The 2005 Ethiopian Elections: Millstone or Milestone?

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Ye'Netsanet Goh Siqed: Liqelebes Ye'Temokerew Ye'Ityopia Demokraci
[*As the Dawn of Freedom Breaks: Ethiopian Democracy Imperiled with Derailment*]
by Berhanu Nega
Addis Ababa (Kaliti Prison), 2006, 615 pp.

Ye'Arem Irsha
[*Weed Farming*]
by Lidetu Ayalew
Addis Ababa, 2005, 125 pp.

Ginbot 7: Ityopia Iko Min? Indet?
[*May 15: Ethiopia—What and How?*]
by Kiflu Tadesse
Silver Spring, MD, 2005, 255 pp.

Democracy is ultimately about the sovereignty and political equality of citizens, and the institutions of accountability that are undergirded by a culture of respect for the rule of law. If free balloting were the essence of democracy, the May 15, 2005 Ethiopian legislative elections are "foundational" enough to be hailed as a turning point in the making of Ethiopian democracy[1]. Bolstered by remarkably open electoral campaigns, the registration rate was high and some 90 percent of registered voters cast their votes. Many stoically endured long queues. Aspiring to full enfranchisement and free citizenship, the Ethiopian poor showed the world, is no monopoly of the rich.

The EU Election Observer Mission[2] sums up the aborting of this promising democratic experiment as follows:

> The 2005 parliamentary elections were the most competitive elections Ethiopia has experienced, with an unprecedented high voter turnout. However, while the pre-election period saw a number of positive developments and voting on 15 May was conducted in a peaceful and largely orderly manner, the counting and aggregation processes were marred by irregular practices, confusion and a lack of transparency. Subsequent complaints and appeals mechanisms did not provide an effective remedy. The human rights situation rapidly deteriorated in the post-election day period when dozens of citizens were killed by the police and thousands were arrested. Overall, therefore, the elections fell short of international principles for genuine democratic elections.

The ruling party, reading the unmistakable signs of a clean sweep by the opposition in the urban areas and possibly in the rural areas, proceeded to declare victory prematurely. Opposition protests against the apparently massive electoral fraud erupted in the major cities in June and again in November of 2005. The government crackdown, a parliamentary commission of inquiry recently reported, led to the loss of some 200 lives and the jailing of over thirty thousand people. Some 110 leaders of the opposition parties, independent journalists, and human rights activists have been on trial on various charges including treason, conspiracy, and genocidal intent. These are some of the issues three members of the Ethiopian political class address with remarkable candor and uncharacteristic humility in the three books that are reviewed here.

1. The Books and the Authors

The books, all written in impeccable Amharic[3] and self-published, offer various thoughtful explanations regarding the significance of the elections and their tragic aftermath. The publication of the book by Berhanu Nega, an economist and a leading figure in the prominent coalition of opposition parties, has generated unprecedented excitement in Ethiopia—especially so because it was smuggled out of prison. Lidetu Ayalew, a member of the senior leadership of the same coalition, is widely considered, at least until very recently, a rising star among opposition politicians. Kiflu Tadesse, a former member of the central committee of the leading Marxist-Leninist party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party (EPRP), is a well-known author and an observer of the national elections.

All three authors offer deep insights into the country's rapidly changing political landscape. This review will focus on what the three authors teach us about the nature of and the prospects for Ethiopian democracy.

As the Dawn of Freedom Breaks is an engaging book that is divided into four parts. Part 1 raises, in a rather didactic tone, the question of why Ethiopia needs democracy and offers a generic but affirmative answer that freedom is constitutive of what it means to be human. Part 2 discusses the political and economic environment under which the elections took place, including why the ruling party feigned a commitment to free and fair elections for the first time in its history. The simple answer is overconfidence in its hold over the population coupled with eagerness to please donors who were increasingly strident about good governance as a prelude to substantially scaled-up development aid. Part 3 reflects on the tragic events that transpired between May and November of 2005. The issues covered include the post-election dispute resolution mechanism, the debate on whether to join parliament after it became clear that the rigging of the elections could not be reversed, and the debates on how best to continue the struggle outside the parliamentary process but within the existing legal framework. Part 4 ponders the question of whither Ethiopia is going following "the dawn of freedom", and ruminates on possible ways of extricating the democratization process from the current quagmire.

Weed Farming devotes three of its nine chapters to the 2005 elections. The first five chapters provide an autobiographical account of the author's six-year involvement in politics prior to the elections and the genesis of the first successful multiethnic political party—United Ethiopian Democratic Party (UEDP-Medhin).

