



Ethiopia:

Implications of the May 2005 Elections for

Future

Democratization Programs

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Introduction: The Importance of the May 2005 Elections

May 15, 2005 elections presented the Ethiopian people a remarkable opportunity to express their political views by participating in a poll that offered them a meaningful choice. In contrast to earlier elections in 1995 and 2000, opposition parties did not boycott but rather competed vigorously across the country. Opposition party mistrust of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), reports of intimidation and violence, and highly polarizing rhetoric raised concerns during the pre-election period but did not deter opposition parties from campaigning in nearly every constituency. Live, televised debates on matters of public policy, opposition party access to state-owned media, and huge, peaceful rallies in the final week of campaigning made it clear that these elections would represent a critical moment in Ethiopia's political development. The Ethiopian people recognized this opportunity and turned out in overwhelming numbers to vote, forcing some polling stations in Addis Ababa to stay open 24 hours to accommodate those in line.

Post-electoral developments, however, raised a series of troubling questions and created concerns that Ethiopia might move toward domestic violence and repression rather than peaceful democracy. On the evening of voting day, while thousands of voters waited patiently and peacefully in lines, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi proclaimed a thirty day ban on rallies of any sort and took direct control over the police and militia in Addis Ababa. The ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF) followed this up by claiming victory on May 16, in the absence of official results being made public by the NEBE. The opposition countered with its own claims of victory and with allegations of impropriety by the government in the counting process. Some opposition leaders made expansive claims to victory and threatened to boycott the parliament unless these claims were validated. Official results from the NEBE trickled in while political partisans circulated unverified and partial results widely. In this edgy and anxious environment, rumors and allegations of fraud circulated feverishly and tensions developed as many Ethiopians became convinced that the election results were being manipulated.

On June 6, police arrested thousands of students protesting at Addis Ababa University, stormed a technical college near Mexico Square the following day, and, most worryingly, engaged in running street battles with rock-throwing demonstrators in the Merkato area on June 8. The June 8 violence included military forces firing indiscriminately into large crowds, killing at least 36 and wounding more than 100. The government was unapologetic over the violence and blamed opposition political parties for creating the trouble. Information Minister Bereket Simeon told a reporter that the violent crackdown was necessary to prevent "strife between the different nationalities of Ethiopia which might have made the Rwandan genocide look like child's play."

Tensions escalated further in early June as the government placed opposition politicians under house arrest, revoked the press credentials of Voice of America and Deutsche Welle reporters, and detained human rights investigators and local election observers. Ethiopia appeared to be on the verge of wide-scale violence. The Ambassador Donors Group, led by the European Commission's Ambassador to Ethiopia, Tim Clarke, intervened and brokered a non-violence pact on June 10 that called on both the government and the opposition to pursue their claims through the electoral and legal process.

The pact also set up special Complaint Investigation Panels (CIPs) to look into the conduct of the count and determine where irregularities justified re-voting. The CIPs consisted of representatives of the EPRDF, opposition, and the NEBE and heard evidence in a structured, legalistic manner. This format greatly favored the EPRDF, which could use its superior resources and experience to have lawyers make polished presentations, and disfavored the opposition, which had to rely on local supporters and often had disorganized and incomplete presentations. In addition, the opposition alleged and observers substantiated in many cases intimidation against opposition representatives and witnesses. The CIP process, however, provided a needed breathing space but replicated the disparities of power that contributed to the crisis in the first place. As a result of the CIPs, the NEBE planned to conduct re-voting in 31 constituencies (plus one by-election where an opposition politician had been murdered) on 21 August. The opposition parties challenged the re-voting in court, claiming that the NEBE had not justified its decisions on which constituencies deserved new polling.

Analyzing the Provisional Results

As of mid-August, provisional results show the EPRDF and affiliated parties with a majority of the seats and the combined opposition with somewhere between 30-40 percent. The 23 seats in the Somali region will be contested on 21 August, along with re-voting in 32 constituencies. The opposition parties have withdrawn from the Somali races and some of the other re-voting constituencies so it is likely that the EPRDF margin of victory will increase as these results are made final.

