



**The Sidama's quest for self-rule:  
A study of the referendum on regional statehood**

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## **Executive summary**

On 20 November 2019, a referendum was held among inhabitants of the Sidama zone. An overwhelming majority voted in support of regional statehood for Sidama directly under the Ethiopian federation – rather than remaining as an administrative zone under the Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s Region (SNNPR), the other option in the referendum.

This study, conducted by Professor Kjetil Tronvoll with Filata Boroje and Kairedin Tezera, assesses the period leading up to, during, and after the referendum. It demonstrates that while the referendum process as a whole was conducted peacefully and orderly, there were issues of concern at each stage of the referendum. During the preparatory phase, issues ranged from institutional dilatoriness to outbursts of violence. There were concerns over voter registration, and the dominance of the “yes”-campaign which may have intimidated individuals or minority groups inclined to vote “no”. On voting day, various irregularities were reported, eventually leading to an annulment of nearly 11% of all votes cast. In the aftermath of the referendum, the results announcement was delayed a number of times. Various explanations for these issues of concern are proposed in this report, and the role of National Election Board Ethiopia (NEBE) in the referendum is discussed.

The report looks at the procedures for the establishment of a separate Sidama Regional State and its future relationship with the SNNPR. Issues to be tackled include the transfer of state powers, the sharing of assets and liabilities, the status of Hawassa, protection of non-Sidama minorities, and the establishment of an interim Regional Council. Failing to address these may complicate or thwart the consolidation of a capable, capacitated, and sustainable Sidama regional state rule. Finally, while the authors argue that the referendum cannot be considered a litmus test, a number of lessons for the preparation of the general elections of 2020 are outlined.





# 1. Introduction

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 grants unconditional rights to self-determination to the “nations, nationalities, and peoples” of the land, up to and including secession.<sup>1</sup> Integral to this prerogative bestowed upon every single ethnic group of the country, is the right to a “full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and Federal governments,”<sup>2</sup> and furthermore “the right to establish, at any time, their own States” under the federation.<sup>3</sup> The Sidama ethnic group in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) of Ethiopia chose to exercise its right to establish regional statehood, through a decision made by the Sidama Zone Council on 18 July 2018.

Over a year later, on the 20 November 2019, a referendum was conducted among the inhabitants of the Sidama zone: on “yes” to establish a separate Regional State directly under the Ethiopian federation or “no” to remain as an administrative zone under the SNNPRS. According to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), an overwhelming 97.7% voted in support for regional statehood; a popular affirmation of the Sidama people’s long-term quest for self-determination.<sup>4</sup>

The referendum was conducted in a peaceful and orderly manner. The process leading up to the decision of conducting a referendum, on the other hand, was marred by political wrangling and institutional dilatoriness, leading to the outburst of violence and killings in the regional capital Hawassa and elsewhere in Sidama in the month of July, in both 2018 and 2019.

The extreme affirmative vote, and the improbably high turn-out of 98.9%, cast an otherwise well-conducted poll in a dubitable light. How was the process leading up to the referendum, the registration of voters, and the casting of votes on polling day, organised and perceived by *all* stakeholders to the process, in order to secure one of the most affirmative referendums in the history of democracy?

This report will outline the political processes leading up to and including the polling day on 20 November 2019, in order to shed light upon the referendum and explain its outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (hereafter the Constitution), Article 39.1.

<sup>2</sup> The Constitution, Article 39.3.

<sup>3</sup> The Constitution, Article 47.2.

<sup>4</sup> A preliminary result announcement indicated 98,5% yes vote. This was later revised. NEBE statement “The final result of the Sidama people’s decision”, 4 December 2019, provided in Annex 2.

## 2. The Sidama's long-term struggle for self-rule

The Sidama justifies, legitimises, and anchors their current process for regional statehood in their deep history of subjugation and quest for self-rule. The Sidama, like other southern peoples, had existed in relation to and been influenced by the greater Ethiopian political domain for centuries; however, they constitute an autonomous socio-political entity.<sup>5</sup> Sidama land and people were forcefully subdued and incorporated into the Abyssinian Empire in 1893 by Emperor Menelik's army.<sup>6</sup> The conquest of the Sidama was part of the great expansion of the Abyssinian/Ethiopian Empire towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in a race against European colonial powers who vied for the same territory.<sup>7</sup> The incorporation of the Sidama into the political realm of the Ethiopian empire entailed a subjugation and dismantling of their local systems of governance and production. The policies of Ethiopian nationalism (perceived as a forceful "Amharisation" of local culture and traditions by people at the receiving end in the south)<sup>8</sup> during several regimes, led to an awakening of Sidama nationalism and quest for self-rule.<sup>9</sup>

Although the fall of the Emperor in 1974 entailed land reform which benefited the "tiller", the Sidama, like other Ethiopians, soon experienced a return to centralisation and authoritarian rule under the Derg military junta. The Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM) started active resistance struggle against the Derg in the mid-1970s, articulating the demand of self-rule for the Sidama.<sup>10</sup> A fierce guerrilla struggle against the Derg army was conducted until the late 1980s, with scores of casualties.<sup>11</sup>

The coming to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991 radically changed the governance structure in Ethiopia with the introduction of a devolved political power principle, which was very much welcomed by most people in the south. During the initial phase of the Transitional Period, the Transitional Charter divided Ethiopia into fourteen regions. The area that is now called SNNPRS was at that time composed of five separate regions. Region 8 constituted the Sidama, Gedeo, Burji, and Amaro Special

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance Arne Tolo (1998): *Sidama and Ethiopian*, Uppsala: Uppsala University (Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Seyoum Hameso (2006): "The Sidama Nation: An Introduction", in Seyoum Hameso and Mohammed Hassen (eds.), *Arrested Development in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press.

<sup>7</sup> Bahru Zewde (2002): *A History of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1991* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Oxford: James Currey/Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press, pp. 60-68.

<sup>8</sup> Understanding Ethiopian history from the view-point of conquered groups in the south, see the seminal work by Donald L. Donham and Wendy James (eds.) (2002): *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*, Oxford: James Currey / Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.

<sup>9</sup> Mulugeta Daye (2006): "Sidama Nationalism and National Identity Problems in Ethiopia", in Seyoum Hameso and Mohammed Hassen (eds.), *Arrested Development in Ethiopia*, Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press.

<sup>10</sup> Lovise Aalen (2009): *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilisation under Ethnic Federalism*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 82-84.

<sup>11</sup> Shiferaw Muleta (2019): "A brief political history of Sidama Nation for self-rule", in *Addis Standard*, May 2019, pp. 1-7.

Wereda, among which the Sidama was the absolute dominant group.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the Sidama felt that finally their quest for self-rule was respected, albeit it should be a short-lived experience.

As EPRDF's views on governance and statehood shifted, from the time of armed struggle to actually administering and running the country, so did their understanding on how to organise the ethnic heterogeneous southern part of the country. Originally sixteen different ethnic parties were established to administer the five regional states in the south at various administrative levels. As these parties were replicates of each other, and initiated by EPRDF in order to obtain politico-administrative control of the southern people, it was decided to merge them into one unified multi-ethnic front in 1993, called Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (later renamed to "movement" as in SEPDM).<sup>13</sup> This was in line with EPRDF's change from an initial objective of "national liberation" to an operational interest in "administrative integration" and concern for containment of "narrow nationalism".<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the five separate regions in the south were merged into one new regional state – the SNNPRS – which subsequently was enshrined in the new 1995 Federal Constitution.

The suspension of the new Sidama region just a couple of years after its introduction, and after the earlier push-out of SLM from the transitional government and the arrest of several of its leaders,<sup>15</sup> created a renewed surge of resistance against the re-centralisation policy of EPRDF with ensuing arrests and crack-downs on Sidama activists, and people in general.<sup>16</sup> The Sidama protest against EPRDF's decision to merge the five regions into one culminated in what has been called the "Looqqe Massacre" in May 2002, where federal forces mowed down scores of unarmed protesters. The demonstration was triggered by a suggestion to make the heterogeneous Hawassa city, the capital of Sidama zone, administratively and politically accountable directly to the federal authorities, as opposed to the Sidama Zone Council. This was perceived to be a strategy to undermine Sidama political control and authority over their own capital city, and further marginalize their claim for self-rule. Estimates of the number of people killed by the security forces during the clamp-down vary from a couple of dozen to over 70, with 200 injured and over 1,000 civilians arrested.<sup>17</sup> The political-administrative status of Hawassa has since been a lingering issue and came again to prominence during the current referendum campaign.

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<sup>12</sup> The other regions were no. 7 (Hadiyya, Kembata, Halaba Tembaro, Gurage, Siltie, Yem Special Wereda), region 9 (North Omo, Konso and Derashe Special Wereda), region 10 (South Omo), and region 11 (Keffa, Bench-Majji and Shekka). The five regions were created under the Transitional Charter Proc. No. 07/1992.

<sup>13</sup> Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll (2003): *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life*, Stockholm: Sida Studies no 10, p. 116.

<sup>14</sup> Lovise Aalen (2009): *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilisation under Ethnic Federalism*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 95-108.

<sup>15</sup> John Markakis (2011): *Ethiopia – The Last Two Frontiers*, Suffolk/New York: James Currey: p. 286.

<sup>16</sup> Kinkino Kia Legide (2019): "The Quest for Regional Statehood and Its Practicability Under the Post-1991 Ethiopian Federation: The Discontent and Experience of Sidama Nation", in *Global Journal of Politics and Law Research*, vol. 7, no. 7 (pp. 1-52), pp. 17-22.

<sup>17</sup> See: "Sidama Liberation Front [SLF] Sidama National Liberation Front [SNLF] Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM)" <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/sidama.htm> (accessed 6 January 2020).

