THE ETHIOPIAN 2010 FEDERAL AND REGIONAL ELECTIONS: RE-ESTABLISHING THE ONE-PARTY STATE

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Ethiopia conducted its fourth federal and regional election on 23 May 2010. Considering the widespread pre-election interest and excitement the 2005 election attracted, and the vigorous role played by the opposition both during the campaign and in the post-election turmoil, the 2010 process was a huge let-down. The general impression among Ethiopians was that the outcome was a foregone conclusion, so the electorate was rather passively, or perhaps reluctantly, following the campaign and election discourse. The only excitement was related to how overwhelmingly the incumbent Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) would win; the general guesstimate was that the huge opposition gains in the 2005 elections, giving them one-third of the seats in the House of Representatives, would be pushed back in order for EPRDF to secure a solid victory of between 75–85 percent of the seats. It thus raised some eyebrows both domestically and internationally when the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) declared that EPRDF had secured 99.6 percent of the seats in Parliament – all but two, one going to the opposition and one to an EPRDF-friendly independent candidate.

What happened in the 2010 electoral process, or before, that can explain the radical setback for the opposition and the total victory of EPRDF? Does the election outcome represent the genuine will of the Ethiopian electorate? Is it true, as Prime Minister Meles Zenawi asserts, that EPRDF actually is that popular? This briefing offers three broad categories, each with three sets of interconnected and reinforcing factors, explaining the shift of political climate in Ethiopia since the 2005 elections, making sense of the ‘better-than-Soviet-style’ 2010 election result. First, however, a brief background to Ethiopia’s electoral transition is presented and an analysis of the political context prior to the run-up to the

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2010 election. Thereafter, the article turns to the campaign, polling, results, and complaint processes, before concluding with the three sets of factors explaining the election outcome.

**Democratic ‘transition’ in Ethiopia and the run-up to the 2010 elections**

Political transitions of states are complex processes formed by an infinite number of factors anchored in unique past histories, influenced by peculiar current events, and motivated by ideology and future aspirations. One should thus be wary of slotting the Ethiopian democratic transition into a formula based on a fixed number of variables, as ‘different states have different histories, cultures, sizes, and economic and demographic structures that at the very least have to be taken into account in the construction of democratic formulae’.

In Christopher Clapham’s illuminating analysis, Ethiopia presents five explicit challenges to democratization which have worked as overall impediments to consolidating the transition:

1. a political history in which no government has assumed power through elections – but always by force;
2. a state structure where the complexities of geography and demography fragment and undermine any attempt at social or political cohesion;
3. a political ‘state culture’ that places enormous emphasis on hierarchy and obedience, the antithesis of democratic values of egalitarianism and liberty;
4. a violent revolutionary experience which tore apart the social fabric of society; and
5. a government that took power through insurgency is – as history shows – hardly one which will relinquish power without struggle.

The constrained, manipulated, and non-competitive 2008 local elections set the stage for the 2010 electoral process. One year prior to the election Professor Beyene Petros, opposition leader and chairman of the main opposition coalition Medrek, was still uncertain whether they would run in the 2010 elections given the political environment:

4. Medrek (‘Forum’) is composed of eight political parties: Ethiopian Social Democratic Party, Southern Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Coalition, Oromo People’s Congress, Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement, Aarea Tigray for Democracy and Sovereignty, Coalition of Somali Democratic Forces, Unity for Democracy and Justice, and Ethiopian Democratic Unity Movement.
The government prevents us to communicate and get close to our constituency. We are not even allowed to talk to local administrators about our followers’ concerns. I was told by district leaders from my constituency in Hadiya that us ‘parliamentarians’ should stay in Addis and make laws, and not interfere in local affairs.5

As numerous studies have shown, the post-2005 crackdown in Ethiopia had widespread consequences on governmental policies and how they restricted liberal values and democratic principles, in contradiction to the Ethiopian constitution and international instruments ratified by the country.6 By ratifying new restrictive legislation and adopting new policies aimed at curbing dissent, the government consciously developed a complex and multi-layered strategy to prevent the political opposition from consolidating and making further political and electoral advances. In the aftermath of the 2005 electoral shock, the EPRDF leadership, and notably the chief ideologist Prime Minister Meles Zenawi himself, authored a number of booklets used to reinvigorate and re-ideologize the party apparatus and to inspire and guide cadres in fulfilling the power ambitions of the party.7 For instance, in a booklet called Democracy and Democratic Unity used in the massive, countrywide teacher training ideology seminars conducted in early 2006 to ‘explain’ the 2005 election result and the following crackdown, and make corrections for the future, it is explicitly stated that the Ethiopian people has a ‘clear choice between