Provisional Results - 492 seats of 524 contested (excluding Somali region's 23 to be determined in August)

Government Supporting Parties			Opposition Parties			Independent	
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front	296	CUD	Coalition for Unity and Democracy	109	Ind	1
BGPDUF	Benishangul-Gumuz Peoples' Democratic Front	8	UEDF	United Ethiopian Democratic Forces	52		
ANDP	Afar National Democratic Party	8	OFDM	Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement	11		
	Other EPRDF Allies	6		Other	1		
	Total	310		Total	173	Total	1
	Percentage of 492 announced	63%		Percentage of 492 announced	35%		

Note: All figures from the Ethiopian National Election Board website accessed 15 August 2005. <http://www.electionsethiopia.org/> All results remain provisional and subject to appeal.

If preliminary results reflect the basic order of magnitude of final results, the opposition's share of the national parliament had increased from 12-15 seats to approximately 175 to 190 (assuming that they will retain some of their seat slated for re-voting on August 21). The EPRDF's share of seats dropped from 97 percent to 60 - 65 percent. Such a result represents a sea change or seismic shift in Ethiopian political life. Never before has power been shared so widely and so many contenders for power engaged in the competitive processes and institutions envisioned in the constitution.

While doing particularly well in urban areas (as predicted) the geographic spread of the opposition's victory surprisingly extended throughout the key Amhara, Oromiya, and Southern Regions. In Addis Ababa, the CUD won an overwhelming victory winning every single one of the 23 seats in contention. In Tigray, the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the core of the ruling party, won all 38 seats handily. In the Amhara region, the Amhara National Democratic Movement (a wing of the EPRDF) won approximately 55 percent of the 138 seats, doing particularly well in East Gojjam and North Welo. The CUD ran strong in West Gojjam, North Shewa, and in the area around Dessie. Widespread reports of violence and intimidation, substantiated by international observers, were a particular problem in Ankober and in parts of East Gojjam, South Gondar, and North Shewa. In the Southern Region, the ruling party won approximately two-thirds of the 123 seats. The CUD did very well in the Gurage area as well as winning some urban seats like Awasa and Arba Minch. The Southern Coalition (part of the UEDF coalition) won nearly all the seats in Hadiya. Reports of violence and intimidation were particularly strong in the area around Hossana.

Perhaps the most surprising results were in Oromiya, Ethiopia's most populous region, where observers had thought that the ruling Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) had a firm grip on the rural voters and had the demonstrated capacity to use force and intimidation to stifle opposition. The OPDO captured approximately 60 percent of the 178 seats, winning large numbers of seats in the rural provinces of Harerge, Illubabor, and Jimma. The Oromo National Congress (part of the UEDF) did well in Western Shoa (ONC leader Merera Gudina won 83 percent in his constituency in the city of Ambo) as well as in East Welega and even remote Borena. The ONC and UEDF won seats in Arsi (Central Oromiya) as well. The Oromo Federal Democratic Movement of Bulcha Demeksa captured 11 seats, most in West Welega. The CUD carried a number of seats in East Shewa (the area immediately around Addis Ababa) as well as some urban areas in Welega. In prior elections, the OPDO controlled just about every seat in Oromiya. The provisional results from 2005, however, gave four different parties meaningful representation in the region. If these preliminary results are confirmed and all parties take up their new seats, politics in Oromiya will be transformed.

Most observers expected EPRDF to win the May 15 elections handily. The ruling party had what was presumed to be the overwhelming advantages of incumbency, particularly in the rural areas where 85 percent of Ethiopians live and where local government and party officials controlled access to land and fertilizer, keys to survival of many small farmers. Contrary to these expectations, however, huge numbers of small farmers and small town residents voted against the ruling party that had appeared to be so strong in their day-to-day life. Wide-scale and deeply felt anger about how the EPRDF operated explains a large part of this pattern. At the local levels in particular, observers regularly reported resentments over *kebele*

officials and how they abused their power. After fourteen years and a record of poor economic performance, many Ethiopians had enough and were ready for a change. Some (particularly in the urban areas and the Amhara region) clearly supported the CUD's platform with regard to Ethiopian nationalist themes ("Ethiopian Unity" in contrast to the ruling party's commitment to ethnic federalism). Others saw leaders of the UEDF and OFDM as more authentic and legitimate representatives of their ethnic group or nationality than the EPRDF ethnic parties.

