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## **Local Democracy and Human Security in Ethiopia: Structural Reasons for the Failure of Democratisation**

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# Local Democracy and Human Security in Ethiopia: Structural Reasons for the Failure of Democratisation

Siegfried Pausewang<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Human security is demonstrated primarily in how secure people experience their daily life. Human and democratic rights feature prominently among the factors that enhance human security, and the occasion of elections can lead to widespread human insecurity if these rights are not respected. While the Ethiopian state has committed itself to safeguard democracy, there are in practice numerous complaints. This report demonstrates the discrepancy between Ethiopia's theoretical democratic guarantees and their application in practice, by focusing on the experiences of the majority of the country's population: the peasant farmers living in rural areas. Through a host of examples, the report reveals the structural reasons why democratisation has so far largely failed in Ethiopia.

This report is based on the experiences of a group of Norwegian researchers who have closely monitored the democratisation process in Ethiopia since 1991. While focusing particularly on elections, the group has also followed the developments in other areas relevant to

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human rights and democracy. These include the process of administrative decentralisation; land redistribution in the Amhara region; the court case against the leaders of the Derg regime;<sup>2</sup> the process of drafting and approving the constitution; and the work of human rights-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Having closely observed the Ethiopian elections in 2000 and 2001, we published a book summing up the experience of a decade of democratisation efforts.<sup>3</sup> This report builds on the evidence and findings of our book and provides several examples of how elections were manipulated at a local level. It concludes that these examples are not insulated events. They are part of a political structure that allows Ethiopia to maintain the image of a democratic state with regular multi-party elections, while ensuring that in practice no opposition groups are able to organise into efficient political parties, or to win an election.<sup>4</sup>

Ethiopia will soon be holding elections again: the House of People's Representatives in 2005 and for regional and local assemblies in 2006. While there have been some changes within the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the party dominating the ruling coalition, as well as some adjustments in the administrative structures of the regions, there is little to indicate that major problems identified in this report have changed. For the 2005 election, Ethiopia has accepted international election observers again, and promises to 'work in co-operation with all opposition parties, to make next year's national election transparent, fair and

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<sup>2</sup> Elgesem F, *The Derg Trials in Context: A Study of Some Aspects of the Ethiopian Judiciary*. Oslo: NIHR (University of Oslo, Norway. Institute of Human Rights), 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Aalen L, Pausewang S & Tronvoll K (eds), *Ethiopia since the Derg. A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance*. London, New York: ZED Books, 2003; Aalen L & Pausewang S, *Withering Democracy. Local Elections in Ethiopia, February/March 2001*. Oslo: NIHR, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Tronvoll K & Vaughan S, *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life*. Stockholm: SIDA, 2003.

free'.<sup>5</sup> This report will show that international observers need to prepare carefully for their task. Any serious election observation team in Ethiopia has to identify the processes by which the rural population is persuaded or coerced into loyal voter behaviour – or else, and more unlikely, the observers must demonstrate that the practices of enforcing a loyal vote have substantially changed since the 2000 election. This report can thus offer a benchmark for improvements on Ethiopia's stony uphill path towards democracy and human security.

## Background

In the 1960s, during the last decade of the feudal regime of Haile Selassie I, the government imposed ever-increasing burdens on Ethiopia's peasant farmers. The cause of the rural poor was taken up by a critical student movement, which made their fate a political issue in demonstrations and pamphlets. Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974 after famine ignited political unrest. The military stepped in to fill the vacuum and established a leftist dictatorship. By 1975, no new government could expect to win confidence without solving the land question. The ruling military committee, called the '*Derg*' (committee), issued a land reform declaration which abolished all rights of the feudal aristocracy, and declared all land the property of the Ethiopian people, to be held by the tillers. The land reform also created locally elected peasant associations. This decentralisation towards rural self-administration gave the regime considerable support from peasant farmers, especially in the south. However, the newly gained liberty was soon revoked when the peasant associations were transformed into local control institutions of the military regime.

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<sup>5</sup> Government statement, Addis Ababa, 10 August 2004.

When urban opposition grew and armed revolt began, the military unleashed a brutal purge, proudly called 'the Red Terror', which almost wiped out a generation of politically critical students. Anyone young and educated was considered suspect, and the squads did not ask questions before executing suspected members or supporters of the resistance movements, the socialist Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), the royalist Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) and several ethnically-based liberation fronts. Those who managed to escape went into exile or hid in the rural areas. In the rural hinterlands, the only way in which the fleeing students could take part in any kind of political activity was to join an ethnic movement. Thus, the Red Terror contributed inadvertently to the growth of ethnic-based political revolt. As a result, when the Derg was finally overthrown in 1991, Ethiopia's new rulers would not have been able to restore stability without offering the country's many ethnic groups a major degree of self-administration.

This was the situation the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) inherited when they, together with the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF), took over power in 1991. By then, Africa's largest army was decimated, demoralised, and devoid of support in its own country. The TPLF had originally fought for an independent state of Tigray, but realised that Tigray could hardly gain independence and peace and feed itself with a mighty Ethiopia as neighbour. Instead, to be able to influence politics in Ethiopia, the TPLF founded the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) together with four other ethnic movements that it had created from a membership of mostly among prisoners of war. The EPRDF today consists of the TPLF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People's Democratic Organisation (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Front (SEPDF), and a coalition of smaller ethnic parties within the Southern Region (SNNPRS).

The EPRDF invited all ethnic resistance movements to form a transitional government and to send their representatives to a national conference that ratified a 'Transitional Charter' to function as Ethiopia's constitution for a period of up to two years until a new Constitution could be ratified. The Charter promised democracy and free elections; ethnic self-determination 'up to and including secession'; and the protection of all major human rights. However, already a year later, in the local elections of 1992,<sup>6</sup> the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the strongest of the ethnic movements that remained outside the EPRDF, were to find out what the TPLF actually meant when it spoke about 'democracy'. OLF candidates were harassed and arrested on concocted charges; their families were threatened; and party organisers faced imprisonment, torture and outright murder. A few days before the election, the OLF decided to withdraw from contest because there was no 'level playing field'. A year later, in 1993, several other ethnic movements left the transitional government and went into opposition.

## **The new Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995**

In 1995, the new Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia was adopted by a National Assembly which consisted exclusively of representatives of EPRDF and its affiliated parties, plus a few independent candidates. All opposition parties had boycotted the election of 1994. The Constitution guarantees human rights, making all the international Human Rights Charters that

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<sup>6</sup> Norwegian Institute of Human Rights (NIHR), *Local and regional elections in Ethiopia, 21 June 1992*. Report of the Norwegian Observer Group, Oslo: NIHR, 1992; National Democratic Institute (NDI), *An Evaluation of the June 21, 1992 Elections in Ethiopia*. Washington: NDI, 1992; and Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF), *Statement of the Heinrich Böll Foundation on the Elections in Ethiopia*. Washington: NDI, 1992 (reprint), pp.106-108.

Ethiopia has ratified part of Ethiopian law. It endorses and deepens commitment to democracy and accountability. It protects the freedom of opinion, association and movement as well as the freedom of information and the press. It prohibits inhumane treatment, guarantees the right of access to justice and asserts the right to vote, to be elected and to take part in the conduct of public affairs. It even asserts a right to development and to a healthy environment.

