

Ethiopia – National Elections 2005

by Imru Zelleke

30 July 2005

After thirty years of turmoil and mayhem, and for the first time in its long history Ethiopia is to embark into a new era of democratic system of government. In our turbulent history the change of rulers has rarely been without attrition and conflicts, a paradigm that may yet develop as in the past.

Political & Social Environment

The election that has been held this year in Ethiopia is a historic watershed in the political life of the country. It is also happening in a different, if not altogether new, political, social and economic environment. The present majority of the population is young, under thirty. This is a new generation of Ethiopians, with its own character and outlook. It is not the traumatized generation of the seventies or even that of the nineties. Those that were in their teens in 1990 are today in their twenties and thirties, their experience and exposure is different from that of their predecessors. Particularly in urban centers, where the inflow of population from the rural areas has been massive, the expansion of education, however inadequate, has created a large number of people susceptible to new notions. The number of private colleges and learning institutions in Addis Ababa is simply impressive. Internet cafes are opened all over town in Addis and other urban centers. Mobile phone have become a major means of communication, they have even been used for political campaign in this election.

Foreign Influence

Addis Ababa counts some 128 thousand foreign residents, excluding the Diplomatic Corps, International Organization, NGO's and similar entities. Hundreds of foreign experts - Development Gateway registers 462 Consulting firms in Ethiopia - running over six thousand projects throughout the country, has exposed a large faction of the population to new ideas and technologies in all aspects of their daily life. Foreign radio broadcasts and television, also a limited but vigorous independent press, even the self-adulatory state propaganda, has had a tremendous impact on the outlook and vision of the people over their condition.

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Furthermore, the very close bond with a large, community abroad (especially from the US) that has a major economic and cultural input has been a forceful vehicle in introducing new cultural values and behavioral patterns. Indiscriminate imitation of western, particularly US, cultural patterns has become a fashionable trend. The desire to improve one's image is quite noticeable; particularly in the clever way young people dress and adorn their appearance, with the limited resources they have. Influences of Jazz, Reggae, Rap and Latino are traceable in the music, while the lyrics have more than often political and social connotations. Ethiopian plays and films are flourishing and it is difficult to get seats in the theaters. Painting and graphic arts have greatly developed both in the traditional and modern styles. The overall impact of all these influences has instilled a new political and social consciousness in a large segment of the society. This said, the core values have remained, and have been an anchor of stability throughout the fracas of subsequent events.

Nonetheless, life is very hard for the large majority of the people. The publicized notion of people living under "one" dollar a day is a myth, in actual fact it is about 'thirty cents' a day. Rampant unemployment caused by slow and clumsy development policies that offer mainly temporal manual labor create little steady jobs let alone career opportunities. However small, every single activity is a hassle to overcome by some sort of bribe and unnecessary waste of time. Tempered by an unrelenting struggle for survival, a certain selfish attitude has also set in people's demeanor.

The Economy

The main stimulus to the economy derives from the enormous inflow of foreign aid and budget subsidies (averaging 1.5 billion US dollars a year) that amounts almost to two thirds of the GNP. Therefore, providing services and goods to related activities has given opportunities to some professional enterprises engaged in information technology, Internet services, real-estate construction, small-scale industries, commercial and small scale ventures. It has also resulted in creating a shocking disparity of wealth mostly due to an evident practice of corruption, nepotism and cronyism led by the ruling regime itself. Compared to the present concentration of wealth, the old Imperial government would look like a socialist populist

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regime. Yet, in spite of all these handicaps, there is still a striving business and commercial sector managing to subsist.

From the economic aspect, without going into further details, on the whole, Ethiopia's under-development or failure thereof is not due to the lack of funds, and of natural and human resources which it has in abundance; it is essentially due to incompetence, disorganization and inefficient implementation caused by a tightly held ethnic based centralization of all administrative functions, the state ownership of the land and major economic sectors. A serious and impartial analysis of the social and economic development in Ethiopia in the past fourteen years would reveal serious flaws and malpractices, incompatible with the minimum of established standards for good governance. There is no respect for human rights, no rule of law, no right to property and ethnic/party biased discriminatory and exclusionary practices. In short despite the gab and verbose claim about development, the glaring fact is that regime is incompetent and deficient in its overall performance. For instance a few months back the Prime Minister claimed an 11.4% increase in GDP, a few weeks ago in an interview with the BBC he declared that growth was between 4 and 5%. This kind of statistical summersaults and inconsistencies are typical of the irrational and inefficient management of the country. The bottom line is that the development is still at the level of decades ago, and that people all over the land are poor, miserable and disenchanted with the regime, and have nothing to look for in the future.