The May 15 elections therefore represent a watershed that immutably changed the political landscape of Ethiopia. A surprisingly large block of voters took advantage of the opportunity of political competition to signal their lack of support for the ruling party and many top leaders lost their seats. It is possible that May 15 may mark the end of a single party dominant political system and the first steps toward a pluralistic, competitive multiparty system, the end of a period where boycott and harassment characterized politics and the beginning of an era where public policy is subject to debate and accountability. Post-election violence, however, raised the prospect that this opportunity for political development tragically may be squandered.

Trends and Potential Scenarios

Two powerful forces have faced one another during the summer of 2005 in a context in which both are assessing their relative power and debating questions of internal leadership and strategy in the aftermath of an electoral outcome that surprised all. The EPRDF suffered a split in 2001 and Meles survived that challenge in part by maneuvering between different factions. Now, however, dozens of senior party members have lost their seats, undoubtedly increasing questions about Meles' leadership within the top levels of the ruling coalition.

The opposition also faces difficult questions regarding its next steps after their surprisingly strong electoral showing. The CUD and UEDF cooperated on certain electoral issues and made a number of common statements since May 15. The opposition coalitions, however, differ on a number of core issues, most notably the critical issue of unity versus ethnic federalism as specified in Article 39 of the constitution. While the CUD and UEDF pledged to form a joint government if they defeated the EPRDF, the two lack a common platform or common list of potential ministers. In fact, many UEDF supporters and voters in the Oromo region in particular perceived the CUD as an Amhara party seeking to re-create the historic dominance of the Amhara over the Oromo and other peoples in southern Ethiopia. The All Ethiopian Unity Party (AEUP), a member of the CUD, split into two factions in early July with several top officials being purged. While the precise outlines of the debates and power struggles within both the opposition and ruling party are difficult to discern, it is clear that both are engaging in fundamental questioning of their strategies and leaderships.

There are factions or at least tendencies within both the EPRDF and the opposition that favor cooperation and would like to see the electoral process move from violent confrontation toward a settlement that would shift attention to peaceful competition and allow the new parliament to operate. Some opposition politicians would like to build on their strong showing in parliamentary representation and their control over the Addis Ababa regional administration to position themselves to win local elections

in 2006 and the next round of national elections in 2010. Some within the ruling party recognize that street violence and wide-scale repression will spoil Ethiopia's chances to win favor among international donors who are increasingly attaching governance conditionality on the aid and debt relief.

At the same time, there are wings within both the opposition and government that believe confrontation and contentious street politics are necessary to vanquish their rivals and control political developments. Some within the EPRDF resent the opposition for daring to challenge their rule, given the sacrifices EPRDF militants made during the 17 year struggle against Mengistu's military while some in the opposition remained in the safety of the university or exile. Some opposition leaders have suggested that boycotting the next parliament and engaging in protest activities such as strikes may be pursued rather than strategies focusing on electoral and parliamentary competition. The pressure to boycott is particularly strong from political leaders in the diaspora who have considerable influence and financial clout.

Options for Democratization Programs

Will Ethiopia continue to build on the momentum of the May 2005 election to further advance and consolidate its process of democratization or will this historic opportunity be squandered into a cycle of violence and harsh crackdown as seen in early June 2005? A key part of the answer to this question, as suggested above, is whether the tendencies within both the ruling party and the opposition that want to pursue strategies of violent street politics are marginalized and a moderate center of those from both parties who wish to continue their competition through electoral, legal, and political institutions is strengthened. There are a number of potential programs that donors could put in place that could increase the incentives for all parties to remain in a political process.