The Looqqe massacre only temporarily stifled the Sidama quest for regional statehood. It became a martyrs' symbol of sacrifice for the nation and hence re-energised the struggle for political autonomy. The maladministration of the SNNPRS during the 2000s, and the perceived marginalisation of Sidamas from regional power positions, led the Sidama representatives within the SEPDM/EPRDF party-state to finally take a public stand and side with the popular demand for statehood. Between 14 and 17 July 2005, the Sidama Zone Council convened to deliberate on the issue and proceeded to unanimously endorse the request for regional statehood. The decision by the Council was endorsed by Sidama elders and academics and received widespread support among the people. In line with constitutional procedures, an official request was submitted to the SNNPRS Council requesting the execution of the decision, and a preparation for a referendum on the issue. The Regional State Council accepted the request, as did the SNNPRS Council of Nationalities. However, as this happened in the context of the controversial 2005 elections, the EPRDF central leadership, allegedly upon direct order from the late PM Meles Zenawi, instructed its SEPDM member party to deter and crush any process leading to Sidama referendum and regional statehood.<sup>18</sup> Several Sidama leaders, including high-ranking members of SEPDM were chastised, and others co-opted to higher office, in order to maintain status quo.<sup>19</sup> Once again, the Sidama nationalist struggle received a blow and setback.

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<sup>18</sup> Kinkino Kia Legide (2019): "The Quest for Regional Statehood and Its Practicability Under the Post-1991 Ethiopian Federation: The Discontent and Experience of Sidama Nation", in *Global Journal of Politics and Law Research*, vol. 7, no. 7 (pp. 1-52), p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Lovise Aalen (2009): *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilisation under Ethnic Federalism*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, pp. 147-154

### 3. The Sidama's renewed claim for regional statehood

Ever since the creation of SNNPRS, there have been initiatives launched by various ethnic groups to form new ethnic administrative units, from *woreda* up to regional states. The SNNPRS, upon EPDRF endorsement, has accommodated many of these claims up to zone level but rejected demands for internal secession to form new regional states. The internal EPRDF crisis and the coming to power of PM Abiy Ahmed, however, opened up political space in the country and sparked a renewed interest by many ethnic groups in SNNPRS to form their own regional state. Political activists within the Sidama community immediately instigated a process demanding increased political autonomy. Especially involved were the Sidama youth, the *Ejjeetto*, who were instrumental in influencing the political elites through demonstrations in Hawassa and elsewhere in Sidama zone. This culminated in a demonstration for regional statehood in mid-July 2018, where scores of people were killed, and businesses and private properties destroyed in Hawassa. Many non-Sidamas were targeted in the turmoil, which was allegedly intended to manifest Sidama "ownership" of the city. As explained by one non-Sidama observer:

"Those who are orchestrating the chaos are from the native people of Sidama and they are claiming the land belongs to them only and any other clan should be kicked out. Houses are raided since yesterday. They are breaking into homes and stealing property and beating people."<sup>20</sup>

The protest and pressure exercised by the *Ejjeetto*, amplified by the interests of both government and opposition politicians, led to the Sidama Zone Council endorsing a demand to form a separate regional state on 18 July 2018.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, an avalanche of eleven more regional statehood claims were endorsed by various zonal councils in SNNPRS during 2018/19.

The Sidama Zone Council's request for regional statehood was submitted to the SNNPRS Council for further processing, as per constitutional procedures. According to article 47.3, the regional state council, which receives such a demand from a zonal council, shall forward an instruction to NEBE to carry out a referendum in the said zone within one year. At first, the SEPDM government in SNNPRS had qualms with how to respond to the Sidama demand. In order to fully understand the implications of the formation of a new regional state in the south, the party, on its tenth congressional meeting held in Hawassa in August 2018, decided that any structural questions in the region should be responded to through a scientific study. SEPDM hence formed a research team composed of twenty scholars in November 2018 to study the cause for the claim, and put forward solutions to resolve the question of regional statehood. Concomitantly, the SNNPRS Council submitted a letter on 20 November to NEBE instructing them to facilitate a referendum on the Sidama request.

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<sup>20</sup> William Davidson (2018): "Deadly Violence Hits Hawassa as Protesters Call for Sidama State", *Ethiopia Insight*, 14 June 2018: <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2018/06/14/deadly-violence-hits-hawassa-as-protesters/>

<sup>21</sup> Interviews conduct from 31 October to 2 November, 2019 in Hawassa City, anonymous.

Soon thereafter, various Sidama actors from across the political landscape, from both government and opposition organisations, started to coordinate and prepare for a robust political process to bring about the changes everyone desired. Key to this was the establishment of an “Academic Task Force”, composed of Sidama scholars, by the Zonal Council, which was mandated to provide guidance on the legal, administrative, and regulative framework for the establishment of the new regional state. The Task Force also developed a new draft constitution for the new Sidama regional state. During the spring of 2019, peoples’ expectations were rising, and several peaceful mass-demonstrations were conducted in Hawassa in support of regional statehood.<sup>22</sup>

After receiving the instructions from SNNPRS Council, NEBE apparently hesitated on how to follow-up on the Sidama request – and whether to start preparing for the referendum.<sup>23</sup> This may be explained by the fact that at the time, NEBE were engaged in institutional, legal, and structural reforms, and did not have the capacity to address the Sidama referendum. However, their prolonged silence on the matter made many Sidama activists speculate on whether there was some ulterior motive to their non-reaction to the Council’s demand. As articulated by one key Sidama intellectual:

“The anti-federalism or unitary political background of the chairwoman of NEBE, their prolonged silence and non-convincing justification, together with the blurred stance of the federal authorities on the issue of ethnic federalism, have all forced us to be suspicious of the federal institutions: we felt that they were conspiring against our demand.”<sup>24</sup>

The research group established by the SEPDM to assess how to handle the many claims for regional statehood started its work in early 2019. Based on half a year’s research, travel abroad to study comparative federal systems, and feedback from more than 17,000 respondents, the team presented its findings and recommendations to the SEPDM Executive Committee in late June 2019. The findings indicated that there were very serious political and administrative injustices committed in the region, and that there was unfair implementation of policies which marginalised the majority of the region’s people.<sup>25</sup> The study provided a range of possible recommendations to the governing party to address and mitigate the claim for regional statehood. At the end of July, however, after several meetings and intensive discussions and consultations with party members and community representatives, the top leadership of SEPDM (Executive Committee and Central Committee) decided by consensus to apply the “55 + 1 solution”: this meant that only Sidama’s claim for regional statehood should be

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<sup>22</sup> Shiferaw Muleta (2019): “A brief political history of Sidama Nation for self-rule”, in *Addis Standard*, May 2019, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Information acquired from various Sidama representatives.

<sup>24</sup> Anonymous, interviewed Hawassa, 02.11.19.

<sup>25</sup> For instance, the report highlighted that political power in the region is not equally distributed but controlled by few groups; the economy is dominated by few actors; big development projects are concentrated in some areas which have a link to higher officials, etc.

accommodated, and the rest of the 55 ethnic groups in the south should remain unified under SNNRPS.

The delay from federal institutions to respond to the Sidama council's decision, however, led activists to organise a group of Sidama lawyers to justify the constitutionality of a unilateral declaration of statehood on 18 July 2019 – one year to the day after the request had been submitted. The real or perceived resistance and obstructionism from federal authorities and institutions contributed to forging unity across Sidama society. The idea of a unilateral declaration of statehood thus gained widespread support. "The popularity of this date and our slogan got momentum as international community and media paid great attention to the issue, forcing the federal government to react on the matter," explained one informant.<sup>26</sup> In response, PM Abiy, during his report to the Federal House in July, warned the Sidama not to take any measure toward unilaterally declaring statehood.

Two days before 18 July, the NEBE announced that it needed an additional five months to prepare for a referendum, to be conducted on 13 November 2019. At the same time, NEBE instructed the SNNPRS Council to prepare laws and regulations to address property division and the status of Hawassa in case the referendum result was to favour Sidama obtaining regional statehood. At this time, however, activists accused the SEPDM of conspiring with the federal government in an attempt to stop the process, and the NEBE statement on a referendum in November came too late to calm all the Ejjetto. Some argued to demand a unilateral declaration on the 18 July, while others argued for a delayed referendum. Finally, the Ejjetto agreed to postpone the plan to unilaterally declare statehood on the 18 July 2019,<sup>27</sup> and instead to conduct a discussion on that day at "Gudumaale" in Hawassa city.<sup>28</sup> However, people heading to Gudumaale on 18 July with the aim of discussing the issue were prevented from doing so by federal military forces and ordered to disperse. This ignited protests in several places throughout Sidama, which in turn led to a heavy-handed crackdown by security forces in Hawassa and in the nearby town of Wotera Rassa. In the ensuing turmoil, people who were perceived to be resisting the demand for Sidama statehood were targeted. Hence both Sidamas and non-Sidamas (from Silte, Gurage and Ahmara groups) were killed, and their properties destroyed.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, scores of people were killed by the security forces,<sup>30</sup> including thirteen people in the town of Wotera Rassa.<sup>31</sup> The threat of more widespread

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with Professor at Hawassa University, Active Ejjetto Member, Interviewed 31 October 2019, Hawassa.

<sup>27</sup> The Ejjetto Statement on 18th July 2019 as broadcast by the Sidaama Media Network (SMN) (Video Available at SMN).

<sup>28</sup> Gudumaale is a venue used for Songo, cultural shows, for consulting in all social and political affairs among Sidama. Sooreessa Gudumaale is located in Hawassa City at the Lake Side, and used for various cultural celebrations, including Fichee and for consultation of Sidaama Elders.

<sup>29</sup> See: "Ethiopia referendum: Dozens killed in Sidama clashes", BBC, 22 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49070762> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> See: "Ethiopia: At least 17 killed in violence over Sidama autonomy", Al Jazeera, 20 July 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/ethiopia-17-killed-violence-sidama-autonomy-190720170914800.html> (accessed 6 January 2020).

protests and large-scale violence was averted when SLM accepted the five months delay in organising the referendum.<sup>32</sup> The violence and the unruly Ejeetto youth movement, however, led to the introduction of military emergency rule (“Command Post authority”) in the whole SNNPRS, which remains effective until this date. Furthermore, there were dozens of arrests of Sidama activists,<sup>33</sup> including journalists working for the Sidama Media Network.<sup>34</sup>

Due to the protests in Hawassa and additional pressure from Sidama representatives within the governing party structure, the EPRDF Executive Committee on 9 August 2019 endorsed the SEPDM-initiated research study on the various statehood claims in the SNNPRS and its recommendations. Subsequently, the SEPDM organised a flurry of community meetings across the region to “create awareness on the significances of living together as per the recommendations of the study and restructure the region into two”.<sup>35</sup> To facilitate an orderly process, the SNNPRS Council established a Transition Project Office in September, mandated to impartially facilitate pre-referendum issues such as developing a legal framework for property sharing (which had earlier been requested by NEBE).