7. Producing such ideological tracts at important crossroads and during party crisis is a deep-rooted tradition within the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), the key party within the EPRDF coalition. They used to be drafted by central party ideologists, and later discussed and decided upon in the central committee and polit bureau of the party. After the 2001 TPLF dissent process, when many of the ideologists were purged, it is believed that these booklets are most often written by Meles Zenawi himself, and no longer undergo the collective scrutiny of the party leadership. The post-2005 booklets included Development, Democracy and Revolutionary Democracy (originally in Amharic, published August 2006) and Strategy of Revolutionary Democracy, Tactics and the Question of Leadership (in Amharic, published January 2007). See Lefort, ‘Powers – mengist – and peasants’, p. 455. New booklets were also developed in the fall of 2009 in order to inspire and instruct the party apparatus ahead of the 2010 elections. The last instructions were published in April 2010 in Manual for Top Leadership to Be Followed in the Last Days of the Election Process (in Amharic). In these strategic booklets, Medrek is termed ‘the force of destruction’. 


dependency and anti-democracy forces (utilizing tools of chauvinism and narrow nationalism) and revolutionary democracy (peace and developmentalism).... No Ethiopian can stand on middle ground or be neutral. During the massive re-ideologization campaign undertaken after the 2005 elections (commonly referred to as ‘capacity-building’ seminars and supported through donor basket funding), the EPRDF and the Prime Minister deliberately employed an alarmist language, aiming to polarize the political landscape and to convince the people that, without EPRDF in power, Ethiopia would turn into chaos.

The tactics used in the 2010 pre-electoral period targeted individual voters, human rights defenders (such as NGOs and journalists), and opposition parties and their members directly, in order to eliminate their capacity as voices of dissent and criticism. Citizens of constituencies that had voted for the opposition in 2005 were pressured – intimidated, harassed, and threatened – to withdraw the symbolic support they had voluntarily extended through the ballot to ‘anti-democratic’ forces. NGOs who had observed the elections and raised a critical voice against the post-election governmental crackdown were sanctioned, and later permanently curbed through the new legislation (Charities and Societies Proclamation – CSO law) effective from January 2010. Private media outlets were closed down and journalists reporting on the crackdown and voicing criticism of government policies were harassed and intimidated, forcing scores to flee the country. Opposition parties’ members and facilities were directly

8. Meaning the legally registered opposition parties in Ethiopia.
9. That is, the government party EPRDF. It is important to bear in mind that the EPRDF’s conception of democracy is not the liberal variety known in the West (based on individual participation, a diversity of interests and views, and plural representation). On the contrary, the EPRDF considers liberal democracy to be a misfit under the social, economic, and political conditions prevailing in Ethiopia. What the Front calls ‘revolutionary democracy’ is based on communal collective participation and representation based on (forced) consensus. The EPRDF’s perception of democracy is formed partly by ideological conditioning (Marxist and Maoist precepts of mass political mobilization), and partly by historical experience during the TPLF’s seventeen-year struggle to liberate Tigray from the Derg regime. For more on revolutionary democracy, see Sarah Vaughan and Kjetil Tronvoll, The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life (Sidastudies, Stockholm, 2003); Medhane Tadesse and John Young, ‘TPLF: reform or decline?’, Review of African Political Economy 30, 97 (2003), pp. 389–403. See also the forthcoming special issue of Journal of Eastern African Studies on twenty years of revolutionary democracy in Ethiopia, to appear in 2011.
11. Interviews conducted in 2006 with several participants in these seminars.
13. Aalen and Tronvoll, ‘The end of democracy?’
14. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) ranks Ethiopia as the country in the world (with Somalia) with the highest number of exiled journalists in the last decade. Between August 2001 and May 2010, 62 Ethiopian journalists were forced to flee the country – 15 of whom left in the last year alone – in the face of attacks, threats, and possible imprisonment,
targeted through a variety of repressive mechanisms, such as personal threats and harassment, closure of party offices and breaking up of meetings, and denying individuals access to state resources, public goods, or official permits needed to carry out their work.\textsuperscript{15} The all-out assault emerges clearly in the testimony of Professor Merera Gudina, Medrek opposition leader and chairman of Oromo Peoples Congress:

More or less all our party offices are forcefully closed. In Ambo, for instance, the house owner we rented offices from was told by the authorities that he constructed the building illegally and that it had to be demolished. Then we were kicked out; and the building is still standing.\textsuperscript{16}

Four years of active state repression against democratic voices of dissent and legislative and institutional infringement on the freedom of organization and expression did not bode well for a level playing field in the 2010 electoral process.