The first is the essentially diplomatic task of continuous, coordinated, credible, and clear statements that spell out the high costs to Ethiopia and to political leaders in particular of a return to violence and repression. The ruling party should understand that the costs in terms of debt relief, access to Millennium Challenge Account funding, or other donor support will be high if they use their military might to determine political outcomes. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has enjoyed a high diplomatic profile, first as one of the "new generation of African leaders" favored by the Clinton administration and more recently as a member of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Commission on Africa. Meles must understand that retaining power through violence will make such close relations impossible. The international community should make clear that post-election actions to make it more difficult for the opposition to administer Addis Ababa and for the opposition to participate effectively in parliament are contrary to the goals of democratization. By the same token, clear messages should be sent to opposition politicians detailing the expectation that incitement to violence is illegitimate and that the international community regards political boycotts with high suspicion except in the most extraordinary circumstances.

The second major imperative is to build and broaden incentives for all parties to remain engaged in the political process shaped by debates, elections, parliaments, and court challenges rather than by boycotts, disengagement, street violence, and the use of military force. For opposition politicians and leaders weighing the critical

decision of whether their political futures are best served by taking their seats and participating in the upcoming federal and regional parliaments or whether a boycott best serves their interests, there are a number of potential programs that can increase the incentives to participate.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen parliament

The Ethiopian parliament since 1995 has been dominated by the EPRDF that occupied all but a dozen or so seats. It therefore has not been a particularly important institution of deliberation or oversight but rather the organ that by-and-large ratified party decisions. The opposition will have fewer incentives to take up their seats and participate in the parliament if it continues to play such a marginal role. If the parliament can be strengthened, its ability to address public policy issues enhanced, and consequently the value of positions in parliament to future political power made clear, then opposition leaders will be less likely to boycott.

The lame duck EPRDF parliament made changes to parliamentary procedures that make it more difficult for minorities to place items on the agenda.¹ The international community must make it clear that this move is regarded as a tactic to prevent opposition participation and therefore is contrary to the interests of democratization in Ethiopia. If the EPRDF agrees to have open discussions about appropriate parliamentary procedures for a parliament that will now have a significant opposition presence that may encourage the opposition to participate. If the opposition perceives that the EPRDF will continually change the rules so that even if they take up their seats they will not have a meaningful role, that will encourage a boycott.

There are many different models of programs to strengthen parliaments and details will need to be determined by appropriate assessments. The point to be emphasized here is that the programs should be designed in a way to encourage opposition politicians to perceive that their participation in parliament will be meaningful. This may entail programs to train and support staff or specialized research or auditing organs of the parliament (to create the equivalent of the Congressional Research Service and the Congressional Budget Office) that will enable the parliament to better conduct oversight and engage the executive branch in informed public policy debates and dialogues.

While meaningless junkets to send MPs to observe other parliaments are not needed, developing places and opportunities for Ethiopian opposition parliamentarians to meet and discuss with opposition parliamentarians from other parts of the world to share techniques to play the critical role of loyal opposition may be helpful. A study tour or set of workshops that brought leading Ethiopian opposition figures together with political leaders from around the world with experiences in using a position as a minority party to build up a base of support and subsequently move into the position of majority would be valuable. How can a party's role as the opposition be used to develop an agenda and political strategy to win power in subsequent elections?

¹ Initial reports suggested that the new parliamentary rule changed the requirement for placing an item on the agenda from 20 MPs to 51 percent, thereby making it nearly impossible for the opposition to affect the agenda. There is some uncertainty regarding the precise change and official translations remain to be published.

2. Support the Institutionalization of a Shadow Cabinet

Increasing the institutional support for a loyal opposition may encourage participation. Setting up and providing support for a shadow cabinet (with training or funding for staff, office space, etc.) may encourage opposition politicians to see their role as the minority party in the parliament as meaningful and as a potentially powerful launching pad to develop and communicate their political agenda.

