



Transcript

Ethiopia: Elections 2010

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Dr Tobias Hagmann:

I will provide a brief overview of the elections, but then mostly focus my talk on the interpretation of the polls. In other words: what is the significance and what are the impacts of the 2010 election result on Ethiopian politics and democratization? I will then close with some personal remarks.

First there are disclaimers:

- I was not present in Ethiopia during elections;
- I will make no attempt here to distinguish between federal and regional elections;
- Due to time constraints I will have to leave out many important issues.

Facts and Figures of the 2010 Elections

The following data on results of the 23 May 2010 federal and regional elections are sourced from the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE).

In the House of Peoples' Representatives, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) obtained 499 seats, with 46 seats going to its affiliate parties, MEDREK (formally known as the Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Ethiopia) obtained 1 seat and 1 seat went to an independent candidate. The number of seats for opposition parties went down from 174 to 2, corresponding to a 99.6 percent victory for EPRDF (545 out of 547 seats).

With the exception of one mandate, the nine regional state councils (which have a combined total of 1904 seats) all went to either the constituent parties of the EPRDF – the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Amhara National Democratic Movement, Oromo People's Democratic Organization, Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement – or its affiliate parties in Afar, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella and Harar.

Electoral process

A code of conduct was agreed between the EPRDF and three opposition parties – though not MEDREK – at the end of October 2009.

Campaigning began on the 8th December 2009. Opposition parties, notably members of MEDREK, complained about the harassment and imprisonment of some of its candidates (MEDREK's founding members are: the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), Somali Democratic Alliance Forces (SDAF) and Arena Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty (Arena) led by a former regional president, Gebru Asrat. Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) joined later).

A series of televised debates took place on ETV with government and opposition participants on the subjects of good governance, federalism and democracy.

Participation

63 political parties participated in the elections. There were almost 32 million registered voters, of which almost 30 million participated in the polls.

Election Day and the Aftermath

Contrary to some expectations (and with some notable exceptions where opposition party members, but also a policeman were killed) the electoral campaign was peaceful.

Assessing the 2010 Elections

What are we to make of the 2010 Ethiopian elections? The Ethiopian government has described the elections not only as 'free and fair', but also 'democratic' and 'credible'. The opposition has rejected the results, but the Supreme Court refused their demand for a re-run. The African Union found them to be 'free and fair'. The EU observer mission was more critical, deploring the lack of 'level playing field' in the run-up to the polls, but otherwise was broadly happy with the election process.

To assess the 2010 elections, we first need to ask ourselves what the yardsticks are that we use to evaluate these elections. Different options exist in this regard. I would argue that even if we use different yardsticks, the result is in most cases a negative one.

- Starting with established democracy theory. We would expect that an 80 million plus population as ethnically, economically and socially diverse as Ethiopia's to be characterized by multiple cleavages which would produce very diverse voter preferences. On this basis the 99.6 percent result cannot be reflective of a genuine democracy.
- But we can also use another yardstick. We can compare the 2010 elections to previous Ethiopian federal elections since 1991: what we see is that in this election EPRDF has won its highest percentage of parliamentary votes so far. In the 1995 elections, the largest opposition party's share of seats was 0.2%, in the 2000 elections it was 1.5%, in the earth shattering 2005 elections it rose to 20% and in 2010 it decreased again to 0.2% - the same as 1995.
- Or, we can compare the 2010 elections to elections under the previous Derg government, which might allow us to detect structural political changes within Ethiopian policy over time. In strictly mathematical terms, we can see only a little difference between the June 1987 national *shengo* elections under one party rule (with zero opposition seats), and the 2010 multi-party elections with 0.2% opposition vote.
- Another option is to evaluate the elections in the regional context. Here we see that certain neighbours have done better in terms of electoral democracy (for example Kenya and Somaliland), but others clearly are at the same level (such as Sudan) or have done worse (Eritrea, Somalia).
- Some analysts of Ethiopian politics conclude that parliamentary elections and the results they produce are not that important. After all the two chambers of the Ethiopian political system – the House of People's Representatives and the House of Federation – are not part of a checks and balance system, but in most cases ratify whatever the government party proposes. Also, most members of parliament maintain very weak relations with their constituencies, and parliament thus remains somewhat suspended in the air.