The Constitution consolidates the practice of decentralisation and federalisation during the transitional period. Regional states delineated along ethnic lines are united in a 'Federal Republic of Ethiopia'. The smallest administrative unit remains the *kebele*, which is essentially the peasant associations of the Derg regime, whose leaders were replaced by cadres from the new ruling EPRDF coalition. A *kebele* usually covers a village or rural community with a population of roughly 100,000 people. Above this level is the *woreda*, which covers an area of roughly five to fifteen *kebele*. Between ten and twenty *woreda* are covered by the *zonal* administration, an executive organ of the regional government. Both the *kebele* and the *woreda* have their own elected councils.

To accommodate smaller ethnic groups, these were given status as *special zones* or *special woreda*. Especially in the 'Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's Regional State' (SNNPRS), which encompasses a multitude of smaller ethnic groups, the zones have an important function as units of self-administration. Therefore, in the SNNPRS the zones have their own elected parliaments, while only special zones in other regions have this privilege.

The Constitution also limits the terms of office of the two houses of parliament, as well as the state councils, to five years, and

establishes a National Election Board,<sup>7</sup> whose members are appointed by the House of People's Representatives upon the recommendation of the Prime Minister. The Election Board is responsible for conducting 'in an impartial manner free and fair elections in Federal and State constituencies'.<sup>8</sup> Its executive apparatus is headed by an Executive Secretary, the lawyer Assefa Birru. He is responsible for organising every aspect of the elections, including the appointment and training of staff to man voting stations and election offices at the local level; the registration of parties and candidates; and the timely production and delivery of all necessary voting materials to every single voting station throughout the country.

### **Two examples of tricks to curtail votes for the opposition**

The Election Board is formally a neutral body with considerable independence and authority to guarantee free and fair elections. However at the local level, the parties in the government coalition, the EPRDF, rule unchecked. They control the peasant farmers and do not allow political competitors to organise into effective opposition parties or to solicit support from voters. In the 2000 (federal)<sup>9</sup> and 2001 (local and regional)<sup>10</sup> elections, voting proceeded correctly and smoothly in constituencies where no opposition candidates were running. But in constituencies where an opposition

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<sup>7</sup> In English, the names Election Board and Election Commission are often used interchangeably, both being translations from Amharic '*mercha bord*'. The English version of the Constitution speaks of the National Election Board. But the tradition of the Election Commission, taken over from the Transitional Government, has kept this version alive, at least for the executive machinery of the Election Board.

<sup>8</sup> The Constitution of 1995, Article 102.

<sup>9</sup> EHRCO, *The May 2000 General Elections. A Report*. Addis Ababa: Ethiopian Human Rights Council, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> EHRCO, *Report on the Zonal, Woreda and Kebele Elections Held on December 23 and 30, 2001 in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State*, Addis Ababa, 2000.

party managed against all odds to organise an alternative, there was trouble. The local cadres of the ruling parties used all kinds of tricks to prevent supporters of the opposition from voting. This report will recount two of the more sophisticated examples of the stifling of opposition voices at election time.

### *Intimidating women*

In Gedeo zone, in 2000, towards lunchtime on voting day, queues in front of the voting stations grew longer and people started to get worried. Suddenly, in one voting station after the other, obviously co-ordinated, the election chairmen decided to let women vote first. 'They need to go home to prepare food and take care of their children', argued the election officials. Foreign observers, mostly embassy staff, were positively surprised that the local authorities had become gender conscious. By early afternoon, the growing crowd of young men waiting outside the voting stations turned impatient and tension rose. Around 2pm it became clear that these were not all the men but a selection of young men, who eagerly explained why:<sup>11</sup>

The women can easily be influenced and frightened when they are alone. And government supporters are allowed in. They know who is who.

Towards 3pm, one young man summarised the situation saying:

You see here, outside, the politically conscious part of the population. You will see, when the voting stations close at six o'clock, we will still be waiting here and will not be allowed to enter before they close the voting.

Towards 4pm, Assefa Birru, the Executive Secretary of the Election Board, announced over radio that everyone present at the voting

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<sup>11</sup> Abbink J, 'The organisation and observation of elections in Federal Ethiopia: Retrospect and prospect', in Abbink J & Hesselting G (eds), *Election Observation and Democratisation in Africa*. London: Macmillan, 2000.

station by six o'clock had the right to vote, even if voting had to continue until midnight. Still, we observed that this information was not announced at the voting stations, even though election personnel knew of it. In the places where we made it known, leaders accepted this rule. But it was later confirmed to us that in almost all villages in Gedeo, and even in the towns, voting stations closed punctually at 6pm, and a large group of young men belonging to opposition parties was effectively disenfranchised after long hours of waiting.

I reported this observation to the Executive Secretary of the Election Board. His only comment was that I would have to give him evidence that could be used in a court case. He considered it difficult to prove that letting women vote first and closing the voting stations punctually could have changed the results.

The second example is from Hadiya zone during the election in December 2001. In Sorro *woreda*, as in all *woreda* in Hadiya, the governing party and the opposition had nominated six candidates each, to contest the six seats up for election. Each of them had submitted a list with the necessary number of signatures, and received a registration card as a candidate. However, on the evening before voting day, the opposition party was informed that almost half of their candidates in Hadiya zone had been disqualified at the last moment. When people in Sorro came to the voting station in the morning, they found that four of the six opposition candidates had been taken off the ballot. (In another constituency all six opposition candidates were disqualified). Instead of casting a vote that could not win, opposition supporters decided to go out on the street to demonstrate. Holding their voter cards high above their heads, an impressive crowd of protesters chanted:

We have the right to vote. We have registered. We have voter cards.  
We cannot vote because our candidates are not there. We demand our right to vote.

When I met Assefa Birru the next morning he said he was content with the election. When asked about the Sorro incident, he replied:

Yes, there was a problem, and I was partly responsible for it: I accepted the cancellation of the opposition candidates. What else could I do? The kebele is the proper authority to check the signatures. They found out that many of them were from youngsters below voting age, or names of deceased persons or other persons not qualifying as voters. The candidates had to be disqualified. The party could have gone to court if they had proof that this claim was not true, and have the election annulled and repeated. But once they boycotted the elections, which is their democratic right, how can they afterwards have a court repeal a result that came into being because of their boycott?

## **Structural Reasons for Election Problems**

After the 1994 polls, reports on the election raised questions of, first, why apparently well-organised elections with little direct fraud or rigging had been boycotted by all opposition parties; and, second, why it produced a constitutional assembly composed of only members of one party coalition except for very few independents.<sup>12</sup> The report by the Norwegian research team observed a political climate of distrust and insinuations, and suggested that reasons for such an uncondusive climate for free and fair elections were to be found in the social structure. People were influenced by the local administration and felt dependent on the party cadres. They felt under pressure to vote for the 'official' candidates. In addition, they had little choice anyway, as the opposition parties boycotted the election. With such preparation, vote rigging appeared superfluous.

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<sup>12</sup> Pausewang S, *The 1994 Election and Democracy in Ethiopia*, Oslo, NIHR, 1994.

The report from the 1995 elections took up this line of thought and elaborated on the mechanisms of control over the rural population.<sup>13</sup> It noted a distinct feeling of *déjà vu*: The *kebele*, the rural administrative unit in the village, created by the military government of Mengistu Haile Mariam (known as the *Derg*), had been taken over by the new government. After the *Derg* regime was overthrown, the controlling party cadres of the *kebele* were merely replaced by cadres of the new EPRDF coalition. These cadres established a gradually tightening net of control over the peasant population, who were made to feel that they had better not vote for any other parties than the EPRDF. Cadres had the power to deprive persons who defied their wishes of community services, and could as a last resort turn to the repressive means of police intervention and imprisonment without – in practice – any control or redress.