\textit{The 2010 electoral process: registration, campaign, polling, results, and complaint process}

In the fall of 2009 several Codes of Conduct for various stakeholders in the elections were prepared.\textsuperscript{17} Most attention was given to the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, signed on 30 October 2009 after two months of negotiations by Meles Zenawi and the leaders of three minor but symbolically important opposition parties.\textsuperscript{18} The Code regulated parties’ conduct during the electoral process and established cross-party committees vested with the theoretical mandate to investigate claims of violence and illegal detentions, and to intervene if necessary.\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{15} Human Rights Watch, ‘One hundred ways’. See also an illustrative report by Dr Negasso Gidada, the former EPRDF President of Ethiopia and currently one of the opposition leaders in the Medrek coalition, on the strategies used by the EPRDF to curb his party’s activities in the Wollega area of Ormoia. Negaso Gidada, ‘No level playing field in the 2010 Ethiopian election’ (Ethiomedia.com, 13 October 2009).
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\textsuperscript{16} Interview, Merera Gudina, Addis Ababa, 28 May 2009.
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\textsuperscript{17} These codes covered media, diplomatic, and international observers’ activities, in addition to political parties as discussed above. For instance, initial drafts of the media regulation restricted foreign and local journalists from even speaking to anyone involved in the election process, including voters on election day. This clause was later modified, although the government kept a close watch on all foreign journalists applying for a visa to follow the elections. Human Rights Watch,’One hundred ways’.
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\textsuperscript{18} The original signatories were Meles Zenawi (EPRDF), Hailu Shawl (All Ethiopian Unity Organization, AEUO), Lidetu Ayalew (Ethiopian Democratic Party, EDP), and Ayele Chamisso (Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party, CUDP). Subsequently, the EPRDF member parties and affiliates also signed the Code of Conduct.
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\textsuperscript{19} Barry Malone, ‘Ethiopia’s Meles agrees to election rules’ (Reuters report, 31 October 2009).
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The main opposition block, the Medrek coalition, never entered the negotiations on the Code, arguing that before reaching an agreement on rather superficial electoral guidelines, an agreement on basic principles of the rule of law was needed. As explained by Gebru Asrat, the legendary former TPLF leader and regional president of Tigray, currently chairman of the Tigrayan opposition party Arena and among the leaders of Medrek, in the aftermath of the signing of the Code:

As of now it is even difficult for us to survive as a political party outside the electoral race. We are harassed, intimidated and our offices closed. Thus, before [the] Code of Conduct negotiations, we wanted to look at basic principles of rule of law during elections, as the denied right to assembly, forceful closing of party offices, political prisoners, harassment of opposition members, etc. Because rule of law is fundamental to all organized and individual political activity, these issues must be settled first…. We wanted to discuss free, fair and credible elections as a whole, not only a piece of paper called the Code of Conduct.²⁰

Since the other non-Medrek opposition parties denied that they had similar problems related to basic rule of law in the country, Medrek asked EPRDF for bilateral talks on these issues before they entered the Code of Conduct negotiations. The government rejected this, and Medrek was thus left out of the high-profile and hyped negotiations.

There was nothing in the Code of Conduct for Political Parties that was not already enshrined in the electoral act and other laws of Ethiopia.²¹ But from the manner in which the negotiations were handled and talked about by EPRDF, as well as by donors and diplomats supporting the process, it is quite clear that it was deliberately stage-managed to give democratic legitimacy to EPRDF ahead of elections, despite the very restrictive legislative and political environment described above. Speaking at the signing ceremony, Meles Zenawi said ‘the document would mean that parties could contest peacefully and legally with fair competition among all parties’, and emphasized that ‘the agreement is a new chapter for the country’.²²

Medrek never signed the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, but as the House of Representatives later ratified it as law, they were nevertheless bound by its dictates. Beyond giving a semblance of democratic legitimacy to EPRDF, the Code would also be a convenient tool if needed in a possible post-election crackdown on the opposition, as explained by Meles Zenawi at a press conference just four days prior to Election Day when addressing opposition campaign activity: ‘We prefer

