

BRIEFING

THE 2008 ETHIOPIAN LOCAL ELECTIONS: THE RETURN OF ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM

LOVISE AALEN AND KJETIL TRONVOLL

ETHIOPIA CARRIED OUT LOCAL ELECTIONS FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD (*kebele*) and county (*woreda*) assemblies on 13 and 20 April 2008, respectively.¹ By law, these elections were supposed to be conducted in 2005, but the chaotic period after the general elections that year made it impossible to carry out the local polls. Considering the formative character of the 2005 general elections, where the opposition for the first time challenged the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), and the dramatic political crackdown in the post-election period, the conduct of the 2008 local elections is important in understanding the status and direction of Ethiopia's overall process of democratization. The constrained political context and government strategies of intimidation and harassment – leading the main opposition parties to withdraw from the local elections – signal the return of electoral authoritarianism in Ethiopia.

Background: the 2005 elections

Since the regime change in 1991 Ethiopia has fitted the description of a hybrid regime.² The country has a democratic constitution and a form of multi-party elections normally linked to liberal democracies, but its practices are highly authoritarian and basic human rights are undermined. As

Lovise Aalen (Lovise.Aalen@sksk.mil.no) is Associate Professor at the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy. She lived in Ethiopia and conducted research there from 2004–8. Kjetil Tronvoll (kjetil.tronvoll@nchr.uio.no) is Professor at the University of Oslo, Norwegian Centre for Human Rights. He has undertaken research on political development in Eritrea and Ethiopia since the fall of the Derg regime in 1991.

1. By-elections for the Addis Ababa City Council and other seats in the national and regional parliaments that were vacant due to the Coalition for Unity and Democracy's (CUD) boycott after the 2005 polls were also conducted at the same time as the local polls.

2. Larry Diamond, 'Thinking about hybrid regimes', *Journal of Democracy* 13, 2 (2002), pp. 21–35.

in other electoral authoritarian states,³ multi-party elections are largely a means to sustain the incumbent regime's own power. Free competition between parties is not allowed and voters have been under severe pressure to vote for the ruling party. This ensured that the EPRDF won more than 95 percent of the votes in all the elections conducted until 2005.

In the run-up to the polls for national and regional parliaments in 2005, however, it seemed that the ruling party was willing to permit more genuine competition between parties, at least in urban settings and through national media.⁴ An unprecedented level of openness was observed – opposition parties gained access to state-owned radio and television and were given a free hand to organize large rallies in the capital. The pre-election period was nevertheless just a liberalization intermezzo. Although the opposition won a large majority in Addis Ababa and other major towns, the National Election Board confirmed a country-wide victory for the EPRDF after a highly dubious re-run and recount process in disputed constituencies.⁵ The incumbent's national win was ensured essentially through the continuous control of local government structures in the countryside.⁶ After the elections, the government used excessive force in their clampdown on urban protests against the controversial election results, killing around 200 and detaining and charging leaders of the main opposition party, civil society organizations, and journalists with serious crimes. Thousands of youths were also picked up from the neighbourhoods of Addis Ababa and other regional cities and sent to short-term detention camps without being charged.

A neutralized opposition

In the April 2008 polls, members of the local *kebele* (neighbourhood) and *woreda* (county) councils were elected essentially without competition between different parties. In a great majority of the constituencies, EPRDF candidates stood unchallenged, as the opposition candidates either boycotted, were pressured to withdraw, or had been prevented from registering. The major opposition party from 2005, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) did not take part in the elections, although splinter

3. Andreas Schedler (ed.), *Electoral Authoritarianism: The dynamics of unfree competition* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, CO and London, 2006).

4. On the conduct and understanding of the 2005 elections, see Jon Abbink, 'Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath', *African Affairs* 105, 419 (2006) pp. 173–99; John W. Harbeson, 'Ethiopia's extended transition', *Journal of Democracy* 16, 4 (2005) pp. 144–58; René Lefort, 'Powers – *mengist* – and peasants in rural Ethiopia: the May 2005 elections', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, 2 (2007) pp. 253–73; Terrence Lyons, 'Ethiopia in 2005: the beginning of a transition?' in *CSIS Africa Notes* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 2006) pp. 1–8.

5. EU-EOM, 'Ethiopia Legislative Elections 2005 Final Report' (European Union Election Observer Mission, Brussels, 2005).

6. Lefort, 'Powers', p. 3.

groups tried to field candidates in Addis Ababa and a few other areas. Two other competitors from the 2005 elections, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) initially intended to stand, but withdrew due to harassment and intimidation of their candidates and supporters.