On 15 October 2019, NEBE decided to postpone the referendum for one week, pushing it back to 20 November. The organisation blamed the SNNRPS for being late in developing the legal and regulatory framework of a possible Sidama transition process to regional statehood.<sup>36</sup> Subsequently, on 18 October, the SNNPRS Council approved the legal framework for a transition with 168 voting in favour, 55 against, and 23 abstentions. NEBE initially demanded that the SNNPRS develop legal protection for non-Sidamas living in Hawassa; a demand that was rejected, as the SNNPRS Council stated that the constitution and the laws of the land regulate such issues and that there was no need for special legislation pertaining only to Hawassa City.

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<sup>32</sup> See: “Unrest over autonomy bid kills four in Ethiopia's Hawassa city”, Reuters, 19 July 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/unrest-over-autonomy-bid-kills-four-in-ethiopias-hawassa-city-idUSKCN1UE15Q> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>33</sup> See: “News: Dozens arrested after clashes between security, Sidama statehood activists; police, activists report casualties”, Addis Standard, 19 July 2019, <https://addisstandard.com/news-dozens-arrested-after-clashes-between-security-sidama-statehood-activists-police-activists-report-causalities/> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>34</sup> See: “Authorities arrest Sidama Media Network workers in southern Ethiopia amid unrest”, Committee to Protect Journalists, 9 August 2019, <https://cpj.org/2019/08/authorities-arrest-sidama-media-network-workers-in.php> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Communication with SEPDM party official.

<sup>36</sup> See: “Ethiopia postpones autonomy referendum for ethnic Sidama: Fana news agency”, Reuters, 15 October 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ethiopia-politics/ethiopia-postpones-autonomy-referendum-for-ethnic-sidama-fana-news-agency-idUSKBN1WU2LJ> (accessed 6 January 2020).

## 4. The referendum process

The SNNPRS Government established by law a Sidama Referendum Implementation Project Office with the mandate to follow-up and execute legal and administrative issues before, during, and after the referendum.<sup>37</sup> In short, they would follow-up, organise, and oversee the Sidama referendum process. More specifically, the objectives of the Project Office were (article 7):

- i. to prepare legal and practical frameworks that facilitate effective implementation of pre-, at and post-referendum processes, so as to effectively conduct the referendum;
- ii. to engage in public relations work that aims to ensure peaceful conduct of the referendum toward achieving publicly acceptable result; and
- iii. to follow up the efficient implementation of the referendum, to provide supports thereto, and to evaluate the whole process.

The head of the Project Office confirmed that they had been working intensively to help facilitate the pre-referendum process.<sup>38</sup> Any matters relating to developing the regulatory framework for a new Sidama regional state, however, would have to wait until after the referendum result was known.

By end of October 2019, NEBE had recruited over 5,000 referendum officials, who were given training in five specific tasks: voter registration, balloting, counting, announcing results, and complaint procedures. These officials were to staff 1,692 voting centres across the 24 *woredas* of Sidama zone.

### Voter registration

The period of voter registration took place during the first ten days of November. One of the most controversial issues discussed in the process was the eligibility criteria for participation in the referendum. Allegedly, NEBE initially wanted a “residence clause” under which a minimum residence of five years in Sidama would be a requirement to be eligible to register to vote in one’s local community. Sidama activists pushed back on this limit. They interpreted it as a strategy to diminish the influence of Sidama voters in Hawassa City, as there has been a high rate of urbanisation from rural Sidama to the city over the last years. Finally, on 4 November NEBE announced that any individual over the age of 18, having resided in Sidama Zone and their community for the six months prior to registration, would be eligible.

Another issue of contention was the initial NEBE requirement of producing a valid ID card to be allowed to register. Accordingly, the Zone’s authorities encouraged everyone to obtain an ID card and worked energetically to that effect. Referring to the new Electoral Law, however,

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<sup>37</sup> The SNNPRS Sidama Referendum Implementation Project Office Establishment and Working Procedure Defining Regulation; No: 172/2019.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Aynekulu Gohatsbha, Transition Project Office Head, 21 November 2019, Hawassa.

NEBE announced that individuals without valid ID could nevertheless be registered by producing whatever document gave evidence of their identity, or by adducing three witnesses.<sup>39</sup> This solution may have led to a number of underaged people registering and voting, as will be discussed below. NEBE did not, however, receive any formal complaints regarding underage registration or voters. In polling stations where age was contested, poll workers used the grievance mechanism according to the law and decided on a case-by-case basis.<sup>40</sup>

Various observers have criticised the manner in which NEBE organised and handled the process leading up to referendum day. They exhibited a wavering stand on several key issues, which in the eyes of many Sidama cast doubt on NEBE's impartiality. These issues included uncertainty around the eligibility criteria; the requirement for valid ID card, which was retracted; the request for legal framework addressing non-Sidama residents, which was also retracted; their interest to determine Hawassa's fate after the referendum, which goes beyond their mandate as electoral board; the change in the date of the referendum; shifting the period of voter registration; and so on. As one Sidama administrator explained it: "These and other partial and conspiratory acts have been tackled by systematic Ejeetto struggle, directly or by pushing Sidama Zone and Hawassa City Administrations to confront the NEBE. Both local and diaspora activists have played a great role in this regard."<sup>41</sup>

### **Issues of concern during voter registration**

It appears that the political context during the registration process was perceived to be intimidating by non-Sidamas living in Hawassa and its environs. Large-scale violence and killings during the summers of 2018 and 2019, where reportedly several Wolaytas were killed by the Ejeetto,<sup>42</sup> appear to have scared many non-Sidamas away from participating in the referendum process. All but one non-Sidama spoken to in Hawassa during the referendum period confirmed they had not registered to participate in the process. As one female hotel employee in Hawassa explained it: "This is a Sidama concern. It does not belong to me. I will not participate in the referendum."<sup>43</sup>

NEBE confirms that they also received some complaints during voter registration through its direct complaint hotline. In order to alleviate the situation, NEBE took different actions like asking the Zonal administration to withdraw any law enforcement (particularly militia) from the vicinity of registration stations, and reinforcing the rules that registration stations should be free from any zonal administrative officials and staff. Furthermore, NEBE followed-up on the complaints and conducted supervision of those registration stations where most

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<sup>39</sup> Statement available on the official Facebook page of the Board, posted on 11 November 2019, at 5:08 P.M.

<sup>40</sup> E-mail correspondence with NEBE, 27 December 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Anonymous, Sidama administration official, interviewed 2 November 2019.

<sup>42</sup> See: "Ethiopia referendum: Dozens killed in Sidama clashes", BBC, 22 July 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49070762> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous, interviewed 19 November 2019, Hawassa.

complaints had been registered. It is NEBE's understanding that the direct intervention by NEBE staff and board members, at least in Hawassa, led to an increase in registration and participation of non-Sidamas in the referendum process.<sup>44</sup>

A complaint that many non-Sidamas had been fired from their positions in local government administration in Sidama prior to the referendum process has been raised by the online paper *Awasa Guardian*. Allegedly, this was done in order to prevent any insight into the distribution of illegal IDs that were to be used in the registration process.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, the Wolayta Committee for Human Rights (WCHR) issued a press release claiming to have "received multiple reports of illegal ID card distribution by local authorities throughout Hawassa city" prior to the registration process.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, an article on the diaspora-based Borkena News outlet made several accusations against the Sidama voter registration process.<sup>47</sup> They claimed that rural voters have been shipped in large numbers to Hawassa to register to vote in the city in order to tilt the demographic composition.<sup>48</sup> The reporting also alleged that NEBE was aware of this, but did not take action. None of these accusations, however, have been corroborated by other independent sources.

In addition to the intimidation of non-Sidamas, concerns have been raised about pressure exerted on people from the Hadicho group in Dara *woreda* to register and vote "yes" in the referendum.<sup>49</sup> A long history lies behind this alleged pressuring. The Sidama people, similar to other groups in Ethiopia, have a stratified social structure. In addition to a clan structure, this social stratification excludes certain groups associated with artisan activity, like potters, tanners, and smiths, from mainstream society.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Written e-mail response by NEBE to the author, 27 December 2019.

<sup>45</sup> See: "Sidama referendum marred by state bias, city boycott", *Awasa Guardian*, 20 November 2019, <http://awasaguardian.com/index.php/2019/11/20/sidama-referendum-marred-by-state-bias-city-boycott/> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>46</sup> See: "NEBE must reject illegal Hawassa IDs or postpone Sidama referendum (Press Release)", *Borkena*, 2 October 2019, <https://borkena.com/2019/10/02/ethiopia-nebe-illegal-hawassa-ids-sidama-referendum/> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Borkena News outlet is diaspora based, does not take responsibility of the accuracy of the reports published, and entertain a certain political viewpoint. Hence one should exercise solid source criticism when taking its reporting into account.

<sup>48</sup> Damo Gotamo: "Voter Registration for Sidama Referendum in Awassa is Marred by Massive Voter Fraud", 12 November 2019, *Borkena.com*

<sup>49</sup> See: "Hadicho boycott Sidama referendum in Ethiopia – AG", *Awasa Guardian*, 14 November 2019, <http://awasaguardian.com/index.php/2019/11/14/hadicho-boycott-sidama-referendum-in-ethiopia-ag/> (accessed 6 January 2020).

We do not hold first-hand information on this issue, as time and resources prevented us to work in Dara *woreda*. Furthermore, NEBE has not registered any complaints from Dara *woreda* (e-mail correspondence of 27 December 2019).

<sup>50</sup> Haileyesus Seba (2001): "Sidama" in Dena Freeman and Alula Pankhurst (eds.), *Living on the Edge. Marginalised Minorities of Craftworkers and Hunters in Southern Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa: Department of Sociology and Social Administration, Addis Ababa University, pp. 227-245; and Lovise Aalen (2009): *The Politics of Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Actors, Power and Mobilisation under Ethnic Federalism*, Leiden/Boston: Brill.

