

Millions register to vote in Ethiopia as opposition parties threaten to boycott

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January 20, 2013 (ADDIS ABABA) - Millions of voters have registered in Ethiopia to take part in upcoming local and Addis Ababa City Council elections due to be held in April this year.

According to sources from the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), over 19.4 million voters have so far been registered, representing almost half of the country's estimated 40 million eligible voters.

However, despite the promising registration figures, 29 political opposition parties have announced they will boycott the election after failing to reach an agreement over disputes with the NEBE.

The question of transparency remains an ongoing issue for opposition parties, with some filing complaints to the board about the timeframe of the polls and other electoral processes.

The groups also accuse the NEBE of being biased, claiming it is merely a tool of the ruling party.

They have called for open political dialogue on these issues prior to committing to run so as to ensure a fair and democratic election.

Post-election violence in 2005 led to the killing of 200 protesters and the arrest of dozens of political leaders amid opposition claims the government had rigged the vote.

Question marks remain over NEBE's transparency after opposition claims last month that they have evidence that members of the ruling Ethiopia People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) party are also serving as local election executives in some parts of the country.

NEBE chairman professor Merga Bekana maintains the board is prepared to conduct a free, fair and democratic election.

Responding to complaints by opposition parties, Merga said the issues they raised have been addressed and resolved in previous elections, adding that other allegations lack evidence.

In a landslide victory, the EPRDF swept 99% of the total vote in the previous national election in 2010. However, European Union observers were critical of the poll, saying it fell short of international standards.

The EPRDF, which continues to enjoy popular support, is also expected to dominate at the April ballot, with the party's main challenger MEDREK indicating it will boycott.

Political parties in Ethiopia tend to show less interest and enthusiasm in local elections than they would in national elections. However, this year's local elections are different because seats in the capital's administrative council will also be decided.

Normally council elections would be held during national elections, but with the current council's five-year term coming to an end soon voting for the next council must take place.

Following the controversy surrounding the 2005 elections, opposition party Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP) refused to take over the city council of Addis Ababa in spite of winning it overwhelmingly.

A total of 79 national and regional political parties have indicated they will run in the upcoming election, either as individual parties or as part of a front, coalition or union.

Of the registered voters so far 47% (over 9 million) are women, indicating an increase in women's participation in the nation's political process.

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