As a political scientist and a student of politics in the Horn of Africa, my assessment of Ethiopia's 2010 elections is the following:

- While all observers had expected a landslide victory by the government, with perhaps an overwhelming majority in the order of 70 to 80 percent, nobody thought the outcome would be 99.6 percent.

- The 2010 elections are the culmination of a political strategy, on which the Ethiopian government had embarked after the humiliating 2005 elections. This strategy consisted of both sticks and carrots. The sticks included threats, harassment and imprisonment of opposition politicians and their potential supporters, while the carrots included mass recruitment of new party members and – as new analysis reveals – federal disbursement of funding to districts with a strong opposition showing for appeasement or buying of votes.
- The 99.6 percent result is somewhat embarrassing for a government that claims to operate a democratic multi-party polity. But it also has advantages. Most importantly, the EPRDF can allow itself a lower vote in the next elections (2015), still win with a comfortable majority and then present itself as a democratic player.
- The 2010 elections didn't produce the political pluralism which Ethiopia might have deserved. But we should not conclude from this that the elections were pointless or meaningless. Rather, they fulfilled two purposes. Domestically, they sent a strong signal to the electorate from EPRDF about who is in charge. This signal had already been sent in the April 2008 *kebele* elections, which EPRDF won with a similar 99 percent majority. Internationally, the elections were geared to generate external legitimacy, which the government needs to be accepted in international fora.

More fundamentally, I think that at this particular moment of Ethiopian history, the 99.6 result is a very strong indicator that in Ethiopia, democracy is not about people's rule, but about ruling people. With this observation I refer to the structural aspects of Ethiopia's democratization, the background on which multi-party elections take place. In a nutshell, these structural aspects of the Ethiopian polity are characterized as follows:

- top-down policy making from the federal level to the regions down to the *woreda*
- state control of rural lands
- absence of free media and public sphere limited to the capital and major cities
- a monopolisation of development initiatives by the government
- state control or oversight of civil society organizations

- a congruency of state organs and the EPRDF, Ethiopia being a de facto party-state with the party position being more important than the state one
- important role of coercion and 'security', including army, federal police and local militia
- the criminalisation of opposition politicians and dissenters

As you know most of these practices have historic precedents in Ethiopia. EPRDF has not broken with this authoritarian legacy, which remains important in Ethiopians' everyday experiences and encounters with the state.

Impact of 2010 Election on Democratisation

So what do the 2010 elections mean for democratisation in Ethiopia?

My impression is that with the 2010 elections, Ethiopia has reached a temporary end of the democratisation process. For the time being, EPRDF has achieved a full circle between the 1995 election and the current election's 99.6% victory. After 20 years in power, EPRDF has not only a de facto monopoly over political representation and decision-making, but also a de facto monopoly over the definition of what democracy means in Ethiopia.

This is visible in the way EPRDF sees itself - namely as a vanguard party that has earned the right to lead the state, to determine what development is and how democracy must be organised. Therefore, whoever is against EPRDF is 'anti-development' or 'anti-peace' and whoever opposes its policies is anti-state.

This situation is deplorable and has not always been the case. When EPRDF came to power in 1991 it was confronted with three daunting policy challenges: firstly to democratise the country, secondly to resolve the national question and thirdly to alleviate/end poverty. Its legitimacy is based on its record in addressing these three issues.

Interestingly, the rhetoric of the ruling party has changed over the past 20 years in terms of the 'official' priority given to these three challenges. The rhetoric has changed in ways that suggest the evolution of relations between the government and society, in the direction of an authoritarian regime. Three types of rhetoric/legitimacies, which are partly overlapping, can be identified.

