECOE's preliminary observation report, the Coalition deployed 2,506 sitting and 867 mobile observers recruited from 101 member organisations, and it monitored 7,723 polling stations, representing 15 per cent of the 51,026 polling stations established by NEBE.⁷⁰ The coalition was able to observe the voting process on June 1, 2026, without any actual attacks, threats, or harassment occurring against election observers.⁷¹ The scale of CECOE's deployment reflects a significant level of civil society engagement in electoral oversight, contributing to independent scrutiny of the electoral process and strengthening accountability mechanisms.

However, the coalition also reported that there were instances in some polling stations where observers were requested to leave the polling stations during the voting and vote counting process.⁷² Even though the preliminary findings do not indicate the overall scale of these incidents, restrictions on observer access may affect the ability of CSOs to independently observe the voting process and reduce the opportunity for electoral transparency.

⁶⁷ Shauna Mottiar, The Role of Civil Society in Elections: The KwaZulu-Natal Democracy and Elections Forum –reducing conflict dynamics and promoting peace, *Journal of African Elections*, Vol. 9 No. 1.

⁶⁸ Proclamation No. 1162/2019. See also, Local Election Observers' Accreditation, Working Procedure and Code of Conduct Directive no. 5/2020 (Amended).

⁶⁹ Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE), online available at: <https://cecoe.org/our-story/>, last accessed on 7 July 2026.

⁷⁰ The Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Coalition for Elections (Coalition for Elections) Preliminary Observation Report. June 03, 2026, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. P. 4.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² The Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Coalition for Elections (Coalition for Elections) 7th general election Preliminary Observation Report. June 03, 2026, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. P. 4.

Similarly, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) deployed 433 stationed and mobile observers and 25 EHRCO staff to observe the 7th general election, bringing the total number of election observers to address 800 polling stations.⁷³ According to the EHRCO preliminary observation report, the council was able to conduct the election observation mission without any intimidation against its election observers.⁷⁴ This constitutes a positive indicator of civic space and demonstrates that CSOs were generally able to conduct independent election observation.

CEHRO has also actively engaged in the election observation on 1 June 2026, monitoring 79 polling stations (in Addis Ababa City, Amhara, Somali and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions) and observed the voting process conducted at the special polling stations (in Amhara and Benishangul-Gumuz Regions) on 9 June 2026. During the observation mission, CEHROs' observers were duly recognised and allowed to access polling stations. The election officials also extended full cooperation to observers throughout the day. The observers also obtained full access to observe the election process and election-related forms without any barriers. As a result, there was no restriction, interference, or undue pressure documented on election observers in carrying out their observation activities. Furthermore, the polling station officials provided designated spaces for the election observers, including CEHRO observers, which enabled them to observe the voting process without any obstructions.

Despite some challenges in restricting access to election observers, CSOs were able to conduct the election observation missions without any interference in most polling stations, which signifies there is an open civic space that allows the CSOs to conduct civic and voter education as well as election observations.

2.1.2. International Election Observers

International observation plays an important role in safeguarding election integrity. The presence of international observers, thus, helps to monitor the election process and may deter attempts to disrupt or tamper with the process.⁷⁵ International election observation expresses the interest of the international community in the achievement of democratic elections, as part of democratic

⁷³ EHRCO, *Ethiopian Human Rights Council Election Day observation report*, 2 June 20206, P. 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Godwin Ihemeje, Election, International Election Monitoring Groups and Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Appraisal, *Journal of Arts & Humanities*, volume 08, 2019.

development, including respect for human rights and the rule of law.⁷⁶ Such a type of observation assesses election processes in accordance with international principles for genuine democratic elections and domestic law, while recognising that it is the people of a country who ultimately determine the credibility and legitimacy of an election process.⁷⁷ International observation can also contribute to public confidence and independent assessment by providing external perspectives on the conduct of elections.