21. The establishment of inter-party committees as a complaint mechanism was a new institution; its effect, however, was negligible.
to look the other way during the election contest, in the interest of a smooth election contest. If need be, we can come back to those crimes committed during the election, after the election. I hope it does not intimidate anybody.\textsuperscript{23}

The electoral cycle commenced in December 2009 with candidate registration from 25 December to 22 February 2010.\textsuperscript{24} A total of 63 political parties registered to compete in the elections (at federal and regional levels), launching 2,188 candidates for the House of Representatives and 4,746 candidates for the nine Regional State Councils.\textsuperscript{25} Opposition parties complained, however, that some of their candidates were prevented from registering by the authorities.\textsuperscript{26} Voter registration was conducted from 9 January to 21 February 2010. Several sources – both Ethiopians and foreigners – confirm that the authorities pressured people to register; cadres went door-to-door and instructed people to go to registration centres. Furthermore, the voter registration cards were reportedly also used as a compulsory ‘ID-card’ in certain circumstances to show that you ‘support the process’. Consequently 31,926,520 million voters registered (out of an estimated 37 million potential eligible voters) – a very high number for an African country.\textsuperscript{27}

Considering the widespread 2005 post-election violence, many feared a high level of conflict during the 2010 elections. The government had thus taken special precautions in surveillance of opposition activity and in police riot control, in order to prevent a repeat of the 2005 events.\textsuperscript{28} The campaign period was officially launched on 9 February 2010. There were a number of complaints from both government and opposition parties about campaign violations, notably campaigning in prohibited areas and the destruction of campaign materials. The opposition also lodged


\textsuperscript{24} The deadline for registering candidates was extended in order to accommodate complaints put forward by the political parties through the National Joint Council for Political Parties.

\textsuperscript{25} Of the HoR candidates, 1,916 were male (87.6 percent) and 272 female (12.4 percent); and of 4,746 candidates for the Regional State Councils, 4,021 were male (84.7 percent) and 725 were female (15.3 percent). All statistics taken from NEBE, <www.electionethiopia.org> (14 October 2010).


\textsuperscript{27} Numbers provided by NEBE, <http://www.electionethiopia.org/en/> (15 October 2010). Still, many Ethiopian sources question this high number of registered voters and argue that it has been artificially inflated in order to give legitimacy to the election outcome.

\textsuperscript{28} ‘The Prime Minister’s press conference in Addis Ababa: “We will not repeat the mistakes committed in the 2005 elections”’, The Reporter, 12 December 2009.
a number of complaints against local administrators, police, and the government party on obstacles to campaigning; generally these complaint were either not acted upon by NEBE or rejected by the authorities. Furthermore, a number of opposition candidates were arrested or detained without charge during the campaign, creating apprehension and insecurity in many locations. The campaign also witnessed some serious, but isolated, incidents of violence; among these, two opposition members and a police officer were reported killed in separate incidents. The opposition argued that the killing of an Arena opposition candidate in Tigray was politically motivated, a claim which was rejected by the authorities. The opposition also accused the government of organizing a broad-based and systematic campaign of harassment, intimidation, and coercion, including the systematic denial of food aid to opposition supporters, in order to force people to vote for EPRDF. According to NEBE, 72 candidates withdrew during the election campaign alleging harassment and intimidation (as well as financial and personal motives). Overall, the European Union observer mission ‘considers that insufficient measures were taken to protect the right to campaign in an environment free from threats and intimidation throughout the country’. Despite these claims and incidents, the campaign, voting, and post-election phase were generally peaceful and calm with no major disturbances observed – a fact many Ethiopians accredit to the stalwart security and military control the government has over its population.

Polling was generally conducted in an organized and peaceful manner on Saturday 23 May. Turnout was also extremely high, at 93.4 percent; considering the constrained political environment in the country, this is a remarkable level and the likeliest explanations are the use of coercive means to get people to vote, or a rigged turn-out number. The EU