The artisan's group is itself divided. Traditionally, the Hadicho group – who are potters – are ranked at the bottom of society. The Hadicho have a strong notion of a separate identity from the Sidama.<sup>51</sup> They have mostly settled in the Dara woreda in the south of Sidama zone. Eclipsed by the Sidama's lengthy struggle for self-rule, the Hadicho people have struggled themselves for separation from the Sidama and the establishment of their own self-administration. The Sidama-Hadicho People's Democratic Organisation (SHPDO) managed to secure a separate woreda status for the Hadicho after the coming to power of EPRDF – to obtain a minimal level of self-administration separate from the Sidama. In the 2000 elections, for instance, the SHPDO held a broad-based support among the Hadicho, and most likely would have won a big majority in their woreda against the ruling EPRDF party, if not the elections had been suspended by NEBE and Kebelle officials in collusion.<sup>52</sup> Hadicho representatives have later argued for a separate zone, in order to exercise self-administration directly under the SNNPRS. This claim runs counter to the interests of Sidama nationalists, both within the government camp as well as among the opposition, who see the possible break-away of Hadicho woreda as a threat to the integrity of Sidama land.<sup>53</sup>

Initially, NEBE projected about 1.9 million voters to register in the zone. It came thus as a surprise that in the end over 2.3 million voters registered, noting a higher number than expected of registered voters in certain areas (like Arbegona, Hula, Wensho and Bona Zuriya), while a lower number than expected in Hawassa city. As we do not have any updated census on the demographic composition of Sidama zone, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about the alleged over-registration of Sidamas to partake in the referendum. It seems plausible to state, however, that the majority of non-Sidamas chose not to register, possibly due to an intimidating and non-conducive political context.

### **The referendum campaign period**

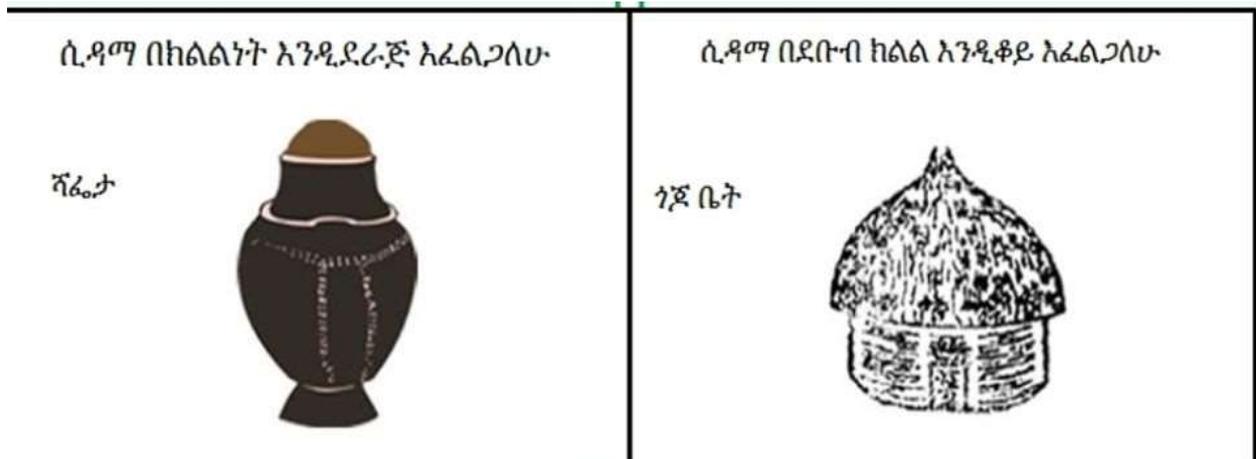
The official campaign period was first set by NEBE to be the first week of November. Later, this was rescheduled in order for the campaigns to be conducted on 5-10 November. This was done for various reasons, including the convenience of conducting it a few days before or together with the voters' registration period.

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<sup>51</sup> Haileyesus Seba (2001): "Sidama" in Dena Freeman and Alula Pankhurst (eds.), *Living on the Edge. Marginalised Minorities of Craftworkers and Hunters in Southern Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa: Department of Sociology and Social Administration, Addis Ababa University, p. 240.

<sup>52</sup> Kjell Solberg (2002): "Political Apathy and Class/Caste Conclift: The Elections in Sidama, Southern Region", in S. Pausewang, K. Tronvoll, L. Aalen (eds.), *Ethiopia Since the Derg. A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance*, London: Zed Books, pp. 141-155.

<sup>53</sup> The research team tried to reach out to Hadicho representatives during the mission, but failed to get any official statements reflecting their views.



*Shaafeeta = For / Yes*

*Goojjo = Against / No*

In order to clarify the two alternatives in the referendum to illiterate voters, two cultural symbols were selected: the *Shaafeeta* (a traditional food container)<sup>54</sup> signified a "yes" vote; and the *Goojjo* (a traditional hut)<sup>55</sup> a "no"-vote. Both symbols connote Sidama culture and do not seem to be selected to indirectly influence the choice of the people, although certain individuals argued for close cultural connections to the Shaafeeta symbols.<sup>56</sup> For instance, a woman emphasised a gendered understanding of the symbols: "Shaafeeta represents our delicious food, and hence prosperity. *Goojjo* represents suppression. It is difficult to feel freedom, being in the *Goojjo* with a huge family. *Goojjo* is trouble." Another elder man highlighted cultural closeness in describing the symbols: "Culturally both appear to be assets in Sidama. However, the Shaafeeta represents us more, because Goojjo is used by other nations and Shaafeeta is not. Shaafeeta also carries many meanings to us."<sup>57</sup>

Organisations and actors interested in campaigning had to register with NEBE. Initially, only the Sidama Zone Administration (including Hawassa City Administration) registered as a "yes"-campaigner, while the SNNPRS Government registered for a "no"-campaign. When NEBE tried to mobilise political parties and CSOs to join in the campaign and invited them to public debates, it created an uproar and strong criticism from Sidama activists and opposition parties. For one reason or the other, it was looked upon as a divisive strategy, as explained by one Ejjeetto youth activist:

"The NEBE invitation to political parties to campaign is unacceptable and looks like a conspiratory act. The very idea of inviting political parties to campaign shows partiality.

<sup>54</sup> Shaafeeta is used in Sidama for serving specially prepared food at various events. In some places, dialectic name 'Shaaqqo' is used to denote the same material.

<sup>55</sup> Goojjo (or Goo'me) is a small hut (traditional house in Sidama society) constructed by the less wealthy/poor people. Due to its size and quality (poor materials used to construct it), it causes lots of discomforts and problems.

<sup>56</sup> In authoritarian societies, symbols used for elections are often culturally loaded either negatively or positively to influence the choice of the electorate. See Kjetil Tronvoll (1996): "The Eritrean Referendum: Peasant Voices", *Eritrean Studies Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 23-67.

<sup>57</sup> Interviews conducted in Hawassa, 20 and 21 November 2019.

[...] This is a referendum for people, not an ordinary election. So, inviting political parties was completely wrong."<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, the main opposition party SLM submitted a formal letter of complaint to NEBE on the matter,<sup>59</sup> explaining the legal context as they interpreted it, and accusing NEBE of unconstitutional acts (including hosting intellectuals discussion and debate forums). They argued that campaigning by political parties was illegal. As such, SLM declined to take part in the discussion forum planned by the NEBE, as did the Sidama Zone Administration and the youth association. This forced NEBE to cancel its plan of hosting a media debate among political parties.

The Sidama Zone Administration organised various committees to facilitate the referendum process. Among them was the Referendum Campaign Committee. The Committee presented an ambitious "yes"-campaign plan, to be undertaken across the zone through various means, including music shows by "Wolliimma" band, the use of banners, brochures, posters, and direct speeches to the public at various places. The Committee also encouraged the literate public to inform rural illiterate voters about the two symbols illustrating a "yes" and "no" vote.<sup>60</sup>

The Chief Administrator of the Sidama Zone, Desta Lendamo, announced the start of the referendum campaign on 5 November.<sup>61</sup> In his speech, he noted that the referendum is an opportunity where the age-old quest of Sidama people for self-rule and administrative autonomy will be fulfilled. He also noted that Sidama has made a great sacrifice to reach this stage, that all the campaigns should bear this objective in mind, and he encouraged all to actively take part in the referendum. Similarly, the Mayor of Hawassa City launched the City Council's campaign by delivering a campaign speech wherein he congratulated all residents of the Sidama for having the historic day of the referendum. He stressed the accommodative culture of Sidama and called for all residents of the City to vote for "Shaafeta" ("yes"), stating that the self-determination demand is a demand of Sidamas and all non-Sidama residents together. He stated that the ultimate goal of achieving the Sidama regional state is for better prosperity of all residents.

Hawassa City and every town in Sidama zone were plastered with posters and flags with the Shaafeta symbol and accompanied by various text messages. These included:

"Voting for Shaafeta, voting for Unity and development!"

"Shaafeta, the dish shared equally, without discrimination!"

"Shaafeta, the reflection accommodative and all participating culture of Sidaama!"

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<sup>58</sup> Interview, 18 November, Hawassa,

<sup>59</sup> In the letter bearing ref. no. ሲአገ/328/12 written on 23/02/2012 (E.C).

<sup>60</sup> News statement from Sidama Zone Administration, Public Relations Office, 2 November 2019 (available on their official Facebook page).

<sup>61</sup> Sidama Zone Administration Public Relations Office, on 5 November 2019, reproduced in various local media, and news statement from (also available on their official Facebook page).

"We will shine with Shaafeeta on Hidar ten! [November 20, the day of referendum]"

"Vote for Shaafeeta!"

"Viva Sidaama and Loving People!"

Beyond the formal entities, there was massive civic popular engagement in the "yes"-campaign. The Ejjeetto youth movement was instrumental in undertaking a thorough and all-encompassing "yes"-campaign throughout Sidama territory.