The NEBE Directive on Accreditation, Working Procedures and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers No. 11/2021 also recognised the key role of international election observation to enhance the integrity of election processes by deterring and exposing irregularities and fraud and by providing recommendations for improving electoral processes.⁷⁸ Proclamation No. 1162/2019 also stressed that international observers are required to monitor the election process in accordance with international treaties.⁷⁹ These legal provisions indicate the formal recognition of international election observers to monitor the voting process.

Election observation serves as an important mechanism for promoting public confidence, independent scrutiny, and accountability throughout the electoral process. The participation of AU and IGAD observers demonstrates that international observation was permitted during the 7th general election.⁸⁰ At the same time, the absence of some international observer missions and the non-accreditation of E-HORN limited the diversity of external observation perspectives involved in the process.

Excluding a credible regional and international observer, despite the availability of accreditation for other regional organisations, may reduce the diversity and independence of electoral oversight and create perceptions of selective access to the observation process. The broader participation of regional and international observers can contribute to greater diversity of oversight and strengthen public confidence in the electoral process. Such an approach can narrow civic space by limiting opportunities for independent and international NGOs to participate in

⁷⁶ Declaration Of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, Commemorated October 27, 2005, at the United Nations, New York, P. 1.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Directive on Accreditation, Working Procedures and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers No. 11/2021, Art. 6.

⁷⁹ Proclamation 1162/2019, Article 2(19) & (21).

⁸⁰ Ashenafi Endale, *Ethiopia: Heads to Seventh Election amid Unsettled Debates over Security, Fairness*, May 30, 2026, online available at: <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/50930/>, last accessed on 6 July 2026.

democratic governance, while also weakening the credibility and inclusiveness of the election observation framework.

2.1.3. Access to Information: CSO Engagement

Access to information is a critical prerequisite for enabling CSOs' engagement in monitoring the electoral process. It is also seen as vital for empowering all CSOs to ensure electoral integrity.⁸¹ The lack of information about dates (voters and political candidate registration dates, election date, and other necessary timelines), location (established regular and special polling stations), and statistical data (number of polling stations, constituency, registered voters, and candidates) significantly constrain the contribution of CSOs to electoral integrity. Proclamation No. 1162/2019 requires the NEBE to provide election timelines and related information to the public, political parties, and voters without delay.⁸²

CEHRO civic space monitoring findings revealed that the lack of advance communication by NEBE regarding the specific locations of the Special Polling Stations (SPS) raised concerns about the transparency and inclusiveness of the electoral process. The delayed disclosure of special polling station locations limited the ability of CSOs and election observers to adequately prepare, deploy observers, and conduct voter information activities. This delay appeared inconsistent with the requirement under Proclamation No. 1162/2019 that election-related information be provided without delay.

CEHRO, despite being engaged in election observation, reportedly received information about SPS locations only at a late stage, illustrating the broader information gap affecting civic actors. Thus, the absence of timely and accessible electoral information reduced opportunities for civic engagement, undermined transparency, and constrained the ability of civil society actors to support credible and inclusive elections.

⁸¹ UNDP, *Access to Information: Practice Note*, October 2003.

⁸² Proclamation No. 1162/2019, Arts. 12 & 15.

2.1.4. Funding Access and Institutional Uncertainty among CSOs

International human rights institutions and courts have recognised that restricting access to funding, including foreign funding, may constitute a violation of the right to freedom of association.⁸³ The UNHRC reaffirmed this principle, stating that freedom of association encompasses not only the right to form and join an association but also to seek, receive and use resources, human, material and financial, from domestic, foreign, and international sources.⁸⁴ However, restrictions on funding have become a major existential threat to associations across electoral contexts, as governments increasingly use funding restrictions to limit the activities of organisations engaged in election observation and democratic oversight.