30. That is, NEBE generally responded by calling for ‘mediation’ on the issue, or referring the case to the police or Joint Councils. This election did see a new complaint system mechanism, where three channels were established to resolve election complaints: (1) the judiciary; (2) the NEBE’s Grievance Hearing Committees; and (3) the Joint Councils for Political Parties (established by the Code of Conduct for Political Parties and entrusted with the mandate to investigate complaints and criticize them, but with no power of sanction but to refer it to the court). Medrek, as a non-signatory to the Code, was not part of the Joint Councils. EU-EOM, ‘Preliminary statement’, p. 9.
31. Ibid., p. 6.
observer mission\textsuperscript{35} noted several severe inconsistencies of election protocol among the polling stations they observed. For instance, in about one-third of observed polling stations the opening procedures were not followed. More critically, in 23 percent of observed polling stations the number of ballots received was not checked against the figure provided by the NEBE-issued document, making it impossible to reconcile this figure with the number of ballots at the closing.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, in 21 percent of the polling stations observed people were allowed to vote without their voter cards, and the process of closing and counting was described as ‘poor’ in 34 percent of the polling stations.\textsuperscript{37} In international election observer terms, these are extremely high numbers of significant breaches of the electoral protocol; which makes it more or less impossible to vouch for the credibility of the overall election result. Added to this is the fact that opposition party agents were only observing the balloting in about half of the polling stations, and Medrek reported that many of their party agents had been ‘hunted down and barred from observ[ing] the process’.\textsuperscript{38} In Tigray, for instance, the Medrek-affiliated opposition party Arena filed over 7,000 names of party agents to NEBE, and only 250 showed up on polling day to do their job; as Arena chairman Gebru Asrat explained, ‘The rest were terrified and ran away due to pressure and harassment.’\textsuperscript{39} Medrek also complained about the breaches of secrecy of votes, as in several places people were voting in groups – surveyed by the local EPRDF cell leader.\textsuperscript{40} The opposition also has credible evidence of ballot stuffing and trashing of opposition votes. Professor Merera Gudina showed this author dozens of valid ballot papers (with NEBE stamp) where voters had ticked off for Medrek: the ballots were found in the latrine areas after the counting was finished in two constituencies in Western Shoa, Oromia Region.\textsuperscript{41} Credible international citizens of Addis Ababa report that many among the local
population expressed disbelief when the results were announced. A typical response was: ‘We all voted for Medrek, how come EPRDF won?’

In several constituencies, in particular in Addis Ababa, the result margin is conspicuously close between the winning EPRDF candidate and the runner-up Medrek candidate. Even more interesting is the fact that in the only constituency where Medrek won, they did it with a margin of only 4 votes! This may give plausible reason to argue that the level of misconduct in following the electoral protocol (as observed by the EU observer mission) – let alone the extremely unlevel playing field during the campaign and run-up to the elections – had a direct and significant impact on the overall election result. The EPRDF and its affiliates obtained 545 seats in the House of Representatives, and Medrek one; as we have seen, the remaining seat went to an independent candidate. In the nine regional assemblies, EPRDF won a total of 1,903 seats, while the total opposition obtained one seat only (the All Ethiopian Unity Organization won this, in Benishangul Gumuz). The single-member constituency ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system in Ethiopia may partly explain such results, nevertheless Medrek won almost 40 percent of the votes in certain regions, they still lost to the EPRDF candidates. It seems unlikely, however, that the total victory of EPRDF can be attributed to the electoral system alone.

The NEBE Chairperson, Professor Merga Bekana, declared the election to be characterized ‘by high voter turnout and orderly conduct of the Election Day proceedings’ and asserted that it was ‘peaceful, credible, fair, free, and democratic’. Prime Minister Zenawi concurred: ‘As the

42. Interviews with several long-term international residents of Addis Ababa.
43. For instance, in Woreda 25, Zone 5, Addis Ababa, EPRDF received 21,231 votes, while Medrek received 18,909; in Woreda 4, Zone 1, Addis Ababa EPRDF received 12,753 votes, while Medrek got 10,085. In Chelliya 1, Western Shoa, Oromia Region, EPRDF received 15,640, while Medrek received 13,681. In Male special zone, South Omo, in Southern Region, EPRDF received 7,312 while Medrek received 5,510. All data from NEBE website.
44. Woreda 6, Zone 1, Addis Ababa: Girma Seifu Maru (Medrek), 12,282 votes; Kamil Ahmed Naji (EPRDF), 12,278 votes. Data from NEBE website.
45. The independent candidate, Dr Asheber Woldegiorgies (a dentist by profession), is a well-known character in his community. He accredited his victory to the fact that the EPRDF candidate in his constituency is strongly disliked by the people. According to Dr Asheber the EPRDF was aware of his unpopularity, and the regional authorities wanted to remove him, but the Zone resisted. Interview, Asheber Woldegiorgis, Addis Ababa, 29 May 2010.
46. NEBE does not provide in its electoral results announcement the regional breakdown of votes per party, only on a constituency level. In Addis Ababa, for instance, EPRDF won about 60 percent of the votes, while the opposition block took 39 percent (EPRDF 564,764; Medrek 384,245; EDP 35,405; AEUP 19,234; CUDP 13,795; Others 19,873). Debebe Deres, ‘Election 2010: PM Meles speech and the extremist dissapora’ (Waltainfo, 7 June 2010), <http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=21871&Itemid=82> (17 October 2010).
47. Ethiopian News Agency, ‘The Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had won the election in a land mark victory getting 499 of the 547 federal
whole world knows, the fourth national elections have taken place in a peaceful, democratic and credible manner. These elections have been conducted successfully according to plan.\footnote{Abebe Gellaw, ‘2010 Ethiopia’s embarrassing elections’, \textit{Wall Street Journal}, 1 June 2010, \texttt{<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000142405274870471004575268492105744822.html?KEYWORDS=ethiopia>}} Medrek leader and the first EPRDF President of Ethiopia, Dr Negasso Gidada, on the other hand, summed it up in the following manner: ‘EPRDF blatantly stole the election!’\footnote{Interview, Negasso Gidada, Addis Ababa, 29 May 2010.}