The elections of 2000 showed that violence and fraud in polling stations were local exceptions. Instead, intimidation of people ahead of polling efficiently ensured that, on Election Day, most constituencies were not contested by opposition candidates at all. As long as there was no competition, voting proceeded smoothly. Opposition parties faced incapacitating problems in the months before the election, making the organisation of a local party structure very difficult: Party offices were closed under dubious pretexts; house owners were pressurised to cancel lease contracts; party officials were harassed or imprisoned under clearly concocted charges; potential voters were threatened. Despite this, in the Southern region, a coalition of local opposition groups was able to mobilise sufficient support and infrastructure to put forward candidates and conduct a reasonably efficient election campaign to

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<sup>13</sup> Aspen H, *The 1995 National and Regional Elections in Ethiopia: Local Perspectives*. Trondheim: NTNU, 1995; Poluha E, *The 1995 Ethiopian Elections Viewed from the Grassroots.*, Stockholm: SIDA, 1995; and Tronvoll K & Aadland O, *The Process of Democratisation in Ethiopia: an Expression of Popular Participation or Political Resistance?* Oslo: NIHR, 1995.

be able to threaten the incumbent ethnic parties of the government coalition EPRDF. In these areas, violent clashes occurred in the months before the elections and the voting itself was characterised by confrontations.

## Two examples of local initiatives to prevent competition

Events were most violent in the province of Hadiya.<sup>14</sup> In the border area between Oromia and Hadiya, there had been trouble for some time before the elections of 2001. Ethnic differences overlapped with political party affiliation. In an area belonging to Oromia state, Hadiya immigrants from the west made up the majority of voters. Their party threatened to demand a transfer of the *woreda* to Hadiya, so that it became a *woreda* of the Southern Regional State instead of Oromia. In one area belonging to Oromia, demonstrations occurred and were violently dispersed. Two or more people were killed, and the opposition party faced severe restrictions. Their leader was imprisoned and their office closed. A few days before the election, the opposition decided to withdraw its candidates from the polls. However, the local government reported to the Election Board that the opposition candidates had decided to run as independents despite their party's withdrawal. The situation was confused and the atmosphere very tense, even the day after the election when I visited the area. Several of the opposition candidates assured me that they had never asked to run in spite of their party's boycott. One of the leaders of the ruling party admitted that they had found it convenient to demonstrate that they could win a 'contested' election. In those voting stations where I could get the first counting results, the opposition candidates received about 10% of the votes in spite of their party's and their own boycott. This does by no means prove their claim that they would have won a large majority in a fair

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<sup>14</sup> This is vividly described by Tronvoll K in Aalen et al, *Ethiopia since the Derg. A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance*. London, New York: ZED Books, 2002.

vote. But it shows that voting was not intended to be fair. And there were clear indications that the cadres of the ruling OPDO (part of the national EPRDF coalition) had taken severe and violent revenge against individual members and supporters of the opposition.

In 2000, several opposition candidates won in Addis Ababa, and a few even won in the smaller towns. Most disturbing for the ruling EPRDF was the fact that Tefara Walwal, the Assistant Prime Minister, failed to be elected in the Bole area of Addis Ababa, losing his seat to a candidate from the All Amhara People's Organisation (AAPO). This inspired some higher party officials to urge their cadres to greater efforts to win the 2001 local elections. In 2001, open repression became visible also in Addis Ababa, in spite of its visibility to the foreign community. In one *kebele*, we were shown the ruins of a house. A few tin roof sheets, some broken beams, and a heap of mud remained of what had been a residence. The owner was an election station observer for the opposition. On voting day he had protested against observed manipulations, and refused to sign the protocol on the grounds that a large number of ballots had been added to the counting without control. After being threatened, he signed in the end out of fear. The next morning he went to his party office to file a report. Returning home he found his children and his wife weeping in front of the ruins of their house. *Kebele* leaders had been personally present to destroy the house. They warned him not to prosecute the case, saying: 'This time it was your house. Next time it will be you.' The case was reported to the authorities, but not followed up. Officially it was said that the case had nothing to do with the elections. The authorities had demolished an illegally built house.

### **Central or local responsibility?**

Foreign observers were no longer invited by the time of the 2000 elections. The Norwegian team received visas as researchers

following the process of democratisation, but not as election observers. Except for our group, only the embassies sent a few foreign observers to the elections. They reported violations of the electoral law and discrimination here and there, but did not make a big issue of it, agreeing that one had to continue to work for improvements. The central government placed the blame for 'some local irregularities and problems' squarely on the shoulders of the local authorities. Indeed, there is some justification in concluding that local authorities, not the central government, manipulated the polls, put pressure on the peasant farmers, or took revenge against organisers of political opposition campaigns.

But the central authorities have not shown any eagerness to correct these 'irregularities' committed by their local representatives. In some high profile cases which came to the attention of the foreign community, individual violations of electoral laws have been corrected. Especially the efforts of Assefa Birru, the Executive Secretary of the National Election Board, have done a lot to rectify violations of the rights and liberty of individual opposition candidates and members. On his travels to 'trouble spots' in the run-up to the elections and during voting day, his efforts freed hundreds of imprisoned local candidates and party observers. In 2000, he personally intervened and cancelled elections in several constituencies where election fraud and manipulations became obvious. He decided to call re-elections in fourteen constituencies in the Southern region. Evidence we collected suggested that re-election should have taken place in many more constituencies. But Assefa insisted that he could act only on evidence that could be used to win a court case. Yet, without official observer status, our team of researchers was not in a position to gather and present court-proof documentation.

While Assefa Birru is prepared in serious and high-profile cases to take up a fight with individual local party leaders, he appears to be unable or unwilling to challenge the local structures in general. He

has succeeded in organising generally well-run elections almost everywhere in the country. This is no small feat in a country as wide and as logistically difficult as Ethiopia.

But is the National Election Board the neutral and independent body that the Constitution demands? In all our election observations and studies we assumed that it at least tries to be. But our experience time and again suggests that the decisions of the Election Board and its Executive Secretary do not merit that conclusion. Reluctantly we have had to conclude that the Board gives the electoral process a semblance of neutrality and makes sure that some few obvious local infringements are corrected – visibly to the foreign community – without endangering the predominance of the ruling parties. Assefa Birru must know about the structural predominance of the ruling parties, and their complete control over the electoral process at local level. He nevertheless assumes a legalistic and ‘neutral’ position in his decisions, knowing well that this works to the incumbents’ overwhelming advantage. What does it help to organise the most perfect electoral process in five hundred constituencies, with tens of thousands of voting stations, if rural voters are convinced they will be punished if they dare vote for opposition candidates, or if seats are not contested at all because people are too scared to run?

Central authorities have not brought to justice local cadres responsible for disturbances, fraud or intimidation – including murder – during local elections. In Southern region, of all those who have been clearly identified as violating electoral laws in 2000, not a single person has been charged in court.<sup>15</sup> While it is the responsibility of the Executive Secretary of the Election Board himself to take up those cases, he has argued that full control of the authorities had first to be restored in these regions before perpetrators could be brought to court. In the meantime, several of

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<sup>15</sup> Pausewang S, *Ethiopia 2001: In between elections in Southern Region*. Oslo: NIHR, 2001.

those politically responsible have been transferred to other positions or areas. Local people are satisfied that they are removed, but the fact remains they are not held responsible in court.