Ginbot 7, named after the Ethiopian date of the May 15 national legislative elections, is divided into 12 chapters. The first three chapters describe the build up to the elections and the preparations made by the major participants. The next chapters describe the campaign phase and the casting of ballots. The remaining six chapters describe and analyze rather dispassionately the momentous aftermath of the elections. The author also offers ambivalent thoughts on where the country might go from there.

2. The Electoral Environment

For the benefit of those readers with little familiarity with Ethiopian politics, I shall make a brief digression into the socio-political context within which the elections took place. Constitutional rule, at any rate at the formal level, is not new to Ethiopians. In the past half century, they have participated in half a dozen parliamentary elections under a monarchist constitution (1955) that granted universal franchise and two quasi-socialist, republican constitutions (1987 and 1995).

The major players in the political contest of 2005 were political parties affiliated with the ruling coalition (EPRDF), the two opposition coalitions (UEDF and CUD),[4] and unaffiliated parties (especially the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement). Other actors included major civil society organizations and the donor community. Major non-participants with an influence on political developments include the exiled liberation fronts (especially the Oromo Liberation Front) and the activist segment of the Ethiopian Diaspora.

The ruling party is portrayed by the three authors as a neo-patrimonial party committed to a dangerous mix of ethnic-based governance (though under the rule of elites from the minority Tigreans[5]) and "revolutionary democracy." The hallmarks of revolutionary democracy, true to its neo-Stalinist roots, include centralism within the party, guardianship of the interests of workers and alienated ethnic groups, and vanguardism in relations with other political parties and mass organizations.

Kiflu (pp. 154-55) goes so far as to render rather starkly what has now become conventional wisdom, namely that Ethiopia currently has a Party-State system—a state within a state:

> Ethiopia today has two governments. The first is the one led by PM Meles Zenawi, which encompasses the offices of state ministers and directors at both the federal level and the regions. It is this visible government that is acknowledged by Ethiopians and the international community alike. The second is the "invisible state" which controls all levels of government from the office of the PM to prisons … This shadow government also controls a network of modern factories, banks, construction companies, import-export firms, wholesale and retail outlets… With a paid-up capital of over 4 billion birr [500 million USD] and over 60 enterprises, the ruling party's business empire towers over the modern economy.

According to Kiflu, TPLF's history of preemptive liquidation of its competitors during its days in the bush and its politicization of ethnicity have both created a climate of fear in the society. The most ubiquitous feature of ethnocentric democracy is a bewildering alphabet soup of liberation fronts which more often than not were established by a handful of urban-based intelligentsia on behalf of their respective "oppressed" ethnic group. The 1995 Constitution builds in political fragmentation along primordial and hence largely immutable boundaries.[6]

3. The Elections and Their Aftermath

A number of other considerations and developments are noted by the authors to show that the 2005 elections were qualitatively different from the largely uncontested elections held in 1995 and 2000. Firstly, to its credit, the ruling party went out of its way to promise free and fair elections. One explanation for this change of heart, emphasized by Berhanu, is the supreme confidence of the ruling party in its political machinery to deliver the votes. This apparently flawed judgment overlooked a number of its own weaknesses, including the fact that the cadre system was enfeebled by the constant reshuffle that followed the internal split within the TPLF leadership over the war with Eritrea (Clapham 2005), and the magnitude of the protest vote reflecting the deep antipathy of the majority of the population toward the regime.

Secondly, the fragmented opposition was willing to participate in the elections within the framework of the existing institutions. This was done notwithstanding Kinijit's serious reservations about key parts of the constitution, including ethnic-based regionalization, government ownership of all land, and the system for adjudicating constitutional disputes.

Thirdly, the donor community was pushing for multi-party elections that would meet minimum international standards. At the same time, the foreign patrons neither desired nor expected regime change by the ballot box. The Meles government was considered pro-poor and a reliable ally in the war against global terrorism. Berhanu bitterly takes this willful ignorance of the true nature of the regime as one that borders on the racist. And yet, the opposition leaders helplessly kept running to the Donor Assistance Group and the heads of the observer missions pleading in vain for meaningful mediation.