'No development without democracy' (~1991-2005)

After coming to power, EPRDF staked its legitimacy on the idea that there can be no development without democracy. Contrary to the coercive Derg, it presented itself as the party bringing the democratic and political rights that so many Ethiopians had been longing for. The idea that Ethiopia's poverty was partly a result of authoritarianism was at the core of EPRDF legitimacy.

'No democracy without development' (~2005-today)

As EPRDF's democratic record waned, and particularly after the 2005 election fiasco, the government had to seek a new discourse to legitimise its rule. No democracy without development became the new slogan. Economic growth, development 'successes', and double digit annual growth became the new source of legitimacy. While it was obvious that the government had decided to stay in power, it had at least brought about economic improvement by dint of a developmental state that controls all strategic economic resources, including a part of external aid.

'No development without stability' (today)

But more recently, even this discourse is being replaced, or complemented, by another one, which broadly states that 'there can be no development without stability'. And this stability can only be brought about by EPRDF. This discourse has two motifs.

First, EPRDF has endorsed a more pan-Ethiopian nationalist discourse ever since Ethiopian-Eritrean war. For example in July 2008 'Flag Day' was established, although Meles had once claimed that the Ethiopian flag was 'just a piece of cloth'.

More recently, immediately after the elections a message was sent to international community, not to 'second guess' the Ethiopian people.

In this sense, the EPRDF which once saw itself as the liberator of oppressed ethnic groups now sees itself as the only power holding these groups together.

Second, there is a strong security dimension to the 'no development without stability' idea, which can also be seen in recent anti-terrorist legislation and which resonates with the international community's concern about terrorism in the Horn.

The evolution of the discourse from democracy to stability is indicative of the trajectory of democratisation in Ethiopia. The changing rhetoric of legitimacy explains why EPRDF sees itself as the only party that can hold the country together and must therefore stay in power.

Donor Policy to Ethiopia as Wax and Gold

If democratisation as we know it has reached its (temporary) end in Ethiopia, many donors feel surprisingly comfortable about it. Although there are some important differences between donors' attitudes towards Ethiopia, there is a general tendency by Western donors to:

- Privately deplore the government's democratic record, and publicly laud and reward it. This means that donors by and large accept where the government has drawn the line on which type of criticism is allowed and which is not.
- To reproduce the discourse about 'no democracy without development', and thereby reinforce the government's own insistence on output legitimacy.
- To constantly avoid political issues by 'technocratising' them; that is framing them in technical terms as development problems (rather than political problems) that can be sorted out with sufficient resources and the adequate strategies and partners.
- Taking a passing interest in Ethiopian politics during 'election time', but paying relatively little attention to structural aspects of Ethiopian politics.

The reasons for this behaviour/attitude by donors are well known to those who follow politics in the region. They have to do with a number of geo-strategic reasons. But they also reflect the fact, I think, that donors are in Ethiopia not primarily because they want to help, but because they want to give. Maintaining large amounts of development budgets for Ethiopia has become an inherent interest of Western donors. They allow donor governments to show their domestic audience that they 'care', that they are willing to 'do something' to address poverty and hunger in Africa.

As you can guess from these critical remarks, I have serious doubts that this approach is beneficial to political change in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, personally, I have come to the conclusion that development aid to Ethiopia in many cases has facilitated the government's strategy of imposing control on

all sectors of society. Since the Western public ignores these connections between donor aid and authoritarianism, there is little pressure on donor governments to change course.

Personal Remarks

I would like to close with a personal remark. In recent years observers have often described the Ethiopian government's recourse to repressive political and legal means as a 'closing of public space'.

What I notice is that this 'closing of public space' in practice primarily means that people are afraid to publicly talk about or air their opinions about Ethiopian politics, or to take a position in regard to a local or national political matter. Many Ethiopians are afraid that they will be punished if they do so. This silencing of critical voices, or rather: of any voice that is not 100 percent compatible with the government's viewpoints, has very clearly extended to Western NGOs, international organisations and also scholars.