The ruling party tried to explain the lack of competition in the local polls by the fact that the opposition was factionalized and disorganized, and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's special adviser Bereket Simon added that the opposition boycott was merely a tactic to 'escape from facing defeat'.⁷ The opposition, on the other hand, emphasized that the ruling party had actively undermined their position, by aiding the dissenting and less popular factions of the parties.

While it seems apparent that internal conflicts within the opposition parties – in particular the CUD – have influenced their ability to mobilize, it is clear that the ruling party has exploited these splits in its favour in order to weaken the opposition. This can be illustrated particularly clearly in the case of the CUD. The detention of the CUD leadership and thousands of party members in November 2005 had a detrimental effect on the unity of the coalition and the party's ability to develop and consolidate its organization.⁸ The CUD leaders were released from prison in July 2007 after receiving a presidential pardon which was triggered by a letter from the group, acknowledging 'mistakes committed both individually and collectively' in relation to the 2005 elections.⁹ Since their release from jail, many of the CUD leaders have spent time abroad without contact with their home constituencies. Concomitantly, conflicts between the different leaders have erupted and the original four-party coalition has collapsed.

The consequences of the CUD collapse were further exacerbated by decisions made by the National Electoral Board ahead of the local elections. Instead of facilitating the participation in the polls of the largest parliamentary group of the party (led by Temesken Zewdie), the CUD party name and licence were given to a minor splinter group led by Ayele Chamiso, and the powerful V-sign ballot symbol from 2005 was given to a previous member of the coalition, EDP-Medhin, led by Lidetu Ayalew. This effectively helped to prevent the emergence of a coherent CUD profile in the local elections, as the core symbols of the party were dispersed among contending factions.

Similar government tactics were also used towards one of the members of the UEDF coalition, the Oromo National Congress (ONC). According to

7. 'Ethiopians vote in polls, ruling party seen as winning', Reuters, 20 April 2008.

8. Human Rights Watch, 'Ethiopia: hidden crack-down in rural areas' (news release, New York, 13 January 2006); and Amnesty International, 'Ethiopia: recent arrests of opposition leaders and police killings of 46 demonstrators' (news release, AFR 25/019/2005, 11 November 2005).

9. Amnesty International, 'Prisoners of conscience set free in Ethiopia' (news release, 23 July 2007).

the founding leader of ONC, Dr Merera Gudina, the party licence and name were given to a marginal splinter group in order to undermine the party and create confusion among the voters. Thus, in order to take part in the 2008 polls the original party had to be renamed, and is now called Oromo People's Congress (OPC). Voters who were not fully informed about this change thus risked casting their vote for the minor, allegedly government-friendly, faction instead of the original party.

A flawed electoral exercise

The ruling party won all but a handful of seats in the local councils, regaining control of the capital Addis Ababa, and all but one of the 39 parliamentary by-elections—¹⁰ diametrically opposite results to those of 2005, when the opposition won all the seats but one in Addis Ababa. It seems clear, from the evidence available, that the 2008 local elections in Ethiopia were seriously flawed. The independent agency Human Rights Watch carried out field research in the run-up to the elections and documented systematic patterns of repression and abuse that 'rendered the elections meaningless in many areas'.¹¹ They noted that local party officials systematically targeted opposition candidates for violence, intimidation, and other human rights abuses from the start of the registration period three months prior to the polls.

The nation-wide strategy to intimidate, harass, and restrict the registration of opposition candidates resulted in the UEDF only managing to register 6,000 of 20,000 prospective candidates;¹² while OFDM was only capable of registering 2 percent of the 6,000 candidates it wanted to put forward. OFDM pulled out of the elections immediately prior to election day, as its chairman Bulcha Demeksa accused the National Election Board and EPRDF officials of vote rigging, harassment, and intimidation on such a scale that his party, a significant force in Wollega in 2005, failed to win a single seat. 'Our hopes and aspirations for democracy have been dashed,' Bulcha Demeksa announced, 'and at this moment we appeal to our members, supporters and the people of Ethiopia in general to support us in our peaceful struggle against this emerging absolutism and disregard for the supremacy of the law.'¹³

In an interview conducted with Merera Gudina, co-chairman of UEDF, in the aftermath of the elections, he listed a number of widespread electoral

10. The one seat lost followed a registration error as a result of which the EPRDF candidacy was cancelled, thus opening the way for the opposition candidate to win the seat.