3. Strengthen and Support the Addis Ababa City Council

One of the only things the EPRDF and the CUD agree on in the confused aftermath of the May 15 elections is that the CUD won the overwhelming majority of the Addis Ababa city council seats. The opposition sent an important signal that it was serious about taking on the challenges of administering the city when it elected Berhanu Nega and Admasu Gebeyehu, two leading opposition spokespersons, as mayor and deputy mayor on August 20. One component of a strategy to make engagement in the political process more attractive than a boycott strategy is to make the inherently difficult job of administering Addis Ababa politically viable. After the May 15 results were known, the EPRDF announced a major decrease in taxes paid to the city council, moved responsibility for roads (and the jobs associated with such projects) out of the purview of the city council, and had the capital of the Oromo region moved back to Addis Ababa (after it had been moved to Adama amidst considerable controversy and expense). These actions send signals that the EPRDF intends to make the job of administering Addis Ababa impossible for the CUD. Donors should counter with proposals to strengthen Addis Ababa administration and provide some of the resources to make programs possible. As with the parliament, it may be useful to organize workshops or study tours to allow the new municipal authorities to meet with other mayor's from opposition parties.

4. Review and Acknowledge Flaws in 2005 Electoral Process

The NEBE's performance in the 2005 elections was mixed with some clear areas of effective administration along with other areas where the NEBE failed (particularly in the counting process). Some of the opposition's complaints against the NEBE were either not substantiated or were concerns more appropriately directed to the ruling government and its local officials in particular. Regardless of the overall technical performance, it is unmistakably clear that the opposition has no confidence in the NEBE, regards the NEBE as a tool of the EPRDF, and that no electoral process managed by the NEBE as currently organized will be credible to significant constituencies in Ethiopia.

The international donors should recognize and clearly state that they accept the imperative to reform the electoral administration in Ethiopia before the next round of national elections (if not before the 2006 local elections). One of the primary purposes of any electoral administrative body is to deliver credible electoral services (registration, voting, tabulation, adjudication of disputes) to candidates and voters. Major actors such as the main opposition parties must have some degree of confidence in the electoral board for this to happen. For a variety of reasons – many of them outside of the current NEBE's control – the opposition is clear and united around its fundamental distrust of the NEBE. Reform of the NEBE was one of the pre-conditions of the opposition to participate in January 2005 and this demand is certainly to be made more decisively in future elections.

Without presuming an outcome, the international community might commit to supporting a thorough and professional examination of alternative model of electoral administration appropriate for Ethiopia and work to create a new body that both the opposition and ruling party can accept before 2010 if not 2006.

In addition to reforming the NEBE, other programs that the donor's might offer to support subsequent elections include international observers, support for party poll watchers, support for domestic observers (see below), and perhaps political party building. The presence of international observers was one of the conditions the opposition made prior to the 2005 elections and will likely make again. International observation of the 2006 local elections will be quite challenging, given the large number of very local contests, but will be an important signal by the donors of commitment to build on the momentum of the 2005 election. Programs to support party poll watchers, domestic observers, civic education, and party building have played important roles in promoting democratization a variety of contexts but in Ethiopia in 2006 they will have the additional advantage of keeping opposition political leaders focused on future electoral strategies and engaged in a political competition.

5. Strengthen Civil Society Organizations

Along with the usual contributions that strong and vital civil society organizations can make to the quality of democratization, the strength of civil society has particular importance in the current crisis in Ethiopia. Monitoring of the 2006 and 2010 elections likely will be a critical demand of the opposition prior to a decision to participate in these elections (as it was in 2005). The Ethiopian courts overruled the NEBE on the question of whether NGOs have the right to monitor elections but lack of time and capacity limited their efforts in 2005. Donor commitments to work with civil society organizations to mount effective domestic observer missions in the 2006 local and 2010 national elections will encourage opposition leaders to remain engaged in a long-term electoral strategy.