### **Two examples of local authorities exercising undue powers**

In many constituencies where opposition candidates were able to compete, many told us that the opposition would win a huge majority were it not for the systematic manipulation, pressure on voters, and outright fraud. They argued that the only people who fully supported the ruling party were those who are paid by the party, those who hold a political office, and their dependants.

This does by no means prove that the opposition would indeed win an election given a level playing field. But it shows clearly that people have no confidence in their rulers and that they expect to be at their mercy. Most rural people are convinced the authorities are free to imprison anyone at any time. We have ample evidence that local authorities consider 'being anti-government' a crime, and that the police considers it their job to eradicate this evil from society. The concept of legal protection against the will and whims of the authorities does not exist. In Gedeo, a high government official explained that there were two ways of getting into prison: by court order and by administrative decision. He did not add what people know: against a court decision there is a possibility of appeal, while against an administrative decision there is none.

During the elections in 2000 and 2001 we repeatedly heard the rural population complain that those who supported the opposition were not given emergency food. For instance, in Shoa, peasant farmers reported that they were called to a meeting to receive emergency food supplies. Before distribution a *kebele* leader held a short speech thanking the World Food Programme for the relief food. Then he asked: 'And who of you supports the opposition? Please stand up.'

Mocking them, he said: 'You may go home. We do not give our food to you. Ask your party to give you food.'

The threat to lose their land was even more demoralising for the rural poor. We heard many complaints by peasant farmers who were called in to the *kebele* chairman and told:

You support the opposition? You know the constitution says that all rural land is owned by the government. We do not give you our land if you betray us by voting for the opposition.

Land is the most important resource for the rural poor, their lifeline. To make the threat come true in a few cases is sufficient to bring peasant farmers everywhere under serious pressure.

### **Local structures of control and coercion**

The land reform of 1975 established 'peasant associations' at village level, with elected leaders responsible for redistribution of land. These associations became in practice organs of peasant self-administration. Their leaders were respected older peasant farmers, who had the confidence of the community and the authority to represent their fellows against the central powers of the state. They were quite strong in their demands to the authorities. In 1976, *woreda* governors complained that the local population would not listen to them unless their demands for grain stores or fertilisers or price controls were met. The peasant farmers also had more resources at their disposal after feudal landlords had been banished and all rent payments on land had been abolished.

But the Derg soon brought the peasant farmers back under their control. A new law demanded that chairmen of peasant associations must be able to read and write. This excluded the older farmers who commanded the respect of their community, to the advantage of youngsters who had gone to school but had little knowledge about agriculture and no confidence among the community. They could

only rely on the state, and later on the party, to bolster their authority.

After the fall of the Derg, the new regime renamed the peasant associations as *kebele*, but retained their functions. They replaced the cadres of the Derg with their own party members. These were, generally, locally recruited young people. The highest educated persons they could find locally were usually 12<sup>th</sup> grade school leavers who had failed university entry requirements. Gradually the *kebele* established a system of control over the local population which tolerates no opposition. In practice, the leaders of the *kebele* command the local police forces, who are deployed not to protect the law, but to enforce the decisions of the *kebele*. There is no concept of restraint on their decisions, nor any opportunity for redress against their power.

### **A concept of traditional loyalty re-established**

The ruling EPRDF coalition claims to represent the interest of the rural community, and hence to have their support. This claim is not altogether unfounded. In 1991 they liberated the peasant farmers from an oppressive system where the farmers were forced to deliver their grain to the National Grain Board; pay extraordinary contributions for different campaigns; succumb to the immensely unpopular villagisation programme; and work as forced labour on environmental protection programmes. The EPRDF also abolished the detested resettlement campaigns and forced recruitment into the military. In addition, it guaranteed the peasant farmers' traditional system of land distribution, in which every person has a right to access to land to till for feeding his or her family. In theory, the Constitution protects that right, though in practice, the government misuses its land ownership as a means to control peasant farmers and punish those who do not accept its decisions.

In return for representing the interests of the peasant farmers, the ruling parties feel convinced of their right to maintain their loyalty. Their idea of loyalty is not one of democratic representation. It does not follow political causes or philosophical principles, but is oriented towards personal commitment. It is built on past merit rather than on a shared vision and a political programme for the future. It demands a personal, rather than a democratic loyalty.

This concept of loyalty is closely related to an understanding of tradition, a vision of 'African democracy' which many understand as an alternative to or a variation of 'Western democracy'. African societies have a tradition of debating in public meetings until consensus is reached. A solution to problems is found to which all can agree, or at least, with which all can live. If such general meetings do indeed allow an open debate and dialogue in which all members can voice their opinion freely and where the essential needs of everyone affected are protected, then such a way of arriving at a workable compromise can be worthwhile. There is all reason to respect African traditions, and to allow for indigenous institutional settings for democratic processes. A secret election following the model of the most industrialised societies does not necessarily fit all societies on the globe.

But if a consensus is based not on arguments and discourse, but on personal loyalty and the claim of elites to represent the majority, then it is not reflecting the democratic will of the people. If one party alone defines the interests of the peasant farmers, and claims to represent them and hence to command their loyalty, one cannot accept such enforced loyalty as the expression of the will of the majority. If consensus is controlled and enforced from above, such a practice is not an African expression of democracy. It is perverting and discrediting democracy.

## Was 2000 really the first contested election?

The Ethiopian government has claimed, and most embassies have repeated, that the 2000 elections were 'the first ever fully contested elections in Ethiopia'. The Norwegian team of researchers investigated the reality behind this claim.

There are different figures circulating about how many of the 550 seats in the House of People's Representatives were contested and won by the governing coalition EPRDF. Figures from the Election Board indicate that a total of 49 parties plus 377 private candidates competed for the 550 seats. The EPRDF, a coalition of four parties under the leadership of the TPLF, formally competed only in roughly 50% of the constituencies. However, most of the 49 parties are affiliated to the EPRDF, although not as full members. In their voting patterns in parliament the affiliated parties stand together with EPRDF as a block. It is thus justified to count them as part of the EPRDF family. Together, the EPRDF and its affiliated parties put forward one candidate for every contested seat, with the exception of six constituencies where only private candidates ran, and seven constituencies where two EPRDF candidates competed against each other, representing different ethnic or social groups within their constituency. Most – although not all – of the individual candidates were also in fact selected or supported by the EPRDF, and should therefore also be counted as belonging to the ruling bloc.

The Election Board set up a list of all candidates in 522 constituencies in June 2000.<sup>16</sup> It shows that the opposition put forward candidates in 121 constituencies. In 255 constituencies, the EPRDF candidate ran unopposed. When adding those six constituencies where only private candidates ran, it emerges that

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<sup>16</sup> Each constituency elects one representative for the House of People's Representatives. There are 550 seats, but the Election Board counted only 522 since elections were delayed in the Somali region and 20 seats are reserved for representatives of the smallest ethnic groups.

263 seats, just above 50%, were not contested at all. In addition, 146 seats were only contested by private candidates, most of whom were also in reality EPRDF-affiliated. Only 23% of the seats were contested by opposition parties. In 18% of the constituencies one opposition candidate stood against one EPRDF candidate (with or without additional competition from private candidates). In another 5% (26 constituencies), several opposition candidates competed not only against EPRDF but also against each other, making success even less likely.

