The 2005 Ethiopian Elections: Millstone or Milestone?

Berhanu Abegaz

[As the Dawn of Freedom Breaks: Ethiopian Democracy Imperiled with Derailment] by Berhanu Nega

Ye’Arem Irsha

[Weed Farming] by Lidetu Ayalew


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, the election process was marred by irregularities and a lack of transparency. Subsequent complaints and appeals mechanisms did not provide an effective remedy.

The ruling party, reading the unmistakable political class address with remarkable candor and genocidal intent. These are some of the harsh words used by Berhanu Nega, an economist and a leading figure in opposition parties, to describe the current political landscape.

Berhanu Nega, in his book "As the Dawn of Freedom Breaks: Ethiopian Democracy Imperiled with Derailment," reflects on the 2005 elections and their aftermath. He argues that the elections were marred by irregularities and a lack of transparency, which undermined the legitimacy of the outcome.

The ruling party, Berhanu Nega contends, is portrayed by the international community as a beacon of hope for democracy, particularly after the May 15, 2005 legislative elections. However, the author argues, this was not the case.

The elections were conducted in a largely peaceful manner, but the counting and aggregation of the votes were marred by irregularities. The ruling party deployed thousands of armed forces to ensure that the elections proceeded without incident. The opposition parties, on the other hand, faced significant challenges in organizing their campaigns and accessing the media.

The results of the election were announced on May 16, 2005, with the ruling party winning a majority of seats. However, the opposition parties disputed the results, accusing the ruling party of rigging the election.

The book "As the Dawn of Freedom Breaks" is an engaging read, providing a detailed account of the events leading up to the elections. It serves as a useful resource for those interested in understanding the political dynamics of Ethiopia during this period.

The 2005 elections were a turning point in Ethiopian politics. They ushered in a new era of political competition, with the ruling party, under the leadership of Meles Zenawi, facing a more competitive opposition.

The elections also marked the beginning of a period of political instability and conflict in Ethiopia. The post-election period was characterized by widespread protests, violence, and political divisions.

The book "As the Dawn of Freedom Breaks" offers valuable insights into the political dynamics of Ethiopia during this period, and it serves as a useful resource for those interested in understanding the political developments in the country.
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 the point where 1500 candidates won in 235 districts. By all accounts, the campaign phase was relatively free of the freest in the history of Ethiopian elections. The ruling party used the advantage of having the ballot box on its side 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 agreements that the deliberations, 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 debates represented the opposition easily pronounced the underhanded party hacks in terms of both policy platform and debate. Berhanu Nega (1944–) is the Big Thing. 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 the human wave and over two million for Kinjikt’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 assemblies. The military takeover by winning over sixty percent of the 547 parliamentary seats (as against 52 for Hibret affiliates and 109 for Kinjikt affiliates) was it. The opposition had made a clean sweep, that alarmed the ruling party into making the preemptive declaration, thereby plunging the country into a paralyzing final crisis.

What followed was a hasty designed appeals process involving the canvassing of 299 contested parliamentary seats. This forma两张的 contemporary challenge is the political structure of the Ethiopian political system—the gap in power imbalance between the ruling party and the opposition parties, the extent to which they are nowhere to be found. The Nicaraguan case is an instructive exception to the rule, because 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—none that is familiar but repudiated, the other empty and unsustainable.

The familiar is the W-model of Revolutionary Democracy, so called after Woyane—the popular name for TPLF. Its ideal constituents are the 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, the police and the armed forces rest 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 contestant is the composite K-model of Social-Liberal Democracy, named after Kinjikt. The electoral process is an instructive exception to the rule, because the only 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 preemption 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 attribute that the attributes listed above are not causes of democracy—they are the very definition of a mature democracy. The general problem of how to rid itself of the ruling party is not to be surmounted by the adoption of a new constitution. The government has thus far been unswayed in its resolve to maintain the status quo to forestall the election of a government of national unity. For his part, Berhanu feels vindicated in the W-model, the police and the armed forces rest 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.

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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**


3. Amhara, 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 Tigre 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 lanceromer parties (Kestalamena or “Rainbow,” and the Ethiopian Democratic League). Henceforth, we will use the Amhara 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.