

Comments on the Ethiopian Crisis

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The Government

The place to start trying to understand any political crisis is always with the government in power. Oppositions merely fill the gaps left by the incumbent regime. The regime itself explains why those gaps are there. In the case of the EPRDF government led by Meles Zenawi, these gaps are glaring.

· Simple time. The Meles government has now been in power for over fourteen years. By the standards of democratic government, anywhere in the world – as opposed to the standards of African dictatorships – this is a very long time. Very few elected leaders last so long: Charles de Gaulle and Margaret Thatcher, the two most dominant European leaders of recent decades, each lasted eleven years. In a newly democratic Africa, Meles' tenure is now exceeded or equalled by a very small number of very doubtfully democratic leaders, such as Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Museveni of Uganda, al-Beshir of Sudan, and (of course) Isaias of Eritrea. People get tired of leaders, and after fourteen years, any credit that they may once have gained from ousting their predecessors has long been lost. Regular change in leadership is both a consequence of, and a requirement for, democratic governance, and Ethiopia is no exception.

· The extreme narrowness of the regime's domestic base. The EPRDF has never been able to rid itself of the sense that this is essentially a Tigray government. Though it has selected ministers from a wide range of nationalities, the core of the regime has always lain in the TPLF that created it. Tigray, with some 10% of the population, provides much too narrow a base from which to govern Ethiopia, and once Ethiopians gained the chance to choose their own government, it is only to be expected that they should vote for parties that more evidently represent their own communities.

· The failure to create effective political institutions. The EPRDF, at least outside Tigray, has never been able, or indeed has never been allowed, to develop into an effective political organisation whose regional leadership could exercise any autonomous authority, or represent the communities that they governed. The extraordinarily rapid turnover of leaders in virtually all of the PDOs, orchestrated from the centre, has reflected their feebleness. Many of these leaders had no local base anyhow, while any who sought to create one were removed in case they presented any threat to the leadership of the regime. Once genuine elections came, in which the ruling party needed an effective grassroots organisation to muster support, that organisation did not exist.

· By introducing ethnic federalism, but at the same time retaining tight central control over regional government, the EPRDF found itself caught between two stools. On the one hand, Ethiopian nationalists (by no means restricted to Amharas) were deeply concerned at what looked like an attempt to replicate the failed nationality policies of the USSR, and was often regarded as a divide-and-rule policy to the advantage of Tigray; on the other, representatives of historically disadvantaged nationalities (notably the Oromo) felt that the EPRDF had promised a level of autonomy that it had then totally failed to deliver.

· The EPRDF, indeed, has never sought to operate as an open and democratic organisation. One striking indicator of this has been the virtual invisibility of its leader. Meles Zenawi's behaviour recalls the era when emperors lived in ritual seclusion: he is virtually never seen, or engages in any public way with other Ethiopians – in striking contrast to his accessibility to important foreigners, and his ability to sparkle on an international stage. While Haile-Selassie was constantly visible and travelled widely round the country, and even Mengistu Hailemariam appeared in public on major occasions, Meles has remained immured in the EPRDF headquarters in Arat Kilo.

· The government's style of decision-making has been equally opaque. It has retained all the instincts of a Marxist-Leninist regime, in which any genuine discussion of policy has been restricted to a tiny Politburo. The clearest example is the TPLF split in mid-2001, when issues of critical national importance were fought out within the party Central Committee, without the slightest reference to other Ethiopians.

· The TPLF split itself gravely weakened the government; even though Meles eventually came out on top, even his base in Tigray was deeply threatened; it also has repercussions on other parts of the country, notably because TPLF leaders such as Bitaw Belay who had been responsible for building up the PDOs sided with the opposition to Meles.

· Though the economy has certainly done better than under Mengistu (which would not be difficult), major weaknesses remained, many of which could be ascribed to the underlying Marxist ideology of the regime. The artificial distinction between 'productive' and 'non-productive' investment inhibited investment in key areas such as housing; the insistence of 'agriculture-led industrialisation' led to the neglect of investment opportunities in towns; and the government's attitude to foreign direct investment remained deeply grudging, reflected in the fact that Ethiopia retains one of the longest periods in Africa for establishing a business. Rigid Marxist ideology prevented any policy debate over the privatisation of land. The TPLF's own large group of quasi-public enterprises has aroused understandable suspicions of corruption, and undermines its proclaimed conversion to economic liberalism.

· For several years, it has been clear that urban dwellers have been deeply alienated from the regime. Despite development in Addis Ababa, and a small number of towns that have benefited from the new political order (notably Mekelle, but also Bahr Dar and Awassa), most Ethiopian towns remain stagnant backwaters, and government policy has ignored them. Most rural areas, so far as I can judge, have been passive towards the government at best, resentful at worst.

- The government's attitude towards dissent has often been brutal and alienating, except where the need to placate donor communities has induced restraint. The Awaasa massacre of May 2002, when government forces opened fire with heavy machine guns on people peacefully demonstrating against a proposed change (pushed through without any consultation) in the status of the municipality of Awaasa (and in no way a threat to the regime) provides a particularly crude example. There was no apology or investigation, and local EPRDF officials who failed to support the government's action were dismissed.

In short, the EPRDF government has now reached a state at which it is almost impossible to imagine it winning any remotely fair election against any reasonably plausible and effective opposition. It has been able to retain a semblance of authority, only because of that deference that Ethiopians customarily display towards people with power, backed by a threat of force. Over three years ago, in July 2002, I reached the conclusion that the government was highly vulnerable, especially to urban dissent. That vulnerability has now been revealed.

The Opposition

Organising public opposition towards those in authority has always been deeply antithetical to Ethiopian conceptions of governance. People who opposed the government for whatever reason have had no options beyond passive obedience, covert subversion under a guise of acceptance, or outright revolt. At no time prior to 1991 had any legitimate opposition been permitted in Ethiopia, and even though the EPRDF government was obliged to accept formal opposition as a result of its need for external support and finance, it has never regarded any opposition movement as legitimate, or as having any right to oust it from power by peaceful electoral means. At the same time, the manifest 'gaps' in the government's capacity to gain the support of the population have produced obvious openings for opposition movements, if these were able to operate. The result has been an opposition with a number of distinctive characteristics.

- The leadership of the opposition has been heavily intellectual and urban-based, since these have been the only group within the country capable of appreciating the hitherto non-existent opportunities that were now open, and with sufficient external contacts to help protect them against government repression. Academics have been well to the fore, but also businessmen, medical doctors and other professionals. There was virtually no other group from which peaceful opposition (as opposed to violent revolt) could be drawn. This very restricted leadership has evidently misled the government into supposing that the opposition would have equally restricted support.

- There were however very important issues which this leadership could articulate, deriving from the weaknesses of the government, and extending well beyond its own group. First and most important were those deriving from 'nationality', including both an appeal to a residual but significant sense of Ethiopian nationalism (most obviously among Amharas, but extending to other groups such