The opposition expressed frustration and hopelessness after the results were announced. Medrek leader Professor Merera Gudina explained: ‘It is useless to stage any demonstrations – it will only kill us. There will be no response from the West anyway; they have given up too …. The civil opposition is back to zero! We will just try to survive the best we can.’\footnote{Interview, Merera Gudina, Addis Ababa, 28 May 2010.} The opposition did file a well-documented 87-page complaint to the NEBE and demanded a re-run of the election. The Election Board chairman dismissed the complaints: ‘These elections were carried out peacefully and fairly. We had taken corrective measures for the handful of justified complaints. I assure you that the Board handled all complaints fairly, but the appeal from Medrek and another group lacked evidence and was given a deserved response.’\footnote{Agence-France Presse, ‘Ethiopia’s ruling party and its allies won more than 99 percent of votes during last month’s controversial legislative polls’ (AFP, 21 June 2010).}

The opposition appealed NEBE’s decision both on substance and procedural matters to the Supreme Court, complaining that NEBE had not even investigated any of the well-documented complaints. The Supreme Court rejected the appeal, however, and backed NEBE’s decision.\footnote{Barry Malone, ‘Ethiopia supreme court rejects election result case’ (Reuters, Addis Ababa, 18 June 2010), \texttt{<http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJOE65H0CN20100618&sp=true>}} Medrek chairman Professor Beyene Petros reflected on the opposition’s marginalized role \textit{vis-à-vis} the so-called independent election board and judiciary of Ethiopia: ‘There was a total lack of seriousness in reviewing our appeal. Under Ethiopian law, the burden is on the NEBE to investigate whatever allegations and evidence we put forward and they didn’t do this, which is a violation of the law.’\footnote{Barry Malone, ‘2010 Ethiopia opposition mounts court challenge to election’ (Reuters, Addis Ababa, 16 June 2010).}
Re-establishing the one-party state: explaining the total EPRDF ‘victory’

When I arrived in Addis Ababa some few days after the elections in May 2010, a long-term Ethiopian friend greeted me with the following warning:

Things have changed. Everyone is afraid now. You cannot trust anybody, and the direct orders by the cadres – from the local to the top level – to comply with government dictates stifle all political discourse. We do not even dare to joke about politics any longer, as it might be overheard and interpreted as opposition. We are afraid. We are back to a culture of fear and intimidation reminiscent of the Derg era.

The election outcome obviously put a scare into many Ethiopians. Despite massive opposition support in 2005 the EPRDF had managed not only to reverse the growing trend over 15 years of elections of increasingly higher opposition representation in the parliament – but actually to turn it back to zero. How has this been possible? Let me summarize the post-2005 developments into three broad categories, each containing three variables working as impediments to a democratic transition—and actually reversing previous democratic gains—in order to explain such a totalitarian outcome in a multi-party election.