The Ethiopian Authority for Civil Society Organisations (ACSO) has drafted a new proclamation that contains provisions that would significantly expand the regulatory authority of the state over the work and funding of CSOs.⁸⁵ The first draft of the proposed amendments grants sweeping powers to the government to intervene in the internal affairs of independent organisations, impose heavy administrative burdens, and restrict access to foreign funding, particularly for groups engaged in democratic advocacy or election-related work.⁸⁶ This would grant the regulator considerable discretion over which organisations may engage in election-related activities, raising concerns about the inclusiveness and independence of election observation.

The imposition of these obligations and the restriction of access to foreign funding generated uncertainty and concern among CSOs during the pre-election period. Local CSOs are heavily dependent on foreign funds to operate their daily activities and election-related work. However, the proposed draft did not consider election monitoring, and democratic advocacy demands huge budgets, and the amount of local funding is limited in the country.

Despite this frustration, the latest draft version removed the provision that prohibits CSOs from engaging in election-related work and democratic advocacy based on foreign funds. Even though the draft proclamation was not approved, it

⁸³ Civic Space Watch, *Access to Funding*, available online at: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/category/access-to-funding/>, last accessed on 7 July 2026.

⁸⁴ Maina Kiai, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association*, United Nations Human Rights Council, A/HRC/23/39, 24 April 2013, Para. 20.

⁸⁵ FIDH, Ethiopia: *New draft law threatens to dismantle civil society*, International Federation for Human Rights, 2025.

⁸⁶ Ethiopia: Proposed Legal Changes Threaten Civil Society: Draft Amendments Would Grant Sweeping Powers to Federal Government, Human Rights Watch, July 2025.

generated significant tension within the civic space in the lead-up to the 7th General Election.

Reports from various CSOs indicate that their engagement in election observation was limited due to funding constraints. Funds are scarce compared to the 2021 elections. This is mainly due to organisations like USAID and IRI, which were major supporters of voter education, are currently less active or absent.⁸⁷ Current support relies heavily on just a few sources, including the UNDP, the National Election Board, and EAS. This scarcity affects the reach of voter education, which is vital for reducing spoiled ballots and increasing turnout.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Bewuket Abebe, Election Funding has Declined Significantly: Head of CSOs Coalition for Elections, The Reporter, online available at: <https://thereportermagazines.com/5930/election-funding-has-declined-significantly-head-ofcsos-coalition-for-elections/>, last accessed on 9 July 2026.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

3. Political Parties and Media Engagement

3.1 Civic Space and Political Parties' Engagement

Freedom of association is a fundamental human right that creates an enabling condition and environment for the exercise of other human rights and is necessary for democracy.⁸⁹ Freedom of association is critical in the context of political parties and campaign activities and includes the ability to freely establish political parties. In line with its mandate to administer elections and facilitate political participation, NEBE accredited 42 political parties to contest in the 7th general election.⁹⁰

CEHRO civic space monitoring findings show that political parties were actively engaged throughout the election process and able to observe the voting process freely. In areas where CEHRO civic space monitors were deployed, there was no observed instance of interference or intimidation against the agents of political parties or candidates. However, CEHRO media monitoring findings revealed challenges that affect political parties' engagement in the pre-election stage.

Based on CEHRO's media monitoring, as reported on *Addis Standard*, opposition parties have raised serious concerns that the candidate registration phase of Ethiopia's 7th national election was already characterised by procedural and administrative barriers that may undermine inclusiveness, neutrality, and credibility of the electoral process. Key grievances include limited consultation on digital registration systems, restrictive documentation requirements, and technical processes such as Fayda ID linkage and online procedures, which are viewed as disadvantageous to rural and less-resourced candidates and as narrowing civic space at the entry point of the electoral process. The NEBE also raised this issue in the official announcement of the 7th general election result, stating that the lack of sufficient skills with the newly introduced digital registration system makes it difficult for most political parties to register effectively on the system.

The other key challenge, identified in CEHRO media monitoring, that undermines civic space was intimidation against political party candidates during election

⁸⁹ OHCHR, *Freedom of Association in the Middle East and North Africa Region an overview of trends, challenges and good practices*, Nov. 2021.