The ebbs and flows—rising hope dashed by a quick reversal of fortune—is worth a brief recounting. The pre-campaign phase was characterized by a number of notable developments, according to the three authors. The ruling party deployed its enormous war chest with financial giveaways and promises (cheap fertilizer for farmers, tax pardon and affordable housing for the urban poor), and mobilized its cadres as well as sections of the state bureaucracy. Hibret (represented by Beyene Petros and Merera Gudina, two academics turned veteran politicians) declared its intention to participate in the elections conditionally. The preconditions included the establishment of an independent and representative national board of elections, neutrality of all other state institutions in the elections, presence of impartial observers, equal access to the state media, and return of exiled parties to participate in the elections. However, Kinijit short-circuited the trickling of concessions by the government. Taking a fateful action that would haunt it later, Kinijit suddenly announced its intention to participate in the elections unconditionally. Led by a small group of academics and professionals (most notably, Hailu Shawl, Lidetu Ayalew, and Berhanu Nega), it had managed in a few months to electrify the elec-

torate by making non-violent regime change a distinct possibility. The alliance surprisingly managed to put a temporary lid on internal personal and party rivalries to field 1500 candidates in 427 districts.

By all accounts, the campaign phase was relatively the freest in the history of Ethiopian elections. The ruling party used the advantages of incumbency to tout its achievements—mainly economic growth, stability and ethnic rights. The opposition parties, though constrained by limited resources and inadequate preparation, mobilized their constituencies mostly by direct campaigning and participation in organized debates. All the authors agree that these debates, which were broadcast on state-owned radio and television, accomplished two momentous things for the opposition. Firstly, the opposition gained access to a national audience and this, *inter alia*, conveyed the stunning signal to the traditionally deferential rural voter that the Emperor in Addis has no clothes after all! Secondly, the debaters representing the opposition easily trounced the under-prepared party hacks in terms of both policy platform and delivery (Berhanu, pp. 321-345). Nothing dramatizes the turn of events more than the mass rallies in Addis Ababa on the eve of the elections which drew a million people for EPRDF's rally (dubbed *the human wave*) and over two million for Kinijit's celebration of democracy rally (dubbed *the human tsunami)*.

This political drama is yet to climax. On the very evening of Election Day, the Prime Minister appeared on national TV to proclaim a ban on all demonstrations and public gatherings. The following day, long before half of the districts completed the counting of votes, EPRDF gave the charade a degree of finality by announcing that it has been returned to power by winning over sixty percent of the 547 parliamentary seats (as against 52 for Hibret affiliates and 109 for Kinijit affiliates). It was apparently the early returns from the towns, where the opposition had made a clean sweep, that alarmed the ruling party into making the preemptive declaration, thereby plunging the country into a deep political crisis.

What followed was a hastily designed appeals process involving the canvassing of 299 contested parliamentary seats. This fateful process exposed the Achilles heel of the Ethiopian political system—the gaping power imbalance between the ruling party and the opposition parties, the extent to which the ruling party would engage what international human rights organizations denounced as irresponsible scaremongering about inter-communal pogroms and violent suppression of peaceful protest, the fragility of the coalitions among opposition parties, and the primacy of geopolitical interest over democracy building for the West.

The picture of the electoral dynamics that can be gleaned from the three books is rather murky and contentious, but a brief synopsis is in order:

- The opposition, having recognized the Constitution and the institutions established to enforce it (the national board of elections, the judiciary, the parliament, etc.), had very little choice but to accept the authority of the same institutions for adjudication. The final authority to approve the credibility of the challenges to the preliminary vote tallies was left to the National Electoral Board (which accorded a rerun for only 39 districts). Predictably, the opposition parties were left with no choice but to go to the courts or abandon the fight. They were unwilling to do either.