The Observers

The Donor Countries and US are to be complimented for the major effort they have made towards the realization of this election. In fact, were it not for their pressure on the regime, it may have not occurred at all, at least in the free format it was conducted. Foreign observers were present in Ethiopia at the invitation of the Government. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) had been present in the country since March 18, 2005. Ms Ana Gomes, Member of the European Parliament, led the EOM. The US did not send any observers, but funded the Carter Center through AID. Although the EU observers had visited most localities before, on Election Day, due to their limited numbers, they could check only

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1034 polling stations out of 32,000. Nevertheless, although they found the proceeding of the election to be well organized they also, quote: “serious concerns regarding threats and intimidation against supporters of the opposition parties including isolated cases of murder” unquote. President Carter and his team arrived in Addis Ababa a couple of days before the Election Day and departed a few days later. President Carter made some rush judgments statement about the outcome, and had to send back some of its members to reconsider its findings, rather for damage control than a serious revision of its wrongful conclusions. Furthermore, Embassies, NGO’s and other International Organizations present in Ethiopia followed closely the progress of the election.

Domestic Civic Organization were not permitted to deploy some twelve hundred observers, because they had not mentioned specifically such activities when initially they registered their organizations.

The Election 2005

It is in this debilitating public state of mind that the election was called, and that in turn it engendered a tremendous sense of hope and a frantic desire for change. Historically the process of choosing a ruler or a leader is not a new experience for the Ethiopian people. Some form of parliamentary election was introduced during the Imperial regime, and for a period of some sixteen years people elected individual representatives every second year. During the Derg’s Marxist rule elections were held following the statutes of the times, and intense and regular meetings of political indoctrination were carried at every social level. The same pattern of political practice had been carried out by the present regime in the guise of some pseudo-democratic rule. Therefore, if not on an ideological or political basis, people have been accustomed to some form of an electoral process and political dialogue.

The EPRDF, comforted by its fourteen years rule and induced by the enormous flow of foreign aid mandating liberalization of politics and of the economy, called for national elections as prescribed by the constitution. The preparations for the election were quite extensive; appropriate procedures and regulations were promulgated, some 130,000-election officers were mobilized and 32,000 voting stations setup. International observers were invited

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from the European Union the Carter Center, foreign Embassies and International Organization followed closely the developments. However, observers from local civic bodies were not allowed under some flimsy regulatory excuse. The election board, with a handpicked body by the Prime Minister, still remained as it was in its composition, despite demands by the opposition for a new independent body. Donor countries provided funds and assistance to facilitate the organization of the election.

Prior to the election, public debates between the ruling party and the opposition political parties were held, and broadcasted openly on television and radio. For once the opposition parties were given the opportunity to present their programs openly to the general public. Moreover, the opposition parties won the day in almost all debates entered against the EPRDF ministers and high officials. The independent Press did a remarkable job in reporting aggressively and extensively on all events. All these activities and political debates created an intense awakening within a public opinion stifled for years under authoritarian rules.

As the Election Day got closer the attack against the opposition by the regime became vicious. The Prime Minister in several televised speeches and public meetings never challenged the opposition over their political program; to the contrary he preferred to treat them as dangerous anarchists bent to destroy the constitution and create havoc and bloodshed in the country, as did the ‘interahamway’ in Rwanda. Rather than appealing to a peaceful conduct, he asked the public to “castigate and punish” them with their vote. The major climax of the whole affaire happened during the two major demonstrations held on Maskal Square on May 7 and 8, the first organized by the regime and the later called by the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD). For the May 7 demonstration the EPRDF had mobilized all its cadre and ‘kebele’ officials to order the people to go out to demonstrate. Money, T-shirts and baseball caps were distributed freely. 480 buses were placed around the city to transport freely the people to Maskal Square. In fact some eight hundred thousand to a million people came out at the meeting, in which Meles showed himself in public for the first time in fourteen years.

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On May 8, the day the CUD called for a public meeting, an extraordinary event never seen in Ethiopia occurred. Over two million people came out; buses and taxis were transporting people freely on their own volition. No coercion or bribing was needed, people came out voluntarily to express their will and their choice. Undoubtedly this gave a tremendous shock to the regime, because they called again for another public ‘candle light’ gathering on May 13, forcing people to come out under a heavy storm, which turned out to be an utter fiasco. At this point, it would be useful to explain how the regime has a hard grip on the population. The state is the major landlord in the country. It collects rent from all the ramshackle huts in the slums of the city where the ninety percent of the population lives. Moreover, it is the largest employer, through state and party owned enterprises and government bureaucracies. It controls trade licenses and other regulatory bodies and has maintained all the mass control political apparatus established by the Derg, and has complete control of all mass media. Nevertheless, the people came out in mass in support of the CUD, defying openly the regime.

On Election Day May 15th people started lining up as early as 5 am in the morning and stood until late in the night to cast their vote. People behaved with admirable dignity and discipline throughout the hours it took queuing to vote. Incensed by the trend of the voting, which was clearly in favor of the opposition, Meles stated that the EPRDF had won even before the counting was done, and proclaimed a state of emergency for the next thirty days, in which all demonstrations and meetings were banned. At the same time he also assumed direct command of all police, security and armed forces. Eventually, the counting of 299 seats out of 547 was challenged by the opposition to be full of irregularities and falsifications.