⁹⁰ *Ethiopia Elections 2026: A Triumph of Civic Participation Over Scepticism*, online available at: <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/51017/>, last accessed on 9 July 2026.

campaigns and the prohibition of political parties' agents from observing the voting process. Various opposition political parties, including Ethiopian Citizens for Social Justice (EZIMA) and the Ethiopian Social-Democratic Party, reported that the ruling party uses various techniques to hinder their election campaign, destroying their banners and arresting their supporters. The NEBE also identified this issue as one of the key challenges during the pre-election period, where government authorities in some parts of the country try to prohibit the political activities of opposing political parties, despite the NEBE taking the necessary measures.

However, one of the most important measures taken by NEBE to ensure an open civic space for political parties to express their commitment to the public is the organisation of 17 political parties' debates broadcast on government media. It creates a public platform for 32 political parties to express their manifestos and positions on different political, social, economic, and development issues. These types of programmes were not present in the previous election period, but it creates a space for political parties to freely communicate their positions to the public.

3.2 Civic Space and Media Engagement

The media is a fundamental pillar of civic space because it enables the exercise of freedom of expression, access to information, public participation, and government accountability. Journalists play an important role in defending people's rights, holding governments to account, and communicating to the public about government actions. Freedom of expression and media freedom enable these actors to connect with public institutions, decision makers, and the public. A free, independent, and pluralistic media provides equitable coverage of political parties and candidates, disseminates voter education, facilitates public discussion, and scrutinises the conduct of electoral stakeholders. These functions enhance transparency, accountability, and public confidence in the electoral process, thereby strengthening civic space.

NEBE accredited 68 media with 1827 journalists, out of which 15 are foreign media, to document and report the 7th general election. As per Article 44 of Proclamation 1162/2019, political parties contesting elections are allowed equal access to state-owned Mass Media such as Radio, TV, and Newspapers. Accordingly, NEBE

assigned free 752.5 airtime hours for radio; free 570.5 airtime hours for TV, and 576 magazine columns for all political parties, considering a fair allocation for all.

CEHRO Civic Space Monitoring revealed that the media play an important role in broadcasting voter education and collaborating with CSOs to disseminate information and political parties' debates on the electoral process. Furthermore, accredited media were also observed while reporting the voting process without intimidation.

However, CEHRO's monitoring findings indicated that some polling stations received insufficient media coverage of the voting process, despite the presence of accredited media assigned to report in those areas. This limited media visibility may have reduced public access to independent information on the conduct of voting at those polling stations. In the general election conducted in SPSs, CEHROs monitored and observed that there was little coverage of the election process through the media.

3.3 Security Issues and Civic Space

The 7th Ethiopian General Election was organised during a period of significant challenges in different parts of the country. The voting process coincided with the persistence of armed conflicts in the Amhara, Oromia, and Tigray Regions and the stagnation of reconciliation and national dialogue.⁹¹ It is also a period when Ethiopia prepares to implement a comprehensive transitional justice system at the national level. The AU election observation mission also affirmed that the election took place in a challenging security environment, particularly in parts of the Oromia, Amhara and Tigray regions, where insecurity affected political activities, electoral preparations and voter participation.⁹² As a result, the electoral environment was characterised by varying levels of security, political tension, and operational constraints across different regions of the country.⁹³

⁹¹ Kaan Devecioğlu, *Ethiopia's 7th General Elections: Strong Government, Challenging Agenda*, June 2, 2026.

⁹² *Ethiopia's general election conducted peacefully despite security challenges: observers*, online available at: <https://english.news.cn/20260604/624e882cc25d4aae9f158e6e618d2c9a/c.html>, last accessed on 7 July 2026.

⁹³ Tadesse Simie, *Ethiopia's national dialogue and transitional justice: competition or complementarity?* Institute for Security Studies, 14 May 2025.