The picture looks brighter if we assume that a few of the independent candidates can be counted to the opposition camp. Yet, the list of winners, again based on information from the Election Board but only covering a preliminary result, shows that altogether 14 opposition party candidates (2.7%) and 13 independent candidates (2.5%) won a seat, while the EPRDF won 481 and the affiliated parties another 39 seats.

How does such a result come about? Does the opposition not have the clout, the organisational capacity or the political ideas necessary to attract sufficient support? The examples cited earlier in this report suggest that it is primarily local harassment of potential candidates and party members that prevents the opposition from competing more forcefully. We heard many complaints that the strongest opposition candidates were arrested under concocted charges so that they could not register in time, or so that they could be disqualified from standing for office due to 'criminal charges'. As mentioned earlier in this report, in 2000 the Executive Secretary of the Election Board travelled to Hadiya and Kambata, the most contested zones, and got over 100 candidates out of local prisons. This was a precondition for the opposition Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Coalition (SEPDC) to participate in the election. In Oromia, the Oromo National Congress (ONC) decided, according to its chairman, not to compete in those constituencies where the

existence of an opposition candidate would have created local violence and endangered the lives of party members.

## A 'Movement government'

The EPRDF came to power in 1992 after 17 years of armed struggle as a resistance movement in the bush. Mohammed Salih<sup>17</sup> and others have shown that liberation movements in the Horn of Africa, if they came to power and became governments, have seldom managed to convert themselves into democratic parties or allow public participation in governance. Having relied on violence as the only means to resolve conflicts and disputes, they continue to see violence as the only response to challengers, regardless of where they come from or what they demand. Having demanded discipline and unconditional loyalty from their members as a prerequisite for an effective struggle, they continue to expect loyalty and discipline and show little tolerance for internal debate or alternative ideas.

The Ethiopian provisional government of 1991 was a typical movement government. TPLF, the principal resistance movement against the Derg regime, formed a coalition of dependent political organisations, called EPRDF, to support their claim to liberate and govern all of Ethiopia. It invited all other resistance movements, most of them based on ethnic identities and programmes of ethnic self-determination, into a provisional government. Next to TPLF, the strongest and best known was the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). The EPRDF worked out the Provisional Charter, a kind of coalition agreement on which the provisional government was based. However, conflicts between the coalition partners soon came to the fore. They were dealt with in typical movement fashion, by trying to

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<sup>17</sup> Mohammed Salih, 'Movement governments and democracy in the Horn of Africa'. Paper presented at the Rafto Symposium, 30 October 2003, Bergen, Norway (to be published).

eliminate all dissenting opinions and groups. Thus the OLF was squeezed out of the coalition, and OPDO, the EPRDF party for the Oromo, took its place in government. In the local elections of 1992, OLF candidates were imprisoned and killed, party offices closed, its leaders harassed and voters intimidated. Finally, the OLF decided to withdraw from the elections. Subsequently their four ministers were told to leave the Coalition, and advised to leave the country or face arrest. The same treatment was used later to isolate and marginalise other parties that did not adapt to the leadership of the EPRDF.

### **Loyalty to the people – or to the party?**

In rural areas, the local administration is in the hands of people who owe their positions and opportunities in life to their membership in the party. Formally they are civil servants and loyal to the state. Personally they are party cronies and loyal to the party. They feel no conflict between the two, most of them seeing them as identical. This is demonstrated when administrators punish peasant farmers for 'betraying them' by voting for an opposition candidate, when food aid is given only to loyal followers, or when 'disloyal' peasant farmers are threatened with being deprived of their land.

In this situation all local officials depend on the party, and the party can rely on their loyalty. They will not bite the hand that feeds them. In turn, the local officials have no sense of wrongdoing when they use the tools of the state – the security system, the police, the prisons, and even the courts – as means to 'educate' people who, in their eyes, fail their obligations of loyalty. They see opposition as ingratitude. 'Never give room to anti-governments' is a recurring greeting formula under letters from the police advising people or calling them to report such supposedly lawless acts. 'Anti-government' is for a policeman identical with illegal.

Local authorities have no sense of guilt when mixing their roles as the representatives of one party, the representatives of the state, and

the representatives of the local people. In Dilla, during the 2000 elections, the administration wanted me to change my translator and accept a man of their choice. In a meeting at the Administrators office, I was told:

We are here not as the Central Committee of GPDM (the local EPRDF-affiliated party), but in our capacity as the Executive Committee of Gedeo Zone. As such, we represent all the people of the zone and are neutral. So we can give you a neutral interpreter whom you cannot refuse.

The opposition rightly criticises such behaviour as undemocratic. This does not necessarily mean that the opposition would act more democratically if they were to win government positions. They too would have to think about securing their positions first.

### **The problem of the judiciary**

For a long time, Ethiopia had a well-trained corps of lawyers. There were many examples of judges and lawyers taking bold and independent decisions. However, many of these were dismissed in 1991 for having co-operated with the Derg regime. In addition, the new decentralised administrative set-up, which offered ethnic groups self-administration in their residential areas, demanded the creation of many new courts. This meant an insatiable need for more lawyers and judges. The law required officials to speak the language of their area. The only way this demand could be met was to train locally recruited people in law. The recruitment was, of course, done by the local authorities. Local school leavers learned quickly that their only chance for a job was through becoming party members. They thus constituted the core of the new coalition parties' local membership. Most often school teachers and school leavers were selected, as the best qualified persons available, for the crash courses in law. After just five or six months of legal training they became judges for a *woreda* or a zone.

No wonder these judges are not interested in exerting control over the decisions of their mentors, the local administrators. They know they depend on the local party leaders for their incomes and social position. An event in a small town in Southern region in 1999, publicised by EHRCO, demonstrates that local judges have no real power except that which is granted to it by the local administration and party leadership. A judge had released the brother of a wanted outlaw whom the administrator of this town wished to be imprisoned. The administrator picked up the released man in his car, and the next day the dead body was found in the forest. The judge sent the police to arrest the administrator and bring him to court, but the man just laughed at the policemen and sent them to arrest the judge instead. When the judge escaped to Awasa, the regional capital, the police arrested his wife and tortured her so she suffered permanent disabilities. Meanwhile, the judge found no help in Awasa but was sent to Addis Ababa, where again he was told this was a matter for the regional authorities in Awasa. Only after EHRCO made the case public, did central authorities eventually intervene, and the administrator was transferred.

A recent study in Ethiopia found that most local judges do not want to be independent from the local administration.<sup>18</sup> They prefer to be part of the administration and execute its decisions. They know they depend on the local authorities, and they know that the local power structures do not allow them to enforce any court decision that the local authorities do not like.

### **The dilemma of the 'free press', public opinion and NGOs**

Ethiopia is frequently commended as a democracy due to the fact that it has a variety of independent private newspapers, some of which criticise the government harshly and head-on. The country

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<sup>18</sup> Demelash Shiferaw Reta, *National Human Rights Institutions: The Prospect for Ethiopia*, University of Oslo: MA thesis, 2003.

also has a rich flora of non-governmental organisations, some of which also criticises the government. There is no question that the present Ethiopian government tolerates much more opposition and criticism than its predecessors, or, for that matter, its counterpart in Eritrea.