The first category can be labelled structural causes; these factors define the overall parameters of democracy in the country. First, we have seen the development of a set of new restrictive legislative acts imposing severe limitations on freedom of expression and organization in Ethiopia. The new media law, the CSO law, and the anti-terror law give the authorities the powers to construe normal democratic initiatives such as alternative development strategies emanating from civil society or peaceful opposition political activity as ‘unlawful’ and thus susceptible to a government clampdown. Second, the development of an omnipresent and all-embracing totalitarian state and party structure carefully limits the space in which opposition forces can organize. The expansion of the local administration councils from about 600,000 members to 3.5 million ahead of the 2008 local elections, and the enlargement of the EPRDF party membership base from about 760,000 in 2005 to more than 5 million today, effectively means that without a government party affiliation personal or organizational career opportunities are limited. Third, although some research indicates that the use of brutal repressive mechanisms has been declining over the last few years, partly displaced by the new ‘soft’ co-optation tactics used instead by the totalitarian state, the

54. I have observed or researched every election in Ethiopia since the coming to power of EPRDF in 1991. Since 2005, however, the authorities have stated that they do not want to see me in the country on polling day in order to prevent me observing the actual voting process; apparently they dislike my scholarly interpretation of the democratization process.

55. Meeting, Addis Ababa, in the last week of May 2010.
authoritarian and coercive forces of the state and party are still at work in Ethiopia. International human rights reporting repeatedly list Ethiopia as one of the worst human rights abusers in Africa, a country where political opposition activity (particularly in rural areas) constantly runs the risk of apprehension.

The second category of factors explaining the election outcome may be called **contextual or cultural causes**; these are sentiments and preferences guiding political action that are anchored in cultural notions, historical experiences or religious dictates. **First**, a culture of fear has been reintroduced into Ethiopian politics after the unprecedented ‘liberal spring’ of the 2005 campaign. The violent and widespread crackdown on the opposition after the 2005 elections, in combination with new restrictive government policies and alarmist rhetoric, have aroused trepidation among most Ethiopians and revived old memories of the political purges during the Red Terror campaign of the 1970s. Consequently, the preferred individual political strategy is one of disengagement and apathy, shying away from politics in order not to become a victim. **Second**, as illuminatingly argued by René Lefort, for the majority of the rural population the elections present a quandary; the general belief is that divine will determines life on earth, including who is in power. Thus, casting a vote may be construed as challenging the will of God. Furthermore, it confronts the peasant with the major danger of voting for the loser (as many did in 2005). The winner (the incumbent) will know how they voted despite the ‘secret ballot’, and the ‘culprits’ will suffer as they did after the 2005 elections. Retribution puts the survival of the whole household at risk, since all public services and goods – including access to agricultural land, the only means of production – are controlled by the party-state. Under such pressure, peasant voters are likely to turn to their opinion leaders to gauge the most plausible winner, and then all vote the same way – for there is safety in numbers. Since the rural elite all suffered after the 2005 display of opposition support, and had been subjected to massive strategies of cooptation and party enrolment, their choice was clear – and opposition ‘defeat was inevitable from as early as autumn 2005’. **Third**, for certain segments among the urban electorate and in Ethiopia’s business sector, EPRDF has become the preferred and only alternative. This is based both on giving credit to the party’s own development performances (which commendably have been impressive

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57. Lefort, ‘Ethiopia’s election’.
in some sectors), and on the need to pursue personal as well as professional interests.\footnote{In its regular ‘A week in the Horn’ update published by the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry, the government offers this as the main, and more or less only, reason explaining their total election victory. Under the heading ‘Analyzing the election results: the two competing trends’, the publications asks: ‘Why did the EPRDF win and the opposition lose by such a wide margin? For some the question is not all that difficult to answer; they just point to the huge development works currently underway in the country: construction of infrastructure and the obvious transformation of a significant portion of the lives of the Ethiopian population as a result of the government’s policies .... The fact that the EPRDF put much effort into campaigning, unlike in the past, is also believed to have made a significant contribution. What’s more, these people also readily point to the opposition’s lack of a well-thought-out political platform and strong organizational structure.’ ‘A week in the Horn’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Addis Ababa, 18 June 2010), <http://www.mfa.gov.et/Press_Section/Week_Horn_Africa_June_18_2010.htm>.


61. In combination with the stifling effect of the new party law on opposition activity, which prohibits political parties receiving funding/support from foreign accounts (held by the Ethiopian diaspora in US and Europe).}

As a long-term contact in Addis Ababa, a distinguished businessman of the old class and a staunch Amhara, embarrassingly confessed after the May election:

I have to admit something to you. For the first time, I actually voted for EPRDF. I am so angry with the opposition (CUD) who betrayed us in 2005. They left the voters to hang, while they were childishly fighting for positions. But EPRDF has also proven that they can deliver; look around you and see all the changes which have taken place over the last five years!\footnote{Interview, Amhara businessman, Addis Ababa, 29 May 2010.}

