

Politics to take center stage in the court of public opinion once again

By Pawlos Belete

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As the national local election schedule approaches its deadline, the political fever between the ruling party and opposition

is taking over the calm and stable political scene of Ethiopia. Twenty eight of the 75 political parties accredited by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) have boycotted the upcoming election.

The Chairman of the Ethiopian People Democratic Front (EPRDF) Election Committee, Redwan Hussien, says EPRDF neither gained nor lost due to their withdrawal. On the other hand, Asrat Tassie, the provisional coordinator of the boycotting parties, argues otherwise. He complains that EPRDF is reversing the democratic process of creating a multi-party state.

Local elections are an important political instrument in which citizens cast their ballot in order to fill governance structures of their localities with someone whom they believe will fulfill their socioeconomic and political aspirations. According to political pundits, it is important, because these institutions impact their daily life in one way or another. Hence, active participation and freewill of citizens is of paramount importance in such a process, they state.

“EPRDF has been presenting its candidates to NEBE after undertaking rigorous screening at party level and after public discourse. We have been nominating candidates with outstanding performance in the socioeconomic and political programs we have been carrying out as the ruling party of the country. We presented candidates based on their achievements and their natural ability to discharge their responsibilities. The candidates our party endorsed are those that have earned the respect and trust of the public,” said Redwan while explaining the candidates his party endorsed to take part in the upcoming local election.

EPRDF will complete the process of endorsing candidates and submitting their list to NEBE by Monday January 28, 2012. The party says it has done all it can to ensure the participation of eligible citizens.

“Our goal is to increase the participation of women in the governance system to 50 percent, more than 30 percent for the youth and the balance is from different interest groups like micro and small enterprises. We have crafted the ratio of citizens participating in the governance system in such a manner because we wanted to ensure the participation of citizens from all walks of life,” said Redwan.

The parties withdrew from the national local election process after demanding to receive legitimate answers to the 18 points they put forward as a prerequisite to participating in the election. They have presented their concerns to the Office of the Prime Minister and NEBE. “We believe that boycotting an election does not serve the purpose of building a democratic

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nation. In our view, their concern might be solved in due course; some of their concerns might not happen at all while others are already solved. These parties are stuck in the past. They don't have room to look at what is happening right now," argues Redwan.

"Boycotting elections cannot serve the purpose of democratization for two reasons. One, such an act curtails the role such parties could have played in the process of building a democratic nation. That is an implication that such parties are unable to craft an alternative program that can ensure better economic progress and good governance. Second, it is a yardstick to judge their preparedness to be judged in the court of public opinion in relation to what they have presented. Those shortfalls prevent them from reaping the benefits of public criticism. That is possible whenever there is a political party ready to learn from its weakness," he adds.

Asrat argues otherwise.

"The government has organized the general public in a manner that serves its political purpose. If you go to any part of the country, you come across people who are organized into a political cell in the name of development intervention. Thus, citizens are not free to impart their free judgment. So how can we expect a free and modern public opinion that can enlighten the general public in such a setting?" argues Asrat.

According to Yisma Birru, Deputy Director of the Public Relation Directorate of NEBE, 26.8 million people have registered for the national local election scheduled to be held in May.

Twenty nine out of the 75 political parties accredited by NEBE have collected the symbol that identifies them. Out of the total parties who have collected their symbols, 12 are to contest at the national level while 17 are regional contestants.

As per the election code of the country, political parties that boycott elections two consecutive times will have their approval licenses revoked. Only three parties have had their licenses revoked so far due to non conformity to electoral rules and regulations.