As expected problems started to rise on the counting of the votes, when the Election Board rejected most of the 299 election posts for which the opposition parties asked for a revision. Although a joint committee composed of members of the regime, the opposition parties and Foreign Observers was to check these allegations, the Election Board started the checking on its own, in absence of the other parties. So far, the announced number of seats was clearly tilted in favor of the regime, with a small number of cases still to be checked. Members of the opposition that were to be assigned to this function were harassed, arrested, beaten and even

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killed. However, faithful to its mission, there is no doubt that the Board will finally decide to give a majority to the regime.

Beyond the flagrant undermining of the election results, the regime has also passed new laws curtailing and circumventing the role of the opposition in the next parliament. Any initiative concerning finances, that is the budget, taxes and thereby funding of all government functions and programs, can only be tabled by the ruling party. All other agenda items will be introduced only after prior approval of the Speaker of the House and the senior member of the ruling party. Restrictions contrary to any form of democratic parliamentary process and denying the opposition any positive role, even if it wished to participate as a “loyal” opposition. The same adverse measures were taken against the new elected Addis Ababa Council whose principal operative departments and revenue sources have been transferred to the federal government.

The EPRDF regime

One aspect of the regime, about which little has been discussed, is the business empire that it has built since coming to power, and its management of public finances. For instance, there is the matter of the 3.4 billion Birr borrowed from the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia by business enterprises owned by the TPLF and written off as non-collectable debts. While over thirty corporations registered in the name of the principal party members declare an aggregate capitalization of 3.32 billion Birr. Officials of the party and affiliate occupy free or with extremely reduced rents several hundred confiscated houses that should have been returned to their rightful owners. The party is in control of all state properties and enterprises and financial institutions. Through the bureaucracy and its own corporate entities the regime has control over all industrial and commercial activities in the country. What we have is not just political regime, but a financial and corporate business cartel, comparable to the “Mafia”. Typical of their character is their complete disregard for human rights, the rule of law and the ruthless exercise of power and violence against a peaceful and unarmed population; which they have practiced for the past fourteen years, as well as their unbound economic exploitation of the country and its resources.

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The killing and butchery followed by mass arrests that occurred on July 15, 2005, was a contrived incident caused by the regime itself, in order to terrorize the population. There was no provocation at all from the students in Addis Ababa University, nor was there any attempt of looting banks and other business in the market. All six banks confirmed that no attempt was made on any of their branches. The Police Commissioner, who seems to have disappeared since, had declared that the killings and beatings were committed by untrained troops and not by the regular members of the Police. The Prime Minister who had taken direct command of all security, police and armed forces during the period of emergency, bear's direct responsibility for these tragic happenings.

Conclusion

The EPRDF regime has never had any legitimacy but one imposed by rigging elections and the barrel of the gun. The Ethiopian people, who have patiently suffered its rule for the past fourteen years, have now voted clearly and unequivocally against it. As in the past the regime refuses to accept the people's decision, by manipulating the counting of the votes in its favor in spite of the clear evidence to the contrary. It has promulgated laws that deny the opposition of any positive function in the next parliament. Contrary to its constitution it has altered the status of Addis Ababa and made dysfunctional the newly elected Council. Thus, the election has lost the very purpose it was held for, that of establishing a freely elected legitimate democratic government.

Under these circumstances a confrontation between the regime and the people looks inevitable. The survival of the regime through coercion and violence is no longer a viable option. The people of Ethiopia are angry and hungry not only for food but for freedom and justice. The US and EU who are trying to mediate a compromise must realize by now that fundamental changes of policy will be required to bring the country to a rightful democratic path. They must condemn emphatically all transgressions and abuses of democratic canons by corrupt and incompetent regimes.

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The Ethiopian people have shown the great civility and wisdom of their culture and traditions. From now on, whatever situation will develop in the future, it is up to the Ethiopian people to defend and affirm their inalienable rights. We are a great nation and a great people, we have a great destiny waiting for us. We must not forsake our future for lack of confidence in ourselves and forfeit our people for an unpromising temporal well being. The new generation of Ethiopians has all the qualities that have marked our people in the past, in addition to have created its own imprint for the 21 first century. It must not shy from challenging any adverse conditions that are impediments to its development.

The role of the Diaspora

The whole Ethiopian Community around the world has responded magnificently in support of the people of Ethiopia and the opposition political parties. The Coordinating Committee and other concerned groups; the radio stations and individuals who have dedicated so much effort and labor must be congratulated for their great performance.

However, the struggle is not over yet. The people of Ethiopia are still to gain their freedom and democratic rights. They need the Voice and support of all their compatriots in the Diaspora to achieve their aspiration for a free and just governance. More than ever our efforts and help are needed. Let's give it to them.

ETHIOPIA LEZELALEM TINUR

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Also read

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