Only on a few occasions has the "no"-campaign been publicly visible. The SNNPRS Government was the only officially registered "no"-campaigner; however, it appears they immediately gave up active campaigning, as no-one observed any meetings or rallies or materials displaying a "no"-vote symbol. The Southern Radio and Television Agency was used by the government of SNNPRS to campaign for Goojjo. In addition, a few youths appeared wearing T-shirts with the Goojjo symbol and posting pictures of themselves on Facebook and other social media outlets. In all, however, the visibility of the "no"-campaign remained minimal.

### **Issues of concern during the campaign period**

Clearly, an overwhelming majority of Sidama supported a "yes"-campaign and vote in the referendum. However, this overwhelming majority would appear, intentionally or not, intimidating towards any individual or minority group who would be inclined to favour a "no"-vote and support the "no"-campaign. With the recent outburst of violence in 2018 and 2019 targeting non-Sidamas in Hawassa, it is likely that a context of fear prevailed among the non-Sidamas, inhibiting them to express their views during the campaign period.

### **Voting day**

People were lining up in an orderly manner in the early morning hours outside their voting stations on 20 November, waiting for the opening of the polls at 6 AM.<sup>62</sup> The ambience in the city among the Sidamas was a mixture of soberness, excitement, and a deep sentiment of fulfilment. There could be no doubt that the event had a huge significance for the absolute majority of the Sidamas: finally, their aspirations for self-rule would be manifested through their vote. A young voter was looking for words when he tried to explain his feelings when he cast his ballot:

"The feeling is so complicated. I was trembling, my hands were shaking. I felt as if some shockwave was hitting my body. At that very point, I felt very fortunate and favoured to

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<sup>62</sup> There are accusations by one commentator at Borkena.com that voting stations in Hawassa opened prior to 6 am in order to cater for illegally registered urban voters to cast their ballots in Hawassa and thence be transported back to their rural constituencies to cast a ballot there too. (cf. Damo Gotamo, "Was the Sidama People's Vote for Statehood in Awassa Free and Fair?" 21 November 2019, borkena.com). So far, this information is not corroborated by other sources.

have gotten chance. At the same time, the thought of our friends who died fighting for our freedom was also on my mind. I was entertaining many different feelings at the same time.”<sup>63</sup>

A number of the voting stations in downtown Hawassa were crowded throughout the day, forcing voters to wait up to two or three hours in line in order to cast their vote. Nevertheless, the queue remained orderly and calm. A voter at Looqqe voting station, who had been waiting for two-and-a-half hours, said: “Many have paid their lives, their jobs, their freedom, and their family to make this day a reality. Compared to their sacrifices, lining up here for a long time is negligible.”<sup>64</sup> Other voters queuing at the same voting station were more critical, claiming: “The NEBE employees in this station are less efficient, and moreover, it seems that somebody is being given a chance to cast their vote without lining up.” As people were still lining up at the close of the polls at 6 PM at several voting stations, NEBE allowed voting to take place until 8 PM in order to allow all those that wanted to cast their vote.

At other voting stations in Hawassa City, the lines were short and all voting was finished around noon. Many people confirmed that the majority of the people living in these areas were non-Sidamas. This illustrates the main potential controversy of the referendum: the likely under-registration of non-Sidamas.

The vote took place peacefully and orderly, in an atmosphere filled with joy and excitement – at least in large parts of Hawassa City. However, in most places, the Ejjetto youth activists were busy organising the lines and keeping control outside of the voting stations, which would have been an intimidating presence for anyone with an interest to vote “no”. Furthermore, since the Military Command Post had issued strict orders prohibiting large gatherings of people or expressions of celebration, no festivities were seen in public and people remained calm throughout the day and thereafter.<sup>65</sup>

### **Referendum voting observers**

Reportedly, in almost all voting stations, representatives of the Shaafeeta (“yes”-vote) were present, while representatives of Goojjo (“no”-vote) were not.<sup>66</sup> The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organisations for Election (CECOE) coordinated 147 domestic observers from a variety of Ethiopian NGOs. In addition, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) had also a team of observers present, headed by Chief Commissioner Daniel Bekele.<sup>67</sup> No international observers were invited or facilitated to observe the referendum; however, the US Embassy in

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<sup>63</sup> Interviewed, Hawassa, 20 November 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Interviewed, 20 November 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Sidama zone, as well as the SNNPR are under an emergency clause, giving extended prerogatives to the federal military.

<sup>66</sup> See: <https://cardeth.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Sidama-Referendum-Observation-Result.jpg> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>67</sup> See: “EHRC says Sidama referendum saw no major critical incident, peaceful”, *Walta Media*, 22 November 2019, <http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php/news/national/detail?cid=52252&locale=en> (accessed 6 January 2020).

Addis Ababa dispatched a small team of diplomatic observers to follow the activities on voting day.

### **Minor issues of concern during referendum day**

Overall, the conduct of the vote was carried out in a peaceful, orderly and organised manner. Beyond certain contextual concerns, as well as incidents of potential ballot-stuffing and multiple voting – which led to the cancellation of result in several voting stations, as addressed below – few major issues were noted by observers or other actors present. Among the minor issues observed, the following can be noted:

- a) *NEBE voting station coordinator arrested*: In Borricha *woreda*, the voting station coordinator was pressuring people to vote “no”, and manipulated the vote for illiterate voters (marking a “no” although they stated they wanted to vote “yes”). NEBE took swift action when this was reported, and the police detained him for the violation (under Criminal Code, para 466-476).
- b) *Posting of results at voting station level prior to the formal closure of the polls*: From around 17.15 hours onward, pictures of results sheets from several voting stations were circulating on social media, showing a 100% vote for “yes”. This was the case, for instance, in the Shabadino *woreda*. The counting and displaying results before the closing of polls is in breach of electoral procedures.
- c) *Reported announcement of the results by the Deputy Mayor*: The day after polling day, the Deputy Mayor of Hawassa was quoted by Walta Broadcasting Cooperation to have said that about “90% of inhabitants of Hawassa city voted yes”. NEBE was swift in releasing a statement rejecting this claim and called it a violation of electoral procedures. Subsequently, the statement was retracted by Walta, which claimed they had misquoted him as “90% of the city population had turned out to vote”.<sup>68</sup>
- d) *Claims of underage voters*: Ethiopian national journalists reporting on the referendum claimed to have observed a number of seemingly underage voters in Hawassa. The same was reported by observers from the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy.<sup>69</sup> When asked about their age, some youth had a kebele ID card stating they were above 18 years. Most of the alleged underage voters had however been “approved” by three local witnesses as per the regulation described above, which gave legitimacy for NEBE to issue voter cards. The extent of this concern is not known, although it was observed in several polling stations and noted by both national observer teams.
- e) *Understaffed and undersupplied voting stations*: Some respondents commented that voting stations were understaffed and inefficiently organised, making voting a

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<sup>68</sup> See statements on NEBE’s official Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/414693405979601/photos/a.430204581095150/558734904908783/?type=3&theater>

<sup>69</sup> See: <https://cardeth.org/sidama-referendum-cards-observation/> (accessed 6 January 2020).

protracted process. This was noted by EHRC as well, which had furthermore observed lack of voting materials hampering the process in certain voting stations.

- f) *Dry indelible ink*: In many polling stations, the indelible ink to be used to mark the thumb after voting had dried up, making it non-useable and hence the check against potential multiple-voting by the same individual failed.

## Counting and result announcement

The counting and compilation of the results from a simple “yes” and “no” referendum in a small territory should not be a complicated and protracted endeavour. Barring unforeseen events, the result compilation was expected to be finalised and announced early morning the next day. However, the day after referendum NEBE scheduled the announcement of the results for the morning of Friday 22 November. This was delayed again until Friday afternoon, and then finally the preliminary announcement was made in the early afternoon of Saturday 23 November. When NEBE commissioners were approached for an explanation for these postponements, it was first claimed to be due to the time it took to transport the results from rural voting stations to Hawassa; later, they admitted that they faced some “issues of concern” during the counting.

The preliminary result announcement made on Saturday stated that 98.51% voted in favour of regional statehood, with a turnout of 99.8% of registered voters.<sup>70</sup> In the final results’ announcement, issued by NEBE on 4 December, this was adjusted to a 97.7% “yes”-vote, with 1.47% having cast a “no”-vote.<sup>71</sup> More importantly, NEBE disclosed that irregularities had been discovered in 235 (12.6%) out of the total of 1,861 voting stations. In 164 of these voting stations, the irregularities were so serious that the referendum results were cancelled. Out of these, in 127 polling stations the number of votes far exceeded the number of registered voters, whereas in 37 polling stations the results were annulled due to “significant ballot paper reconciliation errors”.<sup>72</sup> The results of the remaining 71 polling stations were upheld since the difference with the sum total of compiled votes was less than 10 votes. Consequently, a massive 248,097 votes, or 10.9% of the total votes cast, were annulled – a very high number in any kind of election. In addition, 16,624 votes were considered invalid and rejected.

NEBE decided against a recount (and a re-vote presumably) in the polling stations where irregularities had been discovered. They stated that it would “not change the outcome of the referendum as there is significant gap between the results of the two options; it will not raise questions on the credibility of the process; [and] it will unnecessarily prolong the result announcement’s timeline.”<sup>73</sup> NEBE has, however, established a technical team to investigate

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<sup>70</sup> See: <https://fanabc.com/english/2019/11/sidama-people-opt-for-statehood-nebe/>

<sup>71</sup> See: <https://fanabc.com/english/2019/12/nebe-announces-final-result-of-sidama-referendum/>

<sup>72</sup> NEBE: Sidama Referendum Final Result, 4 December 2019, attached in Annex 2.