11. Human Rights Watch, 'Ethiopia: repression sets stage for non-competitive elections' (Human Rights Watch, Washington, DC, 2008), p. 1.

12. *Ibid.*

13. BBC, 'Clean sweep for Ethiopian party' (19 May 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/ft/-/2/hi/africa/7408185.stm>>).

violations which forced his party to withdraw from the polls. Most importantly, Merera Gudina stressed that the National Election Board (NEB) has become 'a player and not a referee', with handpicked EPRDF cadres serving in the electoral management and restricting opposition candidates from registering,¹⁴ a point also made by OFDM chairman Bulcha Demeksa.¹⁵ NEB chairman Merga Bekana, on the other hand, brushed aside all criticism and characterized accusations of vote rigging and manipulation as 'just a fabrication'.¹⁶ The NEB chairman, like the government, was concerned that the opposition boycott would undermine the democratic legitimacy of the elections, and thus denounced the boycott as 'unhealthy and illegal'. It should be seen merely as an excuse for the opposition's own failure, as a statement from the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry explained: 'They [the boycotting opposition] had failed to gain sufficient support, but rather than put the blame on others they should have concentrated on improving their own position and leaving the final judgment to the people.'¹⁷

Strength in numbers

The opposition's ability to mobilize the voters and gain support in the 2005 national polls came as a rude awakening for the ruling EPRDF. The incumbent party had not expected that the liberalization would entail any real challenge to its position, but had calculated that instead it could keep control in its hands at the same time as profiting from an enhanced democratic image. So the EPRDF's losses in urban areas and among the youth taught the party a lesson: strong measures had to be taken to ensure that its weak performance in the 2005 polls would never happen again. The EPRDF spent its time efficiently, and increased the numbers of party members from 760,000 in 2005 to 4 million in 2008.¹⁸

To make this happen, the party employed a carrot and stick strategy: the incentive of microcredit programmes to attract young members, and pressure on government employees who were told that rejection of membership in the party would endanger their employment or lead to involuntary deployment in peripheral areas. Memories of the harsh measures taken against the post-election protesters in 2005 were also contributing; they demonstrated that opposition leaders and supporters would pay dearly if they seriously challenged the EPRDF.

14. Interview, Merera Gudina, Addis Ababa, 30 April 2008.

15. Voice of America (news bulletin, 16 April 2008, <<http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2008-04/2008-04-16-voa69.cfm>>).

16. *Ibid.*

17. Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'A week in the Horn' (news release, 18 April 2008).

18. Interview, Hailemariam Dessalegn, adviser to the PM and chair of the election committee of the EPRDF, Addis Ababa, February 2008.

Another method to maintain control was to introduce a reform to enhance ‘participatory democracy’ by drastically increasing the number of candidates for the *kebele* and *woreda* councils. In the *kebele* council, for example, the numbers were increased from 15 members to a maximum of 300. This increase required parties intending to run in all constituencies to enter a total of around 3.6 million candidates. Such a huge and nation-wide mobilization of candidates was possible only for the EPRDF, while the opposition parties were unable to compete for a great majority of the posts. No wonder, then, that the outcome of the elections resembles old Soviet plebiscite rituals; the EPRDF won all but a handful of 3.6 million seats.¹⁹ The consequence of this electoral reform is thus clear. In a *kebele* (which has 1,000–3,000 inhabitants) the calculation presents a totalitarian picture when up to one third of the inhabitants may be members of the local government councils, and a similar number are members of the party, resulting in overwhelming control of the local community.

Surprisingly, the number of registered voters was slightly higher in the non-competitive 2008 polls (about 26 million) than in the contested 2005 elections. This may indicate that voters have been pressured to register, or some other tactic to inflate the number of registered voters. For instance, information obtained from an independent source revealed that in one *kebele* in Yeka sub-city in Addis Ababa, only 314 people – out of more than 8,000 eligible voters – had registered to vote at the close of the registration period. Considering the total population of the country (about 80 million), the number of registered voters is actually quite low—around half of the eligible voter population. Nevertheless, and despite the non-participation of the main opposition parties, the government still claims that the elections reflect a popular, democratic legitimacy due to the claimed 93 percent turnout of registered voters.²⁰

Local elections as the struggle for daily bread

Overall, a major reason for local suppression of opposition candidates seems to be that so much is at stake in the control of the local government structures. The *kebele* and *woreda* structures remain the key institutions for controlling local communities and are the main service providers. For members of the local councils, re-election is a matter of keeping their daily bread; and for new candidates, membership in one of the councils is viewed

19. BBC, ‘Clean sweep for Ethiopian party’ (19 May 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/ft/-/2/hi/africa/7408185.stm>>).

