

Election Watch for the Digital Age

Ethiopia

Preelection assessment

Parliamentary elections set for June 2021

The parliamentary elections planned for June are understood as a test of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's stated commitment to democratization. It is the first election since Abiy, a former military officer, was appointed to replace Hailemariam Desalegn, who led an openly authoritarian state until he resigned in 2018 amid mass protests. The previous parliamentary elections, held in 2015, took place in a tightly controlled environment that featured voter intimidation and barriers to registration. All 547 seats in the parliament's lower house were won by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of parties dominated by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), and its allies. In December 2019, rising tensions with the TPLF led to the dissolution of the EPRDF. Most coalition members came together to form the Prosperity Party, which is headed by Abiy; the TPLF refused to join. The federal government revoked the TPLF's registration in January 2021, after Abiy accused the party of initiating the conflict between the central government and the Tigrayan forces. Over 45 parties are expected to campaign in the June elections; though all 547 seats were set to be contested, voting in some constituencies may not take place because of the Tigray conflict and other threats to security.

Several crises related to Ethiopia's ethnicity-based federal structure threaten the stability of the elections, and potentially their credibility. The elections were originally set for August 2020 but postponed by the election board due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thousands of people have been killed in the Tigray conflict since it began in November 2021, though reports of the number of casualties are contested. Human rights groups allege that all sides perpetrated war crimes. Meanwhile, the federal government has imposed a counter-insurgency zone in western Oromia and some parts of southern Oromia, and imprisoned prominent Oromo politicians.

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Internet shutdowns:** The Ethiopian government frequently restricts the internet to accomplish its political aims or in response to unrest. Since January 2020, authorities have imposed connectivity restrictions in the Oromia counter-insurgency zone, nationwide amid mass protests over the death of an Oromo activist and singer, and in Tigray during the conflict. Demonstrations during or after the campaigning period or an escalation of the security situation could prompt the Abiy government to turn to connectivity restrictions.
- **Arrests and prosecutions for online activities:** Abiy presided over a relative opening of online free expression in Ethiopia early in his term, but that progress is increasingly at risk. During the Tigray crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, online journalists affiliated with the TPLF were arrested and charged in relation to reports made on social media. Several laws criminalize online speech, including an overly restrictive hate speech and disinformation law passed in February 2020. Journalists and online commentators alike risk arrest for their social media activities during the electoral period, particularly those aligned with Tigrayan and Oromo political movements.

- **Influence operations:** A degraded information space may make the online environment more vulnerable to coordinated manipulation aimed to sway online discourse during the elections. Online misinformation is rife, exacerbated by the Tigray conflict. Both pro- and antigovernment internet users share false or misleading content and accuse others of spreading disinformation. The TPLF reportedly coordinates party loyalists to shape the social media environment, while previous governments were known to employ online commentators. Disinformation campaigns ahead of the election may also impede voters' access to reliable information.
- **Blocking of platforms and websites:** The government maintains the technical capability to block social media platforms and websites, and has done so during periods of unrest. After Amhara regional officials were assassinated in June 2019, Ethiopian authorities imposed an internet shutdown and later blocked social media platforms. Protests or instability during the electoral period could prompt similar restrictions.

Ethiopia has a score of 30 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a history of elections marred by undemocratic practices and internet restrictions. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 24 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties and **Not Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 29 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Ethiopia country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).