<sup>73</sup> NEBE: Sidama Referendum Final Result, 4 December 2019.

the reasons for the discrepancies, in order to prevent similar issues to impact the upcoming general election.<sup>74</sup>

According to NEBE, 2,279,022 out of the 2,304,577 registered voters cast their ballots in the referendum, making it one of the referendums with the highest participation globally in the history of direct voting. Such a result may, of course, open up speculation about election fraud, or other contextual features influencing the process (see below for elaboration). At the same time, the result and turnout must also be attributed to the deep-rooted support for self-rule that prevails among the Sidama people. Sarmiso Samago, a traditional clan leader of the Moticha clan, eloquently phrased his feelings the following way the day after the referendum:

“There has not been a single time in history we Sidama have not been struggling for self-determination. So today, finally, we realise our rights, and I am extremely happy. All my ancestors have lived here and we have grassed our cattle here for generations. It is a rich and fertile land, which was taken away from us 130 years ago. (...). Now finally we have got our land back and can decide for ourselves.”<sup>75</sup>

### **Contextualising the result**

There is no doubt that an overwhelming majority of the residents of the Sidama zone have longed for regional statehood and thus favoured a “yes”-vote in the referendum. However, despite it being a nationalistic plebiscite, in a multi-ethnic community – considering the heterogeneous Hawassa City – and a predominantly rural constituency, such an affirmative vote with such an extremely high turnout, ought to raise some concerns about the conduct of the polls and the context in which the vote occurred.<sup>76</sup>

As in any context of political transition, political uncertainty and fear abound. This too applied among certain segments of the Sidama zone inhabitants. It seems obvious that the “yes”-campaign has dominated in the referendum process, which likely has led people favouring a no-vote to be quiescent and disengaged.

Non-Sidamas residing and working in Sidama zone are in a precarious situation, and many have expressed fear of their status and well-being, both during the process and after. Several sources confirm societal pressure, as well as blatant intimidation and harassment of non-Sidamas to force them to comply with the interest of the majority Sidama population. Non-Sidamas are very reluctant to speak up on the matter, in order not to jeopardize their status. This explains the apparent severe under-registration of non-Sidamas in the election, as many seem to have chosen non-engagement as the best survival strategy. As one person expressed:

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<sup>74</sup> The investigation report has not been made public at the time as this is written.

<sup>75</sup> Interviewed, 21 November 2019.

<sup>76</sup> This result ranks among the most affirmative and highest turnout referendums in the history of direct balloting! The Ivory Coast referendum in 1958 on continued association or break with France heads the list with 99,8% yes vote and a turn-out of ‘only’ 97,5%. See D. Butler and A. Ranney (eds.) (1978), *Referendums, a Comparative Study of Practice and Theory*, Washington DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research.

“We know we are in a minority anyway, so why should we risk our job and social standing, and maybe ultimately our life, to go and register and vote in this referendum? This is a Sidama process, let them decide by themselves.”<sup>77</sup>

To a certain degree, some Sidamas were also hesitant to talk openly about the current situation, and many community representatives and youth movement activists were reluctant and sceptical to talk to outsiders about the process. There may be a good reason for this such as fear of misrepresentation and lack of trust in outsiders, due to the long history of the struggle for self-determination. However, one trusted international source observed personally that when trying to talk to an elder in a rural district about the process, the elder was cut short by the village chief and Ejjetto representatives, and physically abused and beaten.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, an Ethiopian journalist covering the referendum in Hawassa retold how he personally had observed how non-Sidamas were intimidated and forced to vote “yes” in a rural constituency.<sup>79</sup>

There has been a concerted efforts and tactical alliance between representatives from Sidama Zone authorities, Hawassa City authorities, SEPDM Sidama, Sidama Liberation Movement (SLM), the Ejjetto, as well as Sidama intellectuals, which worked together to “safeguard the process towards regional statehood”, as one informant characterised it. This formidable coalition would appear intimidating to anyone with an interest to vote “no” in the referendum. Local authorities put up road-signs at the entry to Hawassa proclaiming that “you are now entering the Sidama Regional State” many months before the referendum day, and only posters for the “yes” campaign were to be seen around town. The “no” campaign was officially only supported by the SNNPRS; but they quickly ceased their campaign. Hence, the overwhelming messaging from all government officials, political actors, public and civic representatives advocated a “yes” vote. Consequently, it is a pragmatic and well-calculated strategy by non-Sidamas and others who may be reluctant towards the idea of Sidama regional statehood to disengage from the process.

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<sup>77</sup> Anonymous, interviewed, 19 November 2019, Hawassa.

<sup>78</sup> Anonymous, interviewed, 21 November 2019, Hawassa.

<sup>79</sup> Anonymous, interviewed, 22 November 2019, Hawassa.

## 5. NEBE's performance

There may be several legitimate criticisms raised against NEBE's performance. These could be related to the initial request of statehood issued by Sidama Zone Council on 18 July 2018 and their apparent lethargy to act upon the SNNPRS endorsement of a referendum from 20 November 2018 onwards. If NEBE, and federal authorities, had swiftly followed up on the referral from SNNPRS Council and communicated a plan of action to the Sidama stakeholders, the tragic events of July-August 2019 might have been avoided. This put NEBE on a bad footing with the general public in Sidama at the start of the process, although that perception has been changed after a referendum was finally accepted and carried out.

Generally, however, NEBE appears to have been handling the campaign and the conduct of the vote well. On the question of voter registration process, the logistics appear to have been well performed, but the reported under-registration of probable "no"-voters (non-Sidamas) and the alleged over-registration of "yes"-voters (at least in certain constituencies, where the results were cancelled), ought to have been addressed and communicated by NEBE in a transparent manner during the process of registration. No major logistical troubles were encountered, although there were minor issues with insufficient election materials on voting day.

Concrete large-scale irregularities and gross procedural misconduct on voting day led NEBE to cancel the vote in 164 polling stations, leading to the annulment of close to 11% of all the votes cast. Although this does not put in doubt the overall vote of the Sidama people in the referendum, in a hotly contested general election such levels of irregularity will likely directly impact the outcome of the vote. It is thus worrying that NEBE did not manage to protect the integrity of the vote in a more effective manner.

There have been concerns about a lack of transparency from NEBE by some actors: among them were Ethiopian and international journalists and other stakeholders of the process. Complaints have been made against the NEBE spokesperson, who on many occasions was reluctant to answer questions or deferred them to other authorities. Criticism of NEBE's public relation strategy, transparency policy, and access to information is not new: it has been expressed since Ethiopia's first multi-party elections in 1992. The "new" NEBE has improved the dissemination of information, *inter alia* through its Facebook site. However, many stakeholders had hoped that they would have been even more transparent and open for access to information than what has been proven in this process.

Finally, the Sidama referendum *cannot* be considered to be a litmus test of NEBE's capability or capacity to conduct the general elections in 2020. There are many reasons for this. The outcome of the referendum was a foregone conclusion, and no real substantive political competition occurred or played a role in the process. Most importantly, an elite pact safeguarded and drove the process forward, involving all administrative levels of concern (from

kebelle, woreda, zone, and Sidama officials at the SNNPRS), Sidama government party representatives at all levels; all organised political opposition; a unanimous Sidama intellectual community; civil society; and, not least, the Ejjetto youth movement. Therefore, there were no public dissenting voices to the overall aim of the process, making it a very smooth playing field for NEBE to organise a comparatively small and uncontested logistical operation. Additionally, the campaign was over a clear-cut issue, as opposed to the ambiguous and contested party politics which are expected during the 2020 elections. As such, there was little need for comprehensive voter education programming. Finally, the Sidama territory is comparatively small and easily accessible, with a small electorate, thus making it a relatively easy to organise logistical operation. We can, therefore, expect a very different context during the upcoming general elections, and whether NEBE is up to the task would need to be assessed at that time.

## 6. Establishing the new regional state of Sidama

The procedures for the establishment of a separate Sidama Regional State and its relationship to the rump-state of SNNPRS, are outlined in SNNPRS “Sidama Referendum Implementation Project Office Establishment and Working Procedure Defining Regulation” (No. 172/2019) and SNNPRS “Motion on Sidama Referendum Administrative and Legal Issues” (No. 13/2019). The aforementioned Transition Project Office is the key entity entrusted to organise a smooth transition of powers and sharing of assets between the two regional states.<sup>80</sup> The Project Office is currently working on these matters, and has estimated a ten-month period to finalise them.<sup>81</sup>

The preamble to the legal motion explains that there are a number of “nations, nationalities and peoples” peacefully co-existing in the SNNPRS, which may demand regional statehood similar to the Sidama. Based on this, the preamble states that it would be necessary to frame various mechanisms through which peaceful co-existence of the people will be ensured, as well as establish a tenable procedure for a smooth transition of power and for settlement of administrative and legal issues between the existing and the new state, in case an affirmative referendum for statehood.

### Effectuating the new Sidama Regional State

A key – and contested – issue in the debate on the Sidama referendum is whether the establishment of a Sidama regional state would require an amendment of the Federal Constitution of Ethiopia, as Article 47.1 of the constitution lists the nine member states of the Federal Democratic Republic. Some observers have argued that for the new Sidama regional state to become effective, a federal constitutional amendment process must be undertaken to constitutionally enshrine Sidama as the tenth regional state of the Ethiopian Federation. If this were to be the case, it would likely be a cumbersome and protracted process, in which the

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<sup>80</sup> Under article 8 of the regulation, the following powers are outlined:

- a) To prepare and present to the SNNPRS Council, and follow up implementation of legal documents and procedural frameworks for regulating rights of the old and the new regions; and relating to resource sharing process between the two (Art. 8(1));
- b) To prepare, present and follow up implementation of the non-Sidama residents legal protection and procedural schemes (Art. 8(2));
- c) With the view of realizing peaceful co-existence amongst peoples, carry on the public relations task both at pre and post referendum transitional period (Art. 8(3));
- d) To prepare, implement and report to the SNNPRS Council on implementation of the Directive that regulates human resource usage and finance and other assets sharing process between the old and the new states (Art. 8(4));
- e) The task of developing a proposal for containing resource-sharing schemes, based on all relevant information to be obtained from relevant state organs (Art. 8(5));
- f) To prepare and facilitate documents for peaceful transfer of the state power between the old and new state and present the same to the concerned organs (Art. 8(7)).

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Aynekulu Gohatsbaha, Transition Project Office Head, 21.11.19, Hawassa.

consent of the other nine regional state assemblies would need to be obtained.<sup>82</sup> However, such a constitutional interpretation is controversial, as article 47.3(e) in the Federal Constitution clearly states in its procedural overview of the right to establish a separate regional state that “the new State created by the referendum without any need for application, directly becomes a member of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.”