20. ‘The size of registration and the substantial turnout demonstrate the determination of people to exercise their democratic rights. Scepticism about public participation has been proved groundless.’ Ethiopian Foreign Affairs Ministry, ‘A week in the Horn’ (News release, 18 April 2008, <http://www.mfa.gov.et/Press_Section/Week_Horn_Africa_Apr_18_2008.htm>).

as a way of getting access to scarce state resources. After the 2005 post-election crisis, the control of the *kebele* and *woreda* gained in importance. As a reaction to the government's crackdown on the opposition, international donors decided in December 2005 to freeze direct budget support to the central government, and instead channel funds directly to the recipients on the ground (in the *woreda* and the *kebele*) through the so-called basic service provision programme. More resources than ever before are therefore at stake, and the loss of even one seat makes a difference to the particular family affected, as well as to the local communities. Africa director of Human Rights Watch, Georgette Gagnon, stressed this point when explaining the abuses taking place as part of the electoral process: 'The same local level officials who are directly responsible for much of the day-to-day political repression that occurs in Ethiopia have their jobs at stake in these elections. As such, their efforts to intimidate ordinary people into returning them to office are especially intense.'²¹ This corroborates findings in another study which argues that elections are one of the main precipitators of human rights abuses in Ethiopia.²² Moreover, the ruling party may already at this stage be preparing for the 2010 federal elections. As explained by Merera Gudina, co-chairman of the UEDF opposition coalition: 'I think EPRDF decided that they allowed the local cadres to defend their daily bread. If they were allowed to do this now, they will also defend the top cadres in 2010. This is the base of the structure of intimidation.'²³

International actors and reactions to the local elections

The international community changed its role from that of an advocate of democratic rights in 2005, to that of an acquiescent bystander in 2008. Both collectively and as individual actors, the donor community actively engaged in the 2005 electoral process: it pressured the government to open up space for opposition activities and to accept the deployment of international observers from the European Union; the EU Commission attempted to encourage negotiation between the EPRDF and the opposition after the polls; the Donor Assistance Group (DAG) condemned post-election violence; and direct budget support was subsequently frozen. In the 2008 local elections, however, the international community was on the whole silent and absent. Opposition leaders met with the DAG several times throughout 2007, in order to discuss the upcoming elections. The opposition was in particular asking the DAG to help fund training of local observers for the elections, as the government had prohibited international observers from

21. Human Rights Watch, 'Ethiopia: repression sets stage', p. 3.

22. Kjetil Tronvoll, 'Human rights in federal Ethiopia: when ethnic identity is a political stigma', *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 15, 1 (2008), pp. 49–79.

23. Interview, Merera Gudina, co-chairman of the UEDF, Addis Ababa, 30 April 2008.

the polls and had told foreign diplomatic staff to stay away from polling stations during election day. Learning from 2005, the ruling party did not want the elections to be under international scrutiny and judgement,²⁴ and argued that local elections were normally not a matter of international interest. In a letter sent to the DAG of 26 December 2007, the three party leaders Beyene Petros (UEDF), Temesken Zewdie (CUDP), and Bulcha Demeksa (OFDM) desperately pleaded with the donors to start preparing for the elections, and argued: 'We are drawing your attention to this critical matter of election observing because we are afraid that the manner in which the NEB is currently running the process leading up to the elections is predictably a way to a non-consensual election outcome.'²⁵

International donors were interested in funding voter education and domestic election observation, but the preparations were delayed and on such a limited scale that they had little impact. The voter education took place after the voter registration had finished, and many of the Ethiopian NGOs that had intended to observe the elections were not given licences from the National Electoral Board and were thus prevented from doing their job. No central coordinating unit of experts to train local observers (as requested by the opposition leaders) was established, and the embassies in general washed their hands of the whole exercise, for fear of provoking the EPRDF government. Furthermore, by neither supporting nor deploying observers, the donor community could keep quiet in the aftermath, as they supposedly had no substantial and independent observations as a basis for judgement.²⁶ The strong US support for Meles Zenawi and the EPRDF government, as part of the 'war on terror', is thought to serve as an impediment to consolidating international pressure on the EPRDF to follow its own constitution and universal democratic standards and procedures.²⁷

Concluding remarks: What hope for 2010?