The regime is sensitive to criticism and concerned about its image abroad and with the foreign embassies in Addis Ababa. Since the foreign presence is mostly found in the capital, Addis Ababa, there is consequently considerably more space for critical voices and alternative ideas there than in the rural parts of the country. Even in the capital the police functions as a political tool of the ruling coalition, but the authorities are more careful there to ensure that police practices do not raise international concern.

Private newspapers are not given any support, and are held on narrow reigns. They suffer from permanent financial shortages. Many do not have the capacity to pay journalist salaries, and survive more or less on the enthusiasm of one person or a few friends. None has the capacity to pay a qualified staff of journalists. The market for advertisement is limited. Most papers are simply the mouthpieces of their owners. Rather than offering a spectre of information and opinion, they reflect their owners' opinions and rely on accidental contributions from intellectuals and a few private organisations.

Journalistic skills are poor. Some embassies and NGOs have allocated money for journalist training in the hope of improving standards. But the financial base of most private newspapers is too weak for them to make full use of skills improvement programmes.

The government does not support journalist training programmes. To the contrary, the low quality of journalism gives the government a pretext to exclude the free press routinely from their press conferences and to withhold official information from them.

Inquiries from the private press to ministries are seldom answered: they are treated as non-existent.

The private newspapers only reach a miniscule fraction of the literate urban populace in the capital and, to a lesser degree, in the major towns. If a newspaper tries to dispatch a consignment of its papers to a smaller town, it is usually intercepted by local police, since local authorities do not want them to be spread. Only a few copies, brought by travellers, go from hand to hand and are read many times, even after being outdated. Only the state-owned newspapers are regularly available in major towns outside Addis Ababa. The radio, the only organ of mass communication that can reach the majority of people, is still exclusively in the hands of the government. Parliament has passed a new law allowing private radio transmissions. However, the distribution of wavelengths has been postponed again and again, prolonging the monopoly of the state-owned radio.

Critical journalists are constantly under threat of imprisonment. Restrictive press laws can be, and are, interpreted widely by police and courts. For instance, the provision forbidding defamatory material allows the police to arrest a journalist who dares to criticise. In most cases, journalists are released on bail after some time in prison and a court case is never opened. The bail is thus forfeited – in practice as a kind of ransom or extra-legal punishment. Only in serious cases have journalists been imprisoned for prolonged time. Conditions in prison are harsh. Beatings and practices we would not hesitate to call torture are routine.

A few NGOs are known for their critical stance, especially EHRCO. For many years after its foundation in 1992, EHRCO was refused registration and hence legal personality, and at one point its accounts were frozen. EHRCO survived thanks to donations from foreign embassies and the attention its human rights reports attracted abroad. Only after the outbreak of the war against Eritrea

was EHRCO registered as an NGO and allowed to open branch offices in major regional centres.

Under the prevailing political conditions, public opinion in Ethiopia is totally confined to the urban areas – and mainly Addis Ababa – and to the literate, educated part of the urban population. In the towns, ethnic groups are mixed and integrated, intermarriage is common, and an ethnically mixed elite dominates public opinion. The large majority of these people in Addis Ababa feel not as Gurage or Oromo or Sidama, but as Ethiopians – nationalists, often chauvinists, on behalf of a pan-Ethiopian identity. This brings many of them in opposition to the government. The vivid public opinion in Addis Ababa, which is overwhelmingly critical of the government, is often mistaken by outsiders as ‘the’ public opinion in Ethiopia.

The differences between urban public opinion and the government position is particularly visible in two issue areas: the problem of nationalities and the question of land ownership. These issues were debated in a spirit of praiseworthy openness during the drafting of the Constitution in 1994. A debate was arranged in many places all over the country, until, by hook or by crook, the government position carried the day. This report will look at each of these issues separately.

## **The Question of Land Ownership**

In Ethiopian tradition, as in other parts of Africa, land was not a commodity, nor subject to ownership. In an agrarian society, everybody needed access to plough land for survival, just as they need water, air and sunshine. However, when the Empire expanded southward and conquered other tribes, the agricultural wealth of the vanquished was appropriated. Soldiers were remunerated with land

donations. They were not interested in tilling, but wanted land with peasants on it, to collect a portion of its produce. A local aristocracy, of ethnically different stock, mostly Amhara or Oromo, developed and lived on the peasant farmers' labour.<sup>19</sup>

As the Empire was centralised under Emperor Haile Selassie, the nobility was drawn into the central administration and the standing army. They abandoned their local administrative and security functions, yet kept their rural privileges and incomes. An elaborate set of different rights on the same piece of land evolved. When Haile Selassie introduced private ownership (or 'freehold') rights, the aristocracy was quick to claim their particular rights of appropriation recognised as ownership. When the law recognised tax payment over a number of years as proof of ownership, they began to collect taxes from their peasant farmers in order to pay tax in their own names on the land. In this way they established their claims, while peasants effectively became 'tenants'. As urban life became expensive and the need for money grew, the obligatory contributions of peasants were increased. In the 1960s a law limited the total burdens of peasant farmers to three quarters of their produce. In practice this limit was often surpassed.

This was the most burning issue of conflict in Haile Selassie's Ethiopia in the late 1960s. '*Meret le arrashu*', or 'Land to the tiller', was the central slogan around which the Ethiopian student movement grew into a revolutionary political movement. When public discontent ignited during the famine of 1973-74, Haile Selassie's reshuffled new government understood quickly that an answer to the land question was essential to win confidence. A group of experts was assigned to draft a land reform law. Their draft recommended to limit the size of private holdings to 40 hectares and to put a ceiling on peasant contributions. After the overthrow of

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<sup>19</sup> Pausewang S, *Peasants, Land and Society. A Social History of Land Reform*. München and London: 1983.

Haile Selassie, the 'Derg' (the military committee) scrapped the draft and gave a group of radical young graduate students in the Ministry of Land Reform, under the leadership of Zegeye Asfaw, orders to prepare a draft for much more far-reaching reforms. Enacted on 5 March 1975, the land reform proclamation nationalised all rural land, making it 'the property of the Ethiopian people' and disowned the nobility without compensation. The law established local peasant associations in each village, with the responsibility of redistributing the land and to oversee the right of all rural residents to access to land, as far as possible on the basis of equal shares. This law, and its implementation, took the brunt out of rural unrest and gave the Derg strong support among the peasants in the non-Amhara-Tigre areas in Southern Ethiopia.<sup>20</sup> In the North, in Amhara and Tigre inhabited areas, a few local noblemen managed to raise local resistance, but they were eventually defeated by the military. Only when the Derg later tightened its local control and its grip on the resources of the peasant farmers, did it gradually lose the support of the rural communities in the South.

In 1991, the new Provisional Government maintained the nationalisation of land. The Constitution of 1995<sup>21</sup> declares land to be the property of 'the State and the peoples of Ethiopia'. This position is squarely rejected by the urban opposition, who claim that state land defeats economic liberalisation. To be developed, land needs investment, they maintain, and people will only invest in the land if they own it. The arguments of EPRDF are twofold: Firstly, as long as the large majority of the people feed themselves in the rural areas, they take care of themselves. If they were forced to sell their land and move to towns, they would demand jobs and investments on a scale far beyond the government's capacity to provide. Second, the EPRDF can claim that 'common property' defends the

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> The Constitution of 1995, Article 40.3.

traditional land holding systems of rural people, and guards their culture and their economic adaptations.