Everybody is afraid that criticising the Ethiopian government will be met with negative repercussions. Many of my academic colleagues do not want to discuss Ethiopian politics in the presence of Ethiopian officials because they are afraid that they will be declared *persona non grata*.

The Ethiopian government pursues a strategy of monitoring all publications it deems critical, of giving 'lectures' to scholars, of counter-propaganda and kicking out people (mostly journalists). Under these circumstances it is very difficult to continue doing research on political issue in Ethiopia.

I strongly deplore this trend.

Sally Healy:

I agree that there is a trend of growing authoritarianism alongside development success. Does the election result matter for Ethiopia's external legitimacy? Not to the donors as far as I can tell. Ethiopia is doing pretty well with aid receipts. Meles says "we get less aid. We get more space." But I don't see it, as the amounts of aid are stupendous: \$26 billion since 1991; \$3 billion in 2008 alone. Ethiopia is DFID's largest programme in Africa (at £160 million) and is set to rise. It is also the second largest DFID programme in the world after India.

Aid seems set to continue as long as Ethiopia continues to keep on hitting the development targets and producing good results. The World Bank released figures showing that since 2003, Ethiopia has had the second fastest improvement in human development indicators – this is according to the UNDP Human Development report.

There are still some questions though about this success. For example, if agricultural output has improved by 40 percent, why is it that 13 million Ethiopian people are still in need of emergency food aid or safety-net assistance?

People are beginning to ask questions about the development statistics. But it is not easy to query official statistics. The closure of political space has meant that there are limits on civil society organisations – but these are often the people who might query the statistics and offer a different view on things. Without them, how would donors know if there was a problem or not?

As well as being a good development partner, Ethiopia is also a good security partner in a very troubled region (as it neighbours Somalia and Eritrea). The recent al Shabaab bombings will reinforce the view that Ethiopia is an ally and allies are helpful, which is another reason for donors to give a light touch on democracy.

I wonder if it is getting more difficult for donors to ask about governance without government officials getting touchy. Ethiopia has a government that seems to be getting rather over-sensitive. Never mind the Ethiopian public – is there space for our governments to discuss governance with Ethiopia, even in private? By asking questions or making comments about what we see and hear about, are we being told to mind our own business and not to interfere in Ethiopia's affairs whilst being fed a solid diet of development statistics?

It is worth noting the victory demonstrations which happened in Addis just after the election. They were quite strange, as there were banners which said things like:

“Our votes are not for sale”; “Stop second guessing us”; and “We chose our leaders, no one else.” They were written in English. Was this a message written to the outside world basically saying “foreigners keep out”?

The longer term question is whether the effective collapse of democratisation in Ethiopia will have a negative effect on the country’s stability. Does an election result like this make the country more stable or less stable?

Maybe Ethiopia will be able to succeed as a “development state” along Chinese lines and achieve middle income status as it hopes to.

What’s not clear is what happened to the 6.5 million people who voted for change, voted for the opposition in 2005. That was an important political statement. In Addis Ababa region, people voted overwhelmingly for the opposition – and it is not simply that the opposition won all the seats (bar one), but public support won them majorities that were in the high seventies or more. That means that at least a million voters in Addis voted for the opposition. Where are they now?

The opposition vote wasn’t confined to Addis. About a third of the voters in Amhara region and a quarter of the huge population of Oromiya also voted for the opposition, as did almost every town in the vast regions of Amhara, Oromiya and the Southern Peoples region – home to about three quarters of the population.

What does their silence in 2010 mean? Does it bode well for the country’s stability? If it doesn’t, then the current successful development trajectory may prove impossible to sustain.

Q&A SESSION

Ambassador Berhanu Kebede:

Thank you. Dr. Hagmann is pessimistic in his presentation on Ethiopia. Democracy and development are our most important agenda, and the government has stated that democracy and the fight against poverty is not a choice. Dr. Hagmann is writing using information which is based on hearsay. No one in Ethiopia claims that there is full democracy there, but it is a work in progress. It is important for Ethiopia's partners to look at democracy in the context of where the country was twenty years ago.