Considering the events in the country since the highly contested and disputed 2005 elections in the light of the conduct of the 2008 local elections,

24. The critical statements from the European Union observer team leader, Anna Gomez, in the aftermath of the 2005 elections made the Ethiopian government describe the European Union team as partisan, exceeding their mandate as neutral observers.

25. 'Observing the upcoming local and by-elections', letter to the donor community, 26 December 2007, Addis Ababa.

26. The US State Department, for instance, was 'troubled' by claims of irregularities in the elections; however, as emphasized in its statement: 'We did not have observers out for local elections. So it's very difficult to make a judgement about the claims of irregularities in these local elections' (Agence France-Presse news report, 19 May 2008). The same report comments: 'The US said Monday it was troubled by claims of irregularities in Ethiopia's elections last month after weekend results showed that the ruling party won nearly all the seats.'

27. This is confirmed by European diplomats in Addis Ababa (Interview, Addis Ababa, 4 May 2008).

it seems clear that the status and direction of Ethiopia's overall process of democratization is dismal. Ethiopia expert and senior researcher with the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, Chris Albin-Lackey, views the local elections as 'a stark illustration of just how far Ethiopia's political space has been closed off since the limited opening that preceded the 2005 polls'.²⁸ In terms of democracy, the country has turned the clock back more than 15 years; the polarized and oppressive political context seen today resembles the situation after the break-up of the transitional government in 1992 and the pull-out of the opposition from the local elections at that time.

The opposition parties in Ethiopia are equally depressed and pessimistic about the future direction of democracy in the country. 'These elections weren't even good enough to be rigged,' asserts Bulcha Demeksa, the chairman of OFDM. 'A genuine dictatorship has been evolving.'²⁹ On the prospects for 2010, OPC chairman Dr Merera Gudina explains: 'As things now stand – hopeless. But between now and 2010, things may happen if the US pushes for it. Unless pressured, nothing will happen and I see no future for Ethiopian democracy as things stand now.'³⁰

It is of course too early to conclude what strategies and possible pressure the US and the donor group will apply on Ethiopia; however, considering the events since 2005, it is highly unlikely that we will see radical changes. No matter which administration takes power in Washington, the war on terror will for the immediate future define US policies towards the Horn of Africa, where Ethiopia is the US's main ally, preventing strong criticism or sanctions. Likewise, the international community's work towards fulfilling the UN Millennium Development Goals will prevent any large-scale cut-backs in development aid to Ethiopia, because of the demographic pressure the 80 million poor people in Ethiopia exert on the poverty statistics of the world. Meles Zenawi knows this well. When the Donors Assistance Group tried to play hard-ball with him and suspended direct budget support in the aftermath of the 2005 election crackdown, he calmly told them to pack up and go home if they weren't interested in supporting the development of the country. After a few weeks, all donor countries caved in and resumed full development assistance to the country.

Thus the Ethiopian opposition cannot rely on the international community for help in pushing for true democratization in the country. Recent events indicate that the opposition groups have realized that they need to cooperate and stand together to struggle for their democratic rights. Since the 2008 local election two new political platforms have been formed. Four opposition groups have established the 'Forum for Democratic Dialogue in

28. Michael Deibert, 'A tangled political landscape raises questions about African ally of the US' (News report, Inter Press Service, 21 June 2008).

29. *Ibid.*

30. Interview, Dr Merera Gudina, chairman of OPC, Addis Ababa, 30 April 2008.

Ethiopia' in order to resolve problems among themselves with the aim of participating jointly in the 2010 federal elections.³¹ Moreover, an alliance resembling the old CUD has also been established, called the Unity for Democracy and Justice Party (UDJP) but also known as *Andinet* (meaning 'united' in Amharic). Other groups, however, have said that the only viable path to ousting the current government is armed struggle.

Whether the ruling EPRDF government will open up sufficient political space for the legal opposition to build their organizational capacities and consolidate political platforms remains to be seen. Considering the politically incapacitated donor group, the puny democratic legitimacy of the government, and the internal rivalries within the EPRDF, this seems unlikely. As a TPLF cadre recently explained to the authors: 'We have stopped pretending democracy any more; this is a struggle for our survival.'³²

31. The parties, as listed in *Sendek* (an Amharic weekly), 25 June 2008, are: United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), Somali Democratic Alliance Forces (SDAF) and Arena Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty (Arena).

32. Interview, confidential TPLF source, Ethiopia, May 2008.