The SNNPRS Council has adopted a similar constitutional interpretation and stated in its motion No. 13/2019, Article 7(2) that if a “yes”-vote wins in the referendum, Sidama will from the very time of the NEBE announcement assume the status as a regional state. According to the motion, the new regional state will start using regional nomenclature within boundaries of the geographic location inhabited by the “Sidama Nation/People”. It should be noted that this phrasing is different than the usually used “Sidama zone”, probably to bypass the controversies of including Hawassa City under the Sidama domain.

### **Transfer of state powers**

The motion further elaborates on the state power transfer process between the SNNPRS and the Sidama regional state. Art. 7 (6) stipulates that it is conditional on two factors: the referendum result and the constitutional procedure. However, neither the federal nor the regional constitutions offer detailed guidance on how such a power transfer process is supposed to be conducted. Noting this, the Council of the SNNPRS has stated that the enabling laws will be made by the Council (Art. 13 (1) of the Motion) and the task of drafting such laws is entrusted to the aforementioned Project Office.<sup>83</sup> The exact timing for effective state power transfer is not stated; however, it seems apparent it might take some time after the new state formation. To fill the legislative lacuna, the Motion (Art. 11) provides for applicability of laws of the SNNPRS in the new Sidama regional state until power transfer takes effect.

To secure the rights and interests of the rump-state SNNPRS, the Motion establishes a ten-year (two election periods) transition period (Art. 7 (3)). The transition period is intended to enable the SNNPRS to select its new capital city and construct the necessary infrastructure to secure non-disruption of their administrative responsibilities. Within this time, all administrative, asset, and liability-sharing issues between the two regions will be settled (Art. 7(7)).

### **Sharing of assets and liabilities**

The SNNPRS motion regulates in detail the process of asset and liability sharing (Art. 8). An inventory of assets (movable and non-movable) and liabilities will be undertaken, as per pre-

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<sup>82</sup> See for instance: “Sidama vote first step in long process of change in Ethiopia”, The Conversation, 21 November 2019, <http://theconversation.com/sidama-vote-first-step-in-long-process-of-change-in-ethiopia-127525> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>83</sup> Art. 13 (3) of the Motion and Art. 8 of the Project Office establishment regulation.

existing legal framework. Resource sharing will be just, equitable, and balanced on the basis of the population numbers and administrative boundaries (Art. 8(3)). Immovable properties will be shared by taking their current status into account (Art. 8(4)), and the sharing modality will be determined through bargaining that ensures interests of both states (Art. 8(5)). Art. 8(6) through (9) govern liability and loan-sharing procedures, and generally state that the state loan will be shared as its amount at the time of sharing; that they will be shared on the basis of a budget distributing scheme; that the loans and liabilities of the Sidama Zone and Hawassa City, borrowed through old regional state, will be taken up by the new regional state; and that the sharing of the asset and liability may be in cash whenever deemed better. In case of disputes where the old and new regional states fail to amicably settle their issue of concern, the federal government will provide mediation (Art. (8(11))).

### **Status of Hawassa City, security, and the protection of non-Sidamas**

The most debated and controversial issue of concern in relation to the establishment of a new Sidama regional state has been the status of Hawassa city and the security and rights of its non-Sidama inhabitants. The federal government has earlier alluded to making Hawassa City a federal city, accountable directly to the federal government, an initiative that has faced fierce resistance from Sidama political actors on both sides of the aisle. Furthermore, as mentioned above, NEBE initially demanded that the SNNPRS develop separate legislation to protect the rights and interests of non-Sidamas in Hawassa City prior to conducting a referendum – a demand that was rejected on the reasoning that current federal and regional laws provide necessary protection to all Ethiopians wherever they live.

The SNNPRS motion provides that Hawassa City will be accountable to the new Sidama regional state (Art. 7(2)). However, it does also provide that the two states will use the city as their common capital in the transition period.<sup>84</sup> It further enshrines that that administration of security and related issues of the City during the transitional period will fully remain the responsibility of Hawassa City Administration (Art 7(8)), hence vested under and made accountable to the new Sidama regional state.<sup>85</sup> The security of the SNNPRS officials and buildings in Hawassa will, however, remain the responsibility of the SNNPRS security forces (Art. 7(9)). Both states may, through mutual understanding, determine issues relating to security and administrative matters (Art. 7(10)).

Furthermore, the motion determines that all people of various ethnic background residing in Hawassa City will continue to benefit from the economic, social, and administrative services provided by the city administration (Art. 7(1)), and that their rights are protected by the federal constitution and other laws of the land (Art. 9(1)). Moreover, a specific protection scheme for

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<sup>84</sup> Accordingly, the motion in Art. 7(4) calls for amendment of Art. 6 of the SNNPRS Constitution that provides for the capital of the SNNPRS. This amendment will be made at the time of power transfer conditioned, however, to the period of common use provision.

<sup>85</sup> The phrasing of this provision seems to reflect the hesitation of the SNNPRS Council in granting the City's security issue to the New Sidaama state explicitly.

city dwellers to protect their right to obtain information, to ask questions and obtain answers thereof as to the decisions concerning the city, is included. The motion further states that inhabitants have the right to participate in the city's administrative matters, and that they will enjoy a protection of their political rights, the right to own property, and the right to use what they own without any interference. Their right to benefit from services provided by the city with full equality and transparency is also guaranteed in the motion (Art. 9(2)).<sup>86</sup>

### **Interim Sidama Regional State Council**

The motion does not outline or define how an interim Sidama Regional State Council should be composed. A senior party insider to the process, however, alluded to a model where the new Council would be composed of all members in the Sidama Zone Council, Hawassa City Council and the Sidama representatives in the SNNPRS Council. The latter would vacate their old positions as soon as the transfer of power is effectuated.

After the referendum this understanding of establishing a new regional council has been contested by a broader field of Sidama activists. They have argued for an all-inclusive and representative regional council composed of members from all fractions of the Sidama Nation: ruling party officials, Zone and City Council members, opposition party representatives, intellectuals, Ejeetto, and civil society representatives. The activists base their argument on Article 47 (3)(d) of the Federal Constitution which states: "When the State Council will have transferred its powers to the *Nation* that made the demand..."; hence the power should be transferred to an institution reflecting the whole of the nation, not a certain political party. To only include government party representatives in the new Sidama regional state council could be an issue that may spark renewed protests.

The new Sidama regional state Council will thence select the new President of the region, after a debate among the Council members. A party insider warned, however, that as "we still experience some remnants of Democratic Centralism in the Party, the decision of who should be the new regional President may be taken in Addis Ababa, and not Hawassa".<sup>87</sup> The push for a more inclusive representation in the new Council will also affect who will become the first President of the Sidama regional state, and how they will be selected.

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<sup>86</sup> A Miscellaneous Chapter is included in the Motion, covering six Articles (from Article 11 to Art. 16). Article 11 states about transitional provisions, Art. 12 is about duty to cooperate, Art. 13 regulates about the roles and responsibilities of the state organs, Art. 14 is about inapplicable laws, Art.15 deals with the power of issue regulation and directive; and the last Article, Art. 16 provides for the effective date.

<sup>87</sup> Anonymous, interviewed 20 November 2019, Hawassa.

## 7. Conclusion: Regional statehood achieved – now what?

A long and winding road has reached its end. The Sidama referendum was the culmination of a decades-long struggle for self-rule. Hence, its outcome was a foregone conclusion. The irregularities noted in the organisation and implementation of the referendum process, including the cancellation of results in 164 polling station, would not have affected the outcome of the vote. Furthermore, although a greater concern, neither would the context of fear and intimidation of non-Sidamas, leading to their likely non-participation in the process, have radically altered the result. It seems categorically clear that an overwhelming majority of Sidamas favours a separate regional state, and this was reflected in the referendum result.

As this milestone is reached, a host of other challenges are lining up for the new Sidama regional state to tackle, in collaboration or contestation with SNNPRS and the federal government. One, or a combination of several of these, may complicate or thwart the consolidation of capable, capacitated, and sustainable Sidama regional state rule:

- a) Although a Sidama regional state constitution has been drafted,<sup>88</sup> most of the detailed legislative and regulative framework for the new region is lacking. The SNNPRS project office mandated to oversee and organise the transition is just now starting to prepare this.<sup>89</sup> Organising an inclusive and transparent process to develop the new laws and regulations will be essential in order to maintain sustainable peace and development in the region.
- b) The legislative and regulative framework for the new Sidama region will not be finalised prior to the upcoming general elections in Ethiopia, if conducted on schedule in May 2020. The conduct and outcome of the general elections may delay and complicate the consolidation of the new regional state.
- c) The “dissolution” of the old EPRDF into a new “merged” Prosperity Party will complicate the consolidation and representation of political authority and power in Hawassa City, Sidama regional state, and SNNPRS. Although the SEPDM has voted to join the Prosperity Party, there are clear warnings from key Sidama political leaders that they would not accept any infringement on their new-won political autonomy, or support any kind of centralisation of authority and policies, as some believe PM Abiy Ahmed intends to do.<sup>90</sup>
- d) The truce pact and tactical alliance between government and opposition political forces, intellectuals, and the Ejjetto to safeguard the process towards regional statehood, is now likely to wither and eventually be broken, as all forces will be

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<sup>88</sup> Confirmed by one of the legal experts to the process. The Draft Constitution was not made available for scrutiny by this author.

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Project office coordinator, 21 November 2019, Hawassa.

<sup>90</sup> Anonymous, interviewed 20 November 2019, Hawassa.

jockeying for political power. Some may compete against each other in the upcoming election. When the tactical alliance will break and how that will affect the stability of the new region remains to be seen.