The rationale for IFES' 2005 project to support select civil society organizations with capacity building initiatives to conduct civic and voter education remains persuasive and may reinforce other programs to keep the parties engaged in the political process. As noted above, the controversy over domestic observations may justify a broadening of IFES' initial program to include training and capacity building for civil society organizations committed to mounting an observation mission.

6. Sponsor Civic Forums

In addition to their work in civic and voter education and domestic monitoring, civil society organizations sponsored a series of important public policy debates during the 2005 campaign. Making such public policy forums a regular part of political life in Ethiopia has the potential not only to make the population better informed, the government more accountable, and to increase participation in the formulation of public policy. In general, such forums can expand the space for political speech outside of the government controlled institutions. Opposition leaders regarded the 2005 debates as a key opportunity to make their positions known and an important component of their campaign strategy.

This model of public debate may be broadened into a series of civic forums organized by civil society organizations to which non-political leaders may be invited along with the government and opposition. The goal will be to create a regular institutionalized structure for engaging and debating public policy to supplement and reinforce the partisan debates in the parliament.

The main forums in 2005 were in Addis Ababa and entailed debates on national policy between national political figures. In the context of the 2006 local elections such debates should be moved into the regions and to the lowest popular level resources will allow.

7. Local Elections in 2006

The elections of May 2005 represented a critical opportunity to demonstrate the potential for voters to influence their national leadership and for many to send a message of no confidence in the ruling party. Local elections in 2006 will matter for different reasons. Most rural Ethiopians have fairly abstract links to the national government but have strong ties to critical importance to their day-to-day affairs with local administrations. Some observers have suggested that there are two governments in Ethiopia, the one run by the Prime Minister and the second situated in the thousands of institutions of local administration and control. Rural farmers are highly dependent on local administration for access to land and fertilizer and the EPRDF's firm grip over these local institutions has been critical to their domination of political life. The 2006 elections, therefore, are in many ways more important to how most Ethiopians relate to their government than the 2005 elections. International donors and international NGOs like IFES should therefore remain engaged in electoral processes through 2006. One of the most important questions facing the process of democratization in Ethiopia will be whether local authorities are willing to put their local power on the line in 2006 or whether the democratic momentum coming out of the May 2005 elections will be stifled.

8. The Role of the Oromo Region

Finally, in all of these decisions, special consideration should be given to programs in the Oromo region. As noted above, the May 2005 election results were most surprising in this, the largest region of Ethiopia. No government can rule democratically without significant support from Oromiya. Yet there is a power vacuum in the region. The OPDO lacks significant support but rules through force and intimidation, as has been regularly documented by human rights reports and further suggested by the large opposition vote in May 2005. The Oromo National Congress (part of the UEDF opposition coalition) and the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (an independent party that won 12 seats) benefited from voters angry with the OPDO but each is unlikely to fill the larger power vacuum. The Oromo Liberation Front has a broad reservoir of popular support (even if this support is often romantic or quixotic) but its leadership has been in exile for years and has pursued an armed struggle rather than democratic engagement since 1992. All of this leads to a significant source of instability with the potential to pull all of Ethiopia into collapse. Programs to strengthen political processes and civil society organizations should look for creative ways to work in the Oromo region.

Conclusion

The protracted political crisis in Ethiopia in the three months since the surprising May 15 elections has the potential to lead this important country either back to violence and repression or forward to ever broader processes of democratization and peaceful participation. One of the key questions in shaping which path is taken is whether leaders who want to participate and engage in competition through electoral and parliamentary institutions can win in their struggles with other leaders who advocate confrontation and disengagement from formal political processes.

Programs to promote democratization can increase the incentives and strengthen those who advocate participation. By making parliament and local administration more attractive as a base for the opposition to develop, the prospects for further democratization are increased. To the extent that the problems in the electoral process and the NEBE in particular can be clearly articulated and addressed, the opposition parties' inclination to remain engaged in electoral competition will be bolstered. Programs to assist civil society organizations to engage in civic and voter education, domestic observation, and civic forums in the lead up to 2006 local and 2010 national elections will provide opposition political parties with additional justifications to participate and to remain focused on future electoral competitions.