These tensions were evident in the inability to hold voting in all 38 electoral districts in the Tigray region.⁹⁴ In addition to eight districts in Amhara, approximately 143 polling stations were closed in other areas of the country. This resulted in approximately six million voters being unable to participate in the ballot.⁹⁵ Security-related disruptions also resulted in the temporary suspension or early closure of polling stations in parts of the Amhara Region, further limiting electoral participation in affected areas. These include polling stations where voting started early in the morning on June 1, 2026, but has since been interrupted at Kersa, Kutaber, Gilolopa, and Gosache.⁹⁶

These incidents demonstrate the extent to which insecurity affected civic space and electoral participation. The inability to conduct voting in certain areas restricted the ability of affected communities to exercise their political rights and participate in the electoral process on an equal basis with voters in other parts of the country. Insecurity can also affect the broader electoral environment by limiting political activities, reducing voter engagement, constraining election observation, and affecting public confidence in electoral processes. Consequently, security-related disruptions represented a significant challenge to the inclusiveness and integrity of the electoral process.

Although elections were not conducted in Tigray and in some parts of the Amhara Region, with NEBE citing security concerns as the primary justification, the resulting inability of eligible voters in these areas to cast their ballots raised concerns regarding the equal enjoyment of political rights. Unlike other factors delaying or restricting elections (e.g. lack of election materials, logistics or other administrative issues), insecurity seriously undermines the political rights of communities already affected by conflict, which untimely results in disproportionate and unequal political participation. International human rights instruments and the FDRE Constitution provide the principle of universal or equal suffrage, where all eligible citizens can vote and be elected. However, the inability to conduct elections in the regions raises a significant question of representation and inclusiveness throughout the electoral process.

The impact of security issues also extends to limiting the meaningful participation of CSOs in election observation missions and civic and voter education. The

⁹⁴ Ethiopia Observer, *Elections will not be held in 46 constituencies across the Amhara and Tigray regions*, May 2026.

⁹⁵ Ashenafi Endale, *Security Issues Keep 143 Polling Stations Closed*, the Reporter, June 1, 2026.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

security-related disruptions and inability to conduct elections in Tigray and in some parts of the Amhara Region significantly affect election observation missions. According to preliminary reports issued by various CSOs, these conditions limited observers' physical access to affected locations and reduced opportunities to assess and document the broader electoral environment.⁹⁷ Furthermore, it undermines the abilities of local and international observers to assess whether the security measures were lawful, necessary and proportionate. This challenge was compounded by limited publicly available information regarding the number of registered voters affected by security-related disruptions and the arrangements established to facilitate their participation.

4. Civic Space in the Post-Election Period

The post-election period covers the period after election results are announced. During this period, a wide range of activities, such as post-election evaluation, preparations for constituency delimitation and institutional strategic planning, take place.⁹⁸ Ethiopia has entered a post-election phase following the conclusion of voting in the country's 7th General Election and the announcement of election results by the electoral authorities. The National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) maintained the formal procedures and officially announced the results of the election for both the House of People's Representatives and Regional State Councils. The period following the election demonstrated that while formal electoral institutions and mechanisms for citizens' participation remained operational, the broader environment for political engagement continued to be influenced by security concerns and differing perceptions regarding the inclusiveness of the electoral process.

One of the important steps taken by the NEBE in the post-election period was identifying constituencies and polling stations where citizens and political parties could not meaningfully participate in the voting process. In this regard, NEBE received a total of 129 complaints, of which 86 were reviewed, and decisions were obtained following investigation and consideration of the evidence presented. The major issues raised in most of the complaints related to undue influences and forces exerted on voters to choose a particular political party or candidate; restrictions against political parties' and candidates' access to polling stations; and

⁹⁷ The Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Coalition for Elections (Coalition for Elections) Preliminary Observation Report. June 03, 2026, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. P. 4. *See also*, EHRCO, Ethiopian Human Rights Council Election Day observation report, 2 June 20206, P. 1.