The urban opposition counters that successful peasant farmers will never sell their land; they are too much attached to it to let it go to investors. But experience tells a different story: when land became valuable, investors found ways to force peasants to sell. In Kaffa in the 1960s, when coffee land became valuable, investors trapped peasants into debts until they were forced to sell. Ten years later, when a development project had turned a rural area into a grain basket, statistics showed that as productivity grew, the population in the area declined.

Peasant farmers will not sell freely. But agricultural land has become scarce, plots have become too small to be viable, and peasant farmers are poor and vulnerable. Even a self-supplied farmer needs cash for health services, for paying tax, and for buying clothing and tools. Traders are quick in offering credit, and equally fast to exploit a farmer once he is in debt.

Another factor is helping to increase debts: the fertiliser trap. Fertiliser distribution is in the hands of a former parastatal company which has been 'privatised' and bought by the ruling party. Agents of the Ministry of Agriculture persuade farmers, sometimes even forcing them, to accept fertiliser on credit. After harvest they have to pay, no matter how bad the harvest was, despite the fact that fertilisers bring no benefit if the rains fail. The result: after each harvest local prisons are full of farmers unable to pay their debts. They are kept until relatives manage to raise the money demanded. The state gives no debt relief, purportedly because it would encourage peasants to feel that a debt to the state needs not be repaid.

In addition, state agents often misuse the state ownership of land to hold peasants to ransom: 'if you support the opposition, you may demand land from your party, not from us...'

Furthermore, land is getting scarce. With a population growth of 3% per year, the population doubles with each generation. Land scarcity is thus growing worse over time. Yet, to reduce the number of farmers is no solution, if there is no alternative livelihood available for those forced to leave.

*But the voices of peasant farmers are not heard in the public debate. Neither the embassies nor public opinion in Addis Ababa show any consideration of their interests. Even scholars doing research in rural areas often assume to know the interests of peasant farmers without really enquiring. Once again, the political debate and public opinion excludes the overwhelming majority of the Ethiopian people who live in rural areas, most of them illiterate and uninformed about what is debated in the Capital. It is these same rural people who are manipulated and pressured at election time to accept the candidates chosen for them by the State. They can only adjust to whatever their authorities demand of them and decide for them.*

## **The Problem of Nationalities**

The urban nationalist opposition accuses the government of a divide and rule tactic by giving every 'nation, nationality and people' the constitutional right to self-determination 'including secession'. This right is included both in the Provisional Charter of 1991 and the Constitution of 1995.<sup>22</sup> A majority of the urban elite totally rejected the independence of Eritrea in 1993. If a referendum was to decide, they argued, then all Ethiopians should be entitled to vote, since

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, Article 39.

'you cannot amputate my arm with my consent, asking only the arm'. Today they have accepted Eritrean independence, but demand access to the sea for Ethiopia. When the war started in 1998, this group got a strong boost. A patriotic wave swept over Ethiopia, even pulling most of the ethnic opposition parties of the Southern region into the cloud of 'national sovereignty' and revenge against Eritrea.

The problem of nationalities was one of the major sources of conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea. After 1991 Eritrea decided to suppress ethnic or 'national' identities, arguing that thirty years of resistance war had wielded all Eritreans into one nation. Eritrean laws banned political or civilian organisations that were not open to all Eritreans, regardless of ethnic, religious, social or other differences. In contrast, Ethiopia declared the right of nationalities to independent self-administration and gave the major ethnic groups their own territorial areas, in theory as self-administered entities. In practice this led to clashes. For instance, the nomadic Afar people in Eritrea were urged to integrate in the national entity, but when they crossed the border into Ethiopia – which they regularly do in their annual movements – they became citizens of an Afar state with its own administration, schools and courts and even a radio station broadcasting in their own language.

Is the ethnic policy in Ethiopia a device of 'divide and rule', or is it essentially an aspect of equal rights and democratic freedom? Firstly, we have to recognise that Ethiopia's new leaders in 1991 hardly had a choice. The only political forces available in Ethiopia were the ethnically defined resistance movements. The leading TPLF was itself one of them. When the military regime under Mengistu in 1977-78 purged the radical internal opposition, and launched the so-called 'red terror', everybody who was young and educated was a potential suspect. The slightest suspicion, even a simple denunciation by an envious neighbour, could lead a student to summary execution. Those youngsters who could escape, either

went into exile or hid in the remote parts of the country, usually in their home areas. To continue their political involvement, they only had one option: to join ethnically defined resistance movements. The Red Terror thus fed into the recruitment of ethnic rebel groups. Ethnic self-determination became the common denominator of the opposition against the Derg regime. The liberation of ethnic groups, which had been conquered a century ago and whose cultures, languages and economic development had been systematically suppressed, became their rationale for co-operation.

Even before Mengistu fell, the largest of the ethnic rebel groups, the TPLF, had formed a coalition, the EPRDF, with three organisations founded among its prisoners of war from other ethnicities. To create some sense of common ground, it invited all other resistance groups into a transitional assembly and formed a coalition government. Back in 1974, no government could have any hope of winning confidence and legitimacy without solving the land question through radical land reform freeing the peasantry. It must be maintained that no government in 1991 could win legitimacy without solving the ethnic question by giving the different ethnic groups at least a feeling of equality and liberation. The argument at the time was that Ethiopia should stand together as a democratic federation of free and independent nationalities, not a conglomerate of enslaved peoples.

It appears futile to speculate whether the EPRDF could have found a different formula to keep the 70 or 80 different 'nationalities' in Ethiopia together. At the time, the Ethiopian nationalists suspected the leaders of the TPLF of consciously keeping their options open. If they could not hold Ethiopia together, they would pillage its resources and withdraw into an independent Tigray. This has certainly not happened. But the TPLF has fastened its grip on Ethiopia, with the help of its domination of the EPRDF coalition. It has pushed aside all the other ethnic resistance groups and opposition parties and established a system of control at the local

level, which does not allow other parties or political groups to organise or challenge its policies. The autocracy of the nobility under Haile Selassie, or the military under Mengistu, has been replaced with a party hierarchy controlling every village through its dependent and subservient local cadres.

The ethnic policies of the government are not free of opportunistic considerations. In several cases it is hard to understand why else government security forces inflame rather than extinguish ethnic conflicts – for example when Amhara-dominated settlements in Oromo country were violently attacked and the police interfered on the side of the Oromo attackers. In several cases the government has allowed subgroups to re-define themselves as independent nationalities – as in the case of the Silte who separated from the Gurage. In another instance, the government tried to unify several closely related ethnic groups – such as the Wolaita, Gamu, Gofa and Daro, for whom a common language was synthesized, called 'WoGaGoDa'. However, the teachers and students from the concerned groups rejected it as an implant. Demonstrations were suppressed through police violence, and the area was in complete turmoil until the government withdrew the WoGaGoDa experiment and allowed the larger groups, such as the Wolaita, to administer their own zone.

In other cases, even despised social groups were eventually able to establish themselves as separate ethnicities, such as the Hadicho caste among the Sidama, a kind of 'untouchable' craftsmen. In the 2000 elections they formed their own party within the EPRDF family, and ran as an opposition party. The local EPRDF party was taken by surprise when facing a likely defeat in one *woreda*. It reacted violently by attacking candidates and simply taking over voting stations to manipulate the votes. The *woreda* was one of the fourteen constituencies where the Election Board cancelled the elections and called a re-election, which the Hadicho opposition

won with clear margin. It took over the woreda administration after re-joining the EPRDF family as an independent affiliated party.