The constitution recognises a very important fact, which is that Ethiopia is a country of more than eighty nationalities – all of whom are stakeholders. One also has to look at the success of measures which the government has introduced to strengthen the parliament and the judiciary. India, Canada, the UK and Germany have witnessed this strengthening. The election was witnessed by the EU which said that election officers completed their duty professionally. The code of conduct for the election was prepared by a Swedish organisation and was agreed by 66 parties – 63 signed up and the others agreed in parliament. It was also agreed that a council would be established to look at the process and make significant improvements. The speaker have also failed to mention the failures of the opposition parties.

Q: In a sense we are looking at the wrong place, what we should do is look forward and ask what is going to happen to the EPRDF itself? It looks more and more like there is a debate about internal party democracy as used to happen in the 1970s and 1980s in Africa.

A (TH): I agree with the Ambassador that the opposition has been disorganised, but the EPRDF has made life difficult for them. Within a one-party system there will be competition for benefits within the party.

Q: The discussion has to be on the nature of democracy. The first mistake that people make is to assume that the TPLF was democratic – it never was. The EPRDF was forced to dress this up and now has to embrace a new face. The 2005 election results showed that the EPRDF had miscalculated. The party saw that playing with democracy would prove disastrous for them. Serious questions have been asked about aid, and development has only occurred in areas of political interest.

A (TH): There are different types of democracy, and it is fair to question the compatibility between revolutionary democracy and liberal democracy – they are very different conceptions. This is a key point.

Q: In Tigray there were pre-election bombings. Who carried these out? Are we likely to see events like that in the future? Is the ONLF transforming into a political party, and what are your perspectives on their possible integration?

A (TH): For some years there has been competition in Tigray between parties for political representation. The very important support for the TPLF there has waned, but the party is holding the lid on Tigray. There have been negotiations between the ONLF and the Ethiopian government – but there have often been behind-the-scenes talks between the two.

A (SH): Bombs going off in Tigray are not to do with the opposition. In the Somali region there has been a clean sweep for the government, and in Tigray, but the debate with the opposition is about what kind of Ethiopia there should be. Another vision of Ethiopia – one not fixed on an ethnic federal model - was articulated by some opposition movements, and a discussion on that could be made without guns. This is the conversation which has been silenced.

Q: Do you have any thoughts on the official ideology of the EPRDF? Is it consistent with the democratic principle of the constitution?

A (TH): Democracy has evolved a lot as an ideological programme. The ability to voice, debate and discuss different opinions is important. Is there room in policy-making and in society to debate different conceptions of ruling, or is there not? In Ethiopia's current version, there is little room.

Q: I am worried by the idea that there is no room for argument and that the government is over-sensitive. In fact, the two speakers are being sensitive. You claim that you want a debate but when you get it, you discount it.

Human Rights Watch has made it clear that they see the situation as democratic only if the government loses and the opposition wins. A lot of opposition supporters voted in the election, but they just did not win. Most seats in Addis were close. The opposition's problems were very serious – only six weeks before the elections one of the MEDREK parties tried to split into two. The electorate sees these factors, people are not stupid. Even the ONLF thinks that there has been a steady growth over the past few years. You need to remember that the EPRDF accepted the 2005 results and none of the other parties met expectations. Ethiopians are like anyone else – they tend to vote for winners,

A (SH): The point is that in 2005, parliament had diversity. I've never at any point said that the opposition should win the election, but they were there and now they are not. There is no longer a diverse political arena, which is a pity.

A (TH): I am torn between my love for Ethiopia and my obligation to make sense of the data and find words to describe the political processes that are taking place. It is important that researchers, journalists and civil society organizations are allowed the space to work. Most will be able to provide a balanced analysis of the Ethiopian government. You can try to discredit them or to dominate debates, but that does not change the realities on the ground.