⁹⁸ NEBE, *Electoral Cycle*, National Election Board of Ethiopia, P. 20.

being forced to leave the polling stations during the vote counting process. Furthermore, influences on the free choices of voters owing to the election campaign conducted around the polling stations and violations of the secrecy of the voting process by the election officials are the key reasons for the complaint. Most of the complaints related to major restrictions which narrowed the civic space in the electoral process.

Accordingly, NEBE decided to conduct a re-election in 11 constituencies across five regions (Oromia, Somali, Sidama, Central Ethiopia, and South Ethiopia Regions).⁹⁹ NEBE's re-election decision and complaints-handling process helped preserve opportunities for political participation by providing parties and citizens with avenues to challenge restrictions. By reopening electoral opportunities and providing mechanisms to seek redress for such constraints, these measures helped protect meaningful political participation beyond election day.

Political parties and candidates have divergent perceptions and positions on the credibility of the election and its results. EZEMA, one of the major opposition parties, recognized that the election was conducted peacefully in most constituencies, while also acknowledging that there are instances where the neutrality of NEBE is contested, which affect the fairness of the election results. On the other hand, the Coalition for Unity of Ethiopian Unity rejected the electoral process and initially declared that successful candidates would not take up the seats, as the voting process and the results are not credible. However, the contrary position taken by some successful candidates, who argued that they had received sufficient votes and should therefore assume their seats, demonstrates that the post-election political space remained open to competing interpretations and continued engagement. In general, the different responses suggest a context after the election where political expression and contestation were still possible, but where disputes over electoral legitimacy posed substantial risk of political disengagement and lowered the willingness of some opposition actors to engage through formal democratic institutions.

The other instance that affects the civic space in the post-election period is the continued arrest and detention of opposition political party candidates and

⁹⁹ The affected constituencies were Batu (Ziway) and Bega in Oromia; Dera Tole, Hargele, Daror, Hadigala and Aware in Somali; Aroresa in Sidama; Tembaro and Soro 1 in Central Ethiopia; and Chenchu in South Ethiopia.

members. Shortly after the election, on 17 June 2026, Dr. Habtamu Alemu, the former independent candidate in the 7th general election in Dire Dawa 1 constituency, was arrested by security forces and subsequently searched at his residence and had electronic devices confiscated. The reason for his arrest was his public criticism posted on his social media concerning the credibility of the electoral process, citing alleged legal violations by Dire Dawa security forces and NEBE's failure to adequately respond to his complaints. According to his statement, his supporters and brother had also been detained and questioned about his criticism of the government and the electoral process. Such incidents create a perception that political actors continue to face arrests and intimidation due to public criticism of the electoral institution or expressing opposition views after an election. In another incident, two EPRP politicians, Yisak Wolday and Abebe Akalu, were reportedly arrested on 3 August 2026 by the federal police, though the legal basis for the arrest had not been publicly disclosed. Targeting opposition figures and individuals associated with political opposition after the election contributes to an environment of uncertainty and perceived risk for political engagement. The continuation of such incidents therefore raises concerns about whether the political space remained sufficiently open and safe for dissent, opposition activity, and meaningful public participation after the election.

Conclusion

Ethiopia's 7th General Election was held on 1 June 2026, with voting at Special Polling Stations (SPSs) taking place on 9 June 2026. The assessment found both positive developments and persistent challenges in the civic space throughout the electoral cycle. On the one hand, civic and voter education and enabling electoral environments for CSOs, media, and political parties contributed to increased citizen awareness and engagement of civic space actors in the electoral process. On the other hand, conditions that constrained the meaningful participation of citizens, the media, political parties, and civil society organisations continued to undermine the openness, inclusiveness, and competitiveness of the electoral environment. Intimidation of political parties, challenges related to administrative requirements for the political parties' registration system, interference with voters during voter registration, and casting their ballots were the main challenges affecting civic engagement and the right to association. Furthermore, denial of observers' access to polling stations and lack of timely election information have significantly affected the active engagement of the CSOs throughout the electoral process. Despite these challenges, strengthening an enabling civic space that guarantees the rights of all civic space actors to participate freely, express their views, access information, and engage in the electoral process remains essential for enhancing an open civic space for future elections.