  Facing popular pressure against joining parliament but clearly lacking a strong organizational base to mount sustainable street action (along the lines of Georgia and the Ukraine), the opposition was caught in a Faustian bargain that was in no small part its own making.[7] Hibret would soon split into two factions as the leaders based in Ethiopia chose to join parliament. Kinijit was also consumed by internal debates. Lidetu feels vindicated by subsequent events, having made a strong case for a two-pronged strategy: mass action to ensure respect for the people's vote and a willingness to join parliament in the hope of achieving a decisive victory in the 2010 elections.
- The head of Kinijit, Hailu Shawl, comes out as the most determined to reverse the rigged elections primarily by calling for redoing them outright. Berhanu intimates that he, and perhaps a majority of the leadership of Kinijit, was not against joining parliament initially—the rationale being for the sake of peace and stability. The coalition eventually issued what it called necessary and sufficient conditions for joining parliament: (1) the National Electoral Board has to be restructured to be able to operate independently, (2) equal access must be granted to state media for all political parties, (3) the legal system must be allowed to operate independently of the ruling party, (4) an independent commission of inquiry must be established to investigate the June 2005 killings, (5) the police and the armed forces should stay out of politics, (6) the unfair changes to rules and procedures of the Parliament and the council of the city of Addis Ababa should be rescinded, (7) all political prisoners should be released and forcibly closed party offices reopened, and (8) an independent commission must be established to oversee the implementation of these actions. While the Kinijit leadership wallowed in indecisiveness but soon opted for public consultations on what to do next, the impatient urban youth began taking matters into their own hands.
- The last line in the sand in these cascading concessions[8] was a proposal, a stripped down version of one produced by Hibret in the previous summer, for a government of national unity. This proposal fatefully jettisoned the fight for honoring the people's votes by accepting, albeit grudgingly, the EPRDF as the winner of the elections. In return, the opposition called for electoral reforms to ensure that future elections are free and fair. Adept at taking advantage of the structural weaknesses of the opposition, the ruling party categorically rejected this last offer and instead issued its own categorical ultimatum: join Parliament, or retire from politics, or go to the bush.
- A belated call for a boycott of EPRDF-affiliated enterprises and a social boycott of those who participated in persecuting innocent citizens predictably ended in another wave of unrest in November. Berhanu (p. 613) sums up the situation this way: "The opposition was quite willing to grant the ruling party another term on the condition that the constitutional order be respected and a level playing field ensured in order to pave the way for a genuine process of democratization … The EPRDF, fearful of losing power in the near future, instead opted to jail opposition leaders, kill many innocent citizens, imprison tens of thousands more, and put an end to this game of democracy. It demonstrated an unflinching determination to rule by force for the foreseeable future… and inevitably plunged the country into a political crisis whose end is not yet in sight."
- The saga ended predictably with a number of elected opposition members choosing to join an emasculated Parliament and the municipal council of Addis Ababa. The government proceeded to wage a war of annihilation on the remnants of the opposition parties and the free press and to restructure its own organizations—an action that has elicited an unmistakable trend of implosion for ruling and opposition parties alike.

4. Milestone or Millstone?

The 2005 elections made it starkly clear that Ethiopian democracy is at the cross-roads. It stands between two ideologies (socialism or liberalism) and two nationalisms (ethnocentric or Ethiopian). The average voter, a subsistence farmer, was offered a choice between two models of governance—one that is familiar but repudiated, the other enticing but unattainable.

The familiar is the W-model of Revolutionary Democracy, so called after Woyane—the popular name for TPLF. Its ideal constituencies are ethnic-oriented, class-conscious, and survival-seeking communities which can be ruled with the right combination of economic growth, patronage and fear. In the W-model, control over people rests on control over economic resources, and the voters are seen as means rather than ends. True to form, elections are understood here as solely regime-affirming exercises.

The contender is the composite K-model of Social-Liberal Democracy, named after Kinijit. The voter who is expected to find inspiration in Kinijit's election manifesto is one who is freedom-loving, Ethiopian nationalist, and socially responsible. All it takes to mobilize such citizenry is an opposition with a pro-poor program and capable of winning elections. A competitive multiparty system is envisaged in this model with individual rights having primacy over group rights, and power vested in democratic institutions rather than in individual leaders.

The critical issue then turns on what it takes to effect a democratic transition from a poverty-cum-tyranny trap to some sort of accountable governance system, democratic or not. The literature points to the requisite attributes while saying little about how to obtain them: a progressive political class, a capable state, and strong party and civil society organizations. The presumption is that, without these, elections per se, even where they are relatively clean, do not effect a successful—albeit slow—transition to modern democracy. One can, of course, safely counter that the attributes listed above are not causes of democracy—they are the very definition of a mature democracy.

The central problem of how to give fledgling democracies in Africa a firm footing cannot be assumed away so easily. Defenders of religion sometimes argue compellingly that Darwinian evolutionary processes can take you from the simple to the complex, but they cannot take you from Nothing to Something. These considerations yield what I take to be the first lesson of the 2005 Ethiopian elections. We may call it *Hidet-Yizet*[9] Paradox 1: "Popular participation even on a level playing field might take you from political infancy to political adolescence, but it cannot enable you to take the great leap from authoritarianism to democracy."

In this regard, Berhanu makes the perceptive observation that Ethiopian political parties are modeled after Leninist organizations precisely because the only models familiar to the intelligentsia are those of the Left—hierarchical, authoritarian, cliquish, and intensely personal. One can also add that they also conform to the arguably illiberal civic and political traditions of most Ethiopian communities. The hero is the proverbial "big man" or *Gobez* who generously shares the spoils of social violence with his followers and for whom tolerance of dissent is not high on the list of civic virtues. Hence, the prevalence of distressingly high levels of distrust which breed factionalism, myopia, and unbridled opportunism. The modern version of this leadership model is captured by *Hidet-Yizet* Paradox 2: "The Big Man matters more than the Big Principle or the Big Rule. In coalitions, the Big Party matters more than the Collective Will, and procedural fairness matters more than substantive policy platform."