## **Rural versus Urban 'Public Opinion'**

'Divide and rule' tactics or ethnic liberation? Each of the interpretations can claim some facts as proof. The most prudent explanation is that ethnicity has simply become a factor of local politics, in which the preservation of the dominance of the EPRDF (or affiliated) party is the political priority. At the local level, ethnicity is a question of personal and group identity. Where people rally around their ethnic networks to resist the control and the dictate of the political administration, it easily becomes a political identity. That very fact makes the local authorities fear ethnicity as an uncontrollable force with a dangerous potential. So they intervene, if necessary violently, if they feel their positions threatened.

In the urban context, ethnicity is an ideological and political factor of major significance. Here, an educated, ethnically mixed and socially privileged majority stands for an Ethiopian nationalism and refuses to identify ethnically as Amhara or Gurage or Tigre or Oromo. They speak Amharigna, the *lingua franca* of the Empire, and want to feel as Ethiopians without ethnic distinctions. For them, ethnic differences are self-destructive, and Eritrean independence is an amputation which they cannot easily forgive. They have no sympathy with the ethnic identification of other, mainly rural, people for whom daily life, not least in terms of politics, reaffirms their ethnic identity. And they dominate 'public opinion' so completely that the foreign community is satisfied that 'everybody' in Ethiopia considers the disputed border town of Badme as Ethiopian, not Eritrean. Badme, to recall, is the border town where in 1998 the dispute on the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia

escalated into a two year long bloody war, making Badme a symbol of the defence of Ethiopian sovereignty. Hence, for these Amhara nationalists, the decision of the Border Commission to give Badme to Eritrea is a diatribe, an unjust imposition, and the result of another sinister plot to dismantle Ethiopia.

The majority of the Oromo, Somali, Nuer, Hamar, Kaffa or Benishangul peasant farmers along the Ethiopian borders in the south and west, probably do not even know where Eritrea is, not to speak of Badme. They could not care less about Badme being Eritrean or Ethiopian. For them, other issues dominate their attention: Whether they get food aid after a bad harvest; whether they can escape from the fertilizer debts; whether they have access to a clinic when ill, whether they can send their children to school; or whether they can get hold of shoes, clothes, tools, salt and other bare necessities. These are the important issues, not who administers a small town somewhere on the eastern borders. What does affect their interests, however, is whether they are forced to send their sons to the war or collect money for the 'national cause'. Yet their opinion is never asked on such issues of great local significance. The rural population is not reached by, nor does it have any influence on, the formation of the Ethiopian 'public opinion'.

## **Democracy Reconsidered?**

Viewed from the perspective of the conditions of life for the rural majority, it is not justified to speak of Ethiopia today as a democracy, or even to describe it as a society on the road towards democratisation. Democratic rhetoric covers a reality where the primary concern of the political elite is the maintenance of power and, especially at the local level, the preservation of social and political position.

This provides the Western embassies in Addis Ababa, charged with the task of assessing Ethiopia's democratisation process, with an inescapable dilemma. The embassies are there to maintain good relations between states and state administrations. They are subject to the democratic rhetoric daily. And the Ethiopian government has much positive to demonstrate: there is a Constitution; press restrictions are fewer than ever before; and (sometimes) independent courts which even dare to sentence the federal minister of justice to a term in prison (as happened in 2002). There are NGOs which violently criticise the government. However, the reverse side of the coin is hardly ever visible: the fact that the 'public opinion' excludes over 90% of the population. Everybody assumes to know what the peasant farmers need. Solutions for the problems of rural development and for the increasing land shortage are suggested and fought for on the basis of easy assumptions without ever asking what are the interests and views of the concerned majority.

What can embassies do if they discover that elections are manipulated behind a democratic façade? What would they achieve if they made their criticism public? Most likely, the government will persist and the good relationship will be ruined – with serious diplomatic consequences. If criticism were to lead to events that enable the opposition to take over, the Western embassies would be blamed if such a new government did not live up to the expectations of the people. Thus, the embassies prefer to avoid outright criticism of elections as forged or manipulated. Instead, they talk about a step forward on a long road towards democracy, and pledge assistance for further democratisation, irrespective of how grave the observed infringements are.

The Ethiopian government plays along with this tune. Every time undemocratic practices or abuses of power come to the attention of the embassies, the government reacts by promising a new reform. The latest example was the promise of a 'kebele reform', after the elections of 2000 and 2001 raised serious doubts about the protection

of people's democratic rights at the local level, especially in politically contested areas. Sensing increased concern from the embassies, the government proposed a reform that involved further devolution of power to the local level. The Embassies took this as a welcome signal of a new drive in the democratisation process, and offered their full support. They may be aware that this decentralising reform will not change anything in the basic structure of control over the peasant farmers at the local level, in the *kebele* and the *woreda*. But for them, it is more comforting to offer help and financial assistance to concrete measures that promise improvements here or there, than to speak out against major abuses and risk losing their potential influence over further developments.

It should be noted that even if the opposition were able to win an election, they would not necessarily establish more democratic local structures. At present most of the urban opposition parties fall into the trap of jingoistic patriotism and do not hear the voices of the rural majority – despite getting much of their support from the rural areas.

If the aim of democracy were viewed from a human security perspective, harsh criticism and the revelation of serious electoral flaws would achieve very little. The support for decentralising reforms, if this support were to increase local people's influence on local decision-making, would have far more impact. Neither the best possible electoral system, nor the execution of flawless elections – not even an opposition election victory – would guarantee that the human security of the rural poor improves. Only a reform process that offers them more local influence would ensure that the issues that really matter to the rural population, such as better access to food and services, were addressed.

This report has employed a very pragmatic criterion for measuring progress towards democracy. Democracy was assessed according to how it affects the human security and conditions of life for rural

people – the vast majority of Ethiopians. Free and fair elections or not, the main challenge for Ethiopia's democratisation process is to introduce reforms that reduce the dependency and insecurity of the rural poor and offer them more real influence over major decisions affecting their lives and livelihoods.

**Note:** Quotes are not exact recordings of individual communications, but summarised translations by an interpreter, noted down in the field. They have to be understood as the essence of what an informant told us, rather than a verbatim quotation.

### **A note of clarification:**

The second names of Ethiopians are not family names as is the norm in Europe, but the first name of the person's father. Sometimes the grandfather is added as a third name. Therefore, Ethiopians are always referred to by their first names. Accordingly, in bibliographies, authors are also listed under their first name. To call an Ethiopian by his second name would inevitably create confusion.

Misunderstandings are further convoluted by the fact that many Ethiopian names consist of two words. For example, Haile Selassie means the power of the Trinity, and is one name. The emperor's father's name, never used in official statements, was Makonnen. People are known, for example, as Professor Mesfin, not Professor Wolde Mariam or Prof. Mariam, M.W.

In this text, Amharic words are represented in latin letters. This creates problems of exact spelling, since words are often spelt in different ways. The word *woreda*, for example, is often spelt as *wereda* or *worada*. This report writes Amharic words in the plural without English language plural-s (as is often usual). The reader would have difficulties in finding out whether *woredas* means several *woreda* or whether it is a *different word*. The correct plural form, *woredawotch*, would create even more confusion.



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