Recommendations

Considering CEHRO's pre-election, election day, and post-election civic space monitoring findings, we recommend that the observed positive aspects be preserved and further strengthened in future elections. Furthermore, the challenges identified should be addressed in subsequent electoral processes and in post-election legal and procedural reforms. The following are the specific recommendations for the relevant organs concerned: -

To the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE)

- Ensure the timely dissemination of accurate and accessible electoral information, particularly information on polling locations, voting dates, procedures, and any changes affecting voters and observers;
- Strengthen structured information-sharing and coordination with accredited CSOs and election observers to ensure timely access to accurate and relevant electoral information, including polling arrangements, Special Polling Stations, and changes to electoral procedures;
- Organise and strengthen a periodic stakeholders' engagement platform to ensure the meaningful participation of civic space actors, including the media, political parties, and CSOs;
- Improve the existing digital registration system for political parties to ensure that registration requirements are accurate, accessible and transparent for all;
- Promote a safe environment for political parties to engage in the electoral process without any intimidation and ensure accountability for those responsible for acts of intimidation or interference;
- Strengthen the capacity of the election officials through continuous training, thereby ensuring the voters' participation in the electoral process without intimidation and undue influence;
- Considering that IDPs have high information needs due to their displacement, NEBE shall organise and facilitate continuous civic and voter education for IDPs in collaboration with CSOs and other stakeholders;
- Ensure that relevant information related to election timelines, location of special polling stations and the electoral procedures is disseminated to IDPs with sufficient details and promptly;

- To ensure the inclusivity of the electoral process and citizens' fundamental rights to vote, NEBE shall provide clear arrangements for elections in polling stations where elections did not take place due to security reasons;
- Strengthen mechanisms for reporting, investigating, and addressing violations of electoral rights and procedures in a timely and transparent manner;

To Civil Society Organizations

- Establish joint civic space monitoring and early-warning mechanisms to identify emerging restrictions, intimidation, coercion, and other threats to civic and political participation;
- Strengthen strategic engagement with NEBE and government institutions by presenting evidence-based civic space findings and concrete recommendations and following up on institutional responses;
- Develop pooled or collaborative resources among CSOs for election observation, civic space monitoring, civic and voter education, to generate credible, comprehensive, and evidence-based findings to inform advocacy, policy engagement, and democratic accountability;
- Develop and implement continuous and tailored civic and voter education programmes for IDPs that respond to their specific information needs and barriers to political participation, using accessible and locally appropriate communication channels throughout the electoral cycle;
- Establish mechanisms for tracking the implementation of recommendations arising from civic space and election monitoring reports, including periodic public reporting on institutional responses;
- Develop specialised observation approaches to monitor electoral participation and civic space environment among groups and in locations that may face barriers to participation, including IDPs, and conflict-affected communities;
- Strengthen information-sharing mechanisms with NEBE to ensure timely access to accurate and relevant electoral information; and
- Strengthen evidence-based advocacy by systematically translating civic space monitoring findings into targeted policy recommendations and engaging relevant institutions to promote concrete improvements in the protection and exercise of civic and political rights.

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About CEHRO

The Consortium of Ethiopian Human Rights Organizations (CEHRO) is a Consortium of 27 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working on Human Rights, Democracy, and Sustainable Peace in Ethiopia. Over the past eight (8) years, CEHRO has been actively engaged in the advancement of human rights protection and promotion, democratic and sustainable peace values in Ethiopia by creating a common platform for human rights CSOs to articulate their voices and launch well-articulated and evidence-based advocacy for an enabling environment for the operation of civil society in Ethiopia. CEHRO's strategic priorities focus on capacity building of members and key stakeholders, policy advocacy, and broadening of civic space in Ethiopia.

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