Electoral dynamics sums up the third category of issues that determined the election outcome. First, the unlevel playing field tilted the votes radically in favour of the incumbent. The omnipresent cadre structure, the coercive means of the state, and the vast resources commanded by the EPRDF (both through state coffers and the party-owned commercial enterprises) were used to boost their campaign and reportedly buy votes en masse,\footnote{IRIN, ‘Ethiopia: government denies food aid "manipulated" for political gain’ (IRIN news report, 7 June 2010), <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=89382> (15 October 2010).} resulting in a highly biased campaign.\footnote{In combination with the sti\lfootnote{In combination with the stifling effect of the new party law on opposition activity, which prohibits political parties receiving funding/support from foreign accounts (held by the Ethiopian diaspora in US and Europe).}ffling effect of the new party law on opposition activity, which prohibits political parties receiving funding/support from foreign accounts (held by the Ethiopian diaspora in US and Europe).} Added to this are concerns of intimidation and harassment of opposition candidates and voters throughout the process, and plausible information of election day rigging, which together with a single-member constituency electoral system, are likely to have tilted constituencies in favour of the incumbent. Second, the opposition parties did not have the capacity to provide a credible, attractive, and likely nation-wide alternative to the EPRDF in the campaign (as CUD did in 2005). Many factors contributed to this, including outside interference by the EPRDF. The undermining and dismantling of the CUD coalition after the 2005 elections was essential in order to neutralize the biggest electoral challenge to EPRDF. The Medrek coalition was only established in late 2008, and had little time to...

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consolidate its nation-wide political organization and agenda. Despite the broad organizational platform of Medrek, and its presence in all the country’s regions, it failed to fill the void of CUD as a credible and likely national alternative to EPRDF. Contributory factors may have included a lack of popular leaders with nation-wide appeal, or its core policies on ethnic federalism (as opposed to CUD’s pan-Ethiopian platform). Third, the last point worth mentioning as an influence on the electoral process is the lack of international pressure upon EPRDF to open up political space ahead of the 2010 elections, as we witnessed in 2005. The concerted attempt to ‘protect’ its re-ideologized version of ‘democracy’ in the policies adopted by EPRDF after 2005 scared and intimidated international NGOs, diplomats and foreign envoys, human rights organizations, and academic scholars. Very few international voices dared to speak truth to power in Addis Ababa, as the most likely consequence was expulsion and possible breach of relations. Thus instead of applying pressure on EPRDF to accept universal democratic standards as happened in 2005, the donor community this time around gave lip service to democracy and actually boosted the legitimacy of EPRDF by actively supporting the Code of Conduct for Political Parties, and failing to question the breach of basic principles of the rule of law in the country. ‘What can we do?’ a high-ranking EU diplomat admitted off the record just after the election: ‘We have no space at all to manoeuvre, as the government is not willing at all to discuss political substance and democracy. Neither are key donors to Ethiopia. All we talk about these days are poverty and classical development theory.’

**Conclusion**

The facts speak for themselves: in the 2008 local elections EPRDF and its affiliates won about 3.5 million seats in the local and districts assemblies, while the opposition got only a handful. In the 2010 election for regional councils, EPRDF and its affiliates won 1,903 seats, while the opposition got one. In the 2010 federal election for the House of Representatives, EPRDF and its affiliates won 545 seats, while the opposition got one. There is no other conclusion to be drawn from Ethiopia’s electoral development than to consider it as the re-establishment of the country as a one-party state. The recent re-elections for party leadership

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62. The re-arrest of the opposition leader Birtukan Mideksa in December 2008 sustained the neutralization of this electoral segment. Birtukan Mideksa was again released from prison in October 2010; it is plausible to argue that Meles Zenawi ordered her release after the elections so as to strengthen his democratic credentials vis-à-vis the international community.

positions within the EPRDF’s component parts, as well as the appointment of a new government (with many of the old guard guerrilla fighters stepping down), indicates that Meles Zenawi, as chairman of EPRDF and Prime Minister of Ethiopia, will be unchallenged over the next five-year period, during which he will wield an omnipresent power in the country.

A few months after the election, the opposition leaders were in doubt on how to continue their peaceful struggle for real democracy in the country. 64 Without genuine pre-election negotiations for a level playing field ahead of the 2015 elections, some saw continuing the electoral race as a futile exercise. Many opposition leaders, as well as local academic observers, fear that the total closure of plural democratic representation in the country will feed into recruitment to the many armed opposition movements roaming the Ethiopian countryside.

64. Interviews, opposition leaders, Addis Ababa, 4–7 August 2010.