The third lesson has to do with the issue of responsible leadership by the opposition when the cost to citizens of revealing their true political preferences is significantly lowered by credible promises.[10] As the Chinese Cultural Revolution amply demonstrated, "let a thousand flowers bloom" is a double-edged sword indeed. Rulers and aspiring rulers alike tend to underestimate their control over the boomerang effects of unleashing the pent-up anger of the long-suffering masses. By reducing widespread preference falsification, episodes of remarkable political openness are bound to expose the soft underbelly of popular opposition to the regime while at the same time fatally deligitimizing the rulers themselves. That is because, experiencing the fleeting power of popular consent inherent in the ballot box, citizens overcome a paralyzing fear of authority. The underside is that it also prematurely exposes poor voters to punitive actions and the mirage of freedom may very well discredit democracy itself for some time to come.

A vexed dilemma for emerging democracies in Africa with weak civic organizations, our fourth lesson, is that they need an external power (AU, UN, big donors) to arbitrate existential contests between implacable political "enemies." Sad to say, such benevolent external agents of restraint are nowhere to be found. The Nicaraguan case is an instructive exception to the rule, at least outside the European periphery.

Is there another way out, perhaps a bootstraps strategy? This question is at the heart of the deep fissures between Berhanu and Lidetu. Berhanu believes that the 2005 elections constitute a critical stepping stone for Ethiopian democracy precisely because they ushered in the dawn of freedom—the beginning of the end of totalitarian politics. Lidetu reads the post-election developments as a major defeat for Ethiopian democracy. He characterizes the endless equivocation of the Kinijit leadership as capitulation and likens it to a futile exercise of "farming weed." If its preferred strategy were pursued, each camp incredulously argues, the 2010 legislative elections will have been acceptably democratic.

What is incontrovertible, however, is that the ruling party was steadfast in its uncompromising political stance in the face of a severe erosion of its credibility as a

force for progress; the opposition parties showed an iron will to push for meaningful change but lacked a clear plan or an exit strategy; and the Ethiopian voters, though unable to overcome coordination failure, took advantage of the fleeting window of opportunity to reveal their true political preferences for the first time. One can only hope that the election fiasco signifies nothing but the painful birth pangs of a robust democratic order. *A luta continua.*

Notes

1. Christopher Clapham, "Comments on the Ethiopian Crisis," University of Cambridge, 7 November 2005, http://www.ethiomedia.com/fastpress/clapham_on_ethiopian_crisis.html.
2. EU Election Observer Mission, *Ethiopia: Legislative Elections 2005 (Final Report)*, May 17, 2006, http://www.ethiomedia.com/courier/eu_observers_report.pdf.
3. Amharic, with its own Geez script, is the official language of Ethiopia. The English translations of the book titles and the quotations are all mine. I address the authors by their first or given names since Ethiopians do not have family surnames. The Ethiopian calendar, which is based on the older Julian calendar, is 7-8 years and a week or more behind the Gregorian calendar.
4. The Tigrai People's Liberation Front (TPLF) is the core party of the ruling coalition known as the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Party (EPRDF). The United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) is a coalition of ethnic and multiethnic parties based at home and abroad which was established in 1995. The Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) was formed a few months before the 2005 elections by two well-established parties (All Ethiopia Unity Party and the Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party) and two small latecomer parties (Kestedamena or "Rainbow," and the Ethiopian Democratic League). Henceforth, we will use the Amharic shortened names for UEDF (Hibret) and CUD (Kinijit).
5. The 1994 National Population and Housing Census shows the following demographic structure: (a) ethnicity—Amhara (32%), Oromo (32%), Tigrean (6%), Somali (6%), Gurage (4%) and the rest (20%); and (b) religion—Christian (62%), Muslim (33%), and the rest (5%). See Berhanu Abegaz, "Ethiopia: A Model Nation of Minorities," http://www.ethiomedia.com/newpress/census_portrait.pdf. Regional federal units have been established since 1994 along these ethnic lines. Parenthetically, although religion and region are salient features of its polity, Ethiopia lacks a legacy of purely ethnic-based states of any consequence.
6. Andreas Eshete and Alem Habtu argue that the ethnic-based federal constitutional dispensation is considered by the ruling party its singular achievement since seizing state power. See Andreas Eshete, **"**Implementing Human Rights and a Democratic Constitution in Ethiopia**,"** *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 21, No. 1/2 (1993), pp. 8-13; Alem Habtu, "Ethnic Pluralism as an Organizing Principle of the Ethiopian Federation, *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol. 28 (2004), pp. 91-123.