- e) Although the new regional state guarantees the rights and security of the non-Sidamas in Hawassa and elsewhere, the situation ought to be followed with care. Unpredictable political dynamics created by the manifestation of new political power and fierce competition in the upcoming elections, where contending parties and civic movements may want to demonstrate their 'Sidamanness', could create a precarious security context for non-Sidamas.
- f) Establishing and manifesting the new Sidama regional state will likely lead to the hardening of the ethno-territorial borders vis-à-vis its neighbouring states of Oromia and SNNPRS. Of particular concern are the contested border areas between Wolayta (SNNPRS) and Sidama, as well as the Arsi and West-Gujji Oromo areas on the Oromo-Sidama border. It is likely that border tensions will increase, and as inhabitants will register for next year's election, "ethno-demographic re-engineering" may occur in the contested territories. In this respect, Sidamas living in SNNPRS and Oromia may be vulnerable for "tit-for-tat" retaliation.
- g) With the establishment of Sidama Regional State, the Gedeo zone in SNNPRS has become an exclave cut off from SNNPRS, partly surrounded by Oromia regional state. The precarious situation of the Gedeos, due to massive displacement as a consequence of the Gujji-Gedeo conflict, will be reinforced by this situation.
- h) There are reportedly eleven other ethnic groups in the SNNPRS who have formally endorsed a claim to establish their own regional state under the Ethiopian federation. The decision of SEPDM and SNNPRS Council to only accept the Sidama claim for statehood has sparked protest from several of these groups, as the "55+1" model appears to be a tactical political decision, not underpinned by principles of equality or constitutional procedures. As this report is being written, the Wolayta activists have protested since 20 December (the one year anniversary for their statehood claim) as their claim for statehood has not been passed on to NEBE by SNNPRS Council.<sup>91</sup> Wolayta activists are arguing for a unilateral declaration of statehood if the SNNPRS Council and federal government do not accept a referendum process. So far, the SEPDM/EPRDF has shown little willingness to cater to the Wolayta demand (nor to the demands of others).<sup>92</sup> Instead, the federal government is deploying security forces to

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<sup>91</sup> See: " News: Security forces detain Wolayta National Mov't secretary general", Addis Standard, 19 December 2019, <https://addisstandard.com/news-security-forces-detain-wolayta-national-movt-secretary-general/> (accessed 6 January 2020).

<sup>92</sup> As this is written, NEBE has not received a referral from SNNPRS Council of the Wolayta endorsement of regional statehood and a request to organise a referendum on the issue (as per constitutional procedure). (Mail from NEBE, 27 December 2019).

the area to quell possible protests. If other regional statehood requests are forcefully suppressed too, this may also have an adverse effect on a peaceful consolidation of the Sidama regional state administration.

## 8. Lessons for the 2020 general election

The conduct of the Sidama referendum may give us some lessons to prepare for the Ethiopian general elections, scheduled to be held in May 2020.

- a) **The influence of non-organised pressure groups, more specifically the “youth movements”, on the electoral preparations and performances.** The Ejjeetto youth movement exercised considerable pressure upon both party and public officials prior to and during the referendum process and managed to obtain an “official” capacity as “guardians” of the polls during voting day. It is likely that the youth movements among all ethnic groups will mobilise a considerable presence during all electoral phases, influencing public officials and NEBE in their work.
- b) **Troublesome voter registration process.** Ethiopia enters the 2020 elections without an updated population census, which has been repeatedly postponed due to security concerns.<sup>93</sup> It thus rests upon NEBE to confront the intrinsic challenges of registering eligible voters without any baseline census to use as a guideline. It is likely that various pressure groups and political actors will try to influence the registration of voters, either by alienating potential voters not in their favour or increasing potential voters in their favour. Installing a context of fear, ethnic demographic re-engineering, registering under-aged voters, and registering ghost voters, are all strategies that may be employed in the 2020 elections. It is a question whether NEBE will have the capacity, capability, or in certain cases integrity, to stem such violating activities.
- c) **Protecting the integrity of voting stations.** The 2020 elections will be severely contested, with multiple political parties and unorganised pressure groups trying to exert influence and domination over the voting and counting process. The multi-layered security regime in the country – where federal, regional and local security forces all will be present at and in the vicinity of the polling stations, with possible differing loyalties and agendas – will pose a serious challenge to polling station administration and the integrity of the vote. NEBE needs to radically scale up the presence of independent election officials at the polling stations, in order to safeguard the integrity of the process.
- d) **Lack of troubleshooting capacity.** The announcement of the Sidama referendum result was delayed for two days due to misconduct and irregularities during voting in 233 out of the total of 1,861 voting stations. All NEBE Commissionaires were present in Sidama during the referendum, working to solve these issues. With tens of

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<sup>93</sup> See: “Ethiopia postpones national census”, Africa Diplomatic, 10 June 2019, <https://africadiplomatic.com/2019/06/10/ethiopia-postpones-national-census/> (accessed 6 January 2020).

thousands of polling stations scattered around the country, it seems obvious that NEBE needs to rethink and rescale its troubleshooting mechanisms in order to cater for the likely massive irregularities, which may occur during the 2020 elections.

- e) **Transparency and dissemination of information.** Since the very start of the Sidama referendum process, complaints have been raised about lack of transparency and dissemination of information pertaining to the process from NEBE. National and international journalists, and other stakeholders to the process, complained about lack of access to information and the conduct of press conferences. The credibility of NEBE would increase if a more transparent and open access to information policy is adopted.

## Annex 1: Methodological disclaimer

This report is based on a research study into the process of the Sidama referendum. The research team was composed of Dr Kairedin Tezera (Addis Ababa University, a social anthropologist and expert on the peoples and cultures of the SNNRPS), Filata Boroje (Hawassa University, lawyer and expert on Constitutional law and Sidama), and headed by Prof. Kjetil Tronvoll (Norway, senior expert on Ethiopian politics and elections).

The team requested NEBE in early October 2019 to be accredited as an international observer team to the referendum, under the organisation of Oslo Analytica. The request was not followed up by NEBE through its official contact point. After contacting a Commissionaire directly, we were told that it is not the prerogative of NEBE to invite international observers, but the authority rests with the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). Reaching out to the MFA through one high-level contact-point did not produce any response, however.<sup>94</sup> The team thus organised itself as a regular research assignment on the referendum process.

As our team did not receive an observer accreditation status, our observations on polling day were limited to activities taking place outside, and at a certain distance from, the polling stations. Consequently, we were prevented from observing and providing scrutiny on *inter alia*: how the voting stations were organised and who were present inside the voting stations in terms of NEBE officials, other observers, or the presence of non-eligible individuals; whether the ballot boxes were empty and ballot papers safely secured, before the start-up of polls; whether the voting stations had sufficient and adequate supplies; how the identification of voters was carried out and checked up against the voter register; confirming that only eligible and registered people were allowed to cast their ballot; observing any discrepancies in the closure of polls and conduct of counting, and scrutinising whether the compilation of votes were carried out in a transparent and correct manner.

Furthermore, as we were not official accredited observers, we were also prevented from participating in NEBE press conferences and our questions to NEBE Commissionaires on the conduct of the referendum during and after polling day were left unanswered.

Notwithstanding these critical limitations, we still believe our study represents an important contribution to the assessment and understanding of the Sidama referendum process itself and provides a backdrop of knowledge on the possible forthcoming referendums on regional

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<sup>94</sup> It came as a surprise when NEBE issued an urgent mail to head of missions and diplomats in Addis Ababa in the evening Friday 15 November 2019, announcing that international observers are welcome and should register with the MFA prior to be facilitated by the NEBE. As it was explained in the mail: "Given the situation on the ground in Sidama and Hawassa, and given that only four days remain until referendum day, we strongly urge you, and through you other international partners, to follow the official process outlined above to avoid unnecessary challenges and delays." (Mail of Friday 15 November 2019 at 06:37 PM, from NEBE Commissionaire to the diplomatic community). To issue an invitation and instruction mail for registering as observers *two* working days prior to the referendum, indicates, or at least may be interpreted as, that NEBE was disinclined to have an independent international scrutiny of the conduct of the referendum, as any attempt to follow these instructions would lead to the team being bogged down in bureaucratic procedures in Addis Ababa, over 270 km from where the referendum would take place.

statehood in the SNNPRS and beyond. Our study may also be read in the light of the forthcoming general elections scheduled to be conducted in May 2020 in Ethiopia.

## **Annex 2: NEBE Statement “Sidama Referendum Final Result”**

### **National Electoral Board of Ethiopia Sidama Referendum Final Result December 4, 2019**

On November 23, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia provided the provisional results for the Sidama Referendum conducted on November 20. The Board learned that there have been some discrepancies and number reconciliation issues on the results. The board announced the following final result after thoroughly scrutinizing the results of each polling station.

When such issues of discrepancies on results arise, a recount should be done to understand the main cause of the issues. However, the Board opted not to request a recount understanding that: a recount will not change the outcome of the referendum as there is a significant gap between the results of the two options; it will not raise questions in the credibility of the process; it will unnecessarily prolong the result announcement’s timeline.

Taking into consideration international standards on elections results administration and understanding that this is a referendum and that issues with discrepancies in a limited number of polling stations only narrowly impact on the outcome, the Board has taken the following decisions on polling stations that have discrepancies:

1. In 127 polling stations where the number of voters exceeded the number of registered voters, the Board has annulled the results.
2. In polling stations where the discrepancy in ballot paper reconciliation was ten or less, the Board has included in the total tally. However, the results of polling stations where the ballot paper reconciliation discrepancy exceed ten were excluded from the total tally. To that end, 37 polling stations’ results have been annulled due to significant ballot paper reconciliation errors.

Overall, 164 polling stations results were annulled due to the above-mentioned reasons; however, the results of 71 polling stations that had ten or less ballot paper reconciliation discrepancies were added to the total result.

The Board has established a technical team that to investigate the reason for these discrepancies as such discrepancies will have a significant impact during competitive elections such as the general elections. Based on the findings of the technical team’s investigation, the Board will make the necessary arrangements to increase staff capacity as well as to enhance the poll workers’ training and elections processes.

Last, the results for the fully completed Sidama referendum results is as following but should you want the full polling station result detail, please click on [this link](#).

Number of registered voters: 2,304,577

Number of voters that cast their votes: 2,279,022

- Percentage: 98.8911 %  
Voters who did not vote: 25,555  
Percentage: 1.10888 %
- Overall Result
- Invalid votes: 16,624  
Votes given to Shafeta (for Sidama to establish its own regional state) = 1,984,283
- Percentage: 97.7%
- Votes given to Gojo (for Sidama to remain with the current regional state) = 30,018  
Percentage: 1.478%
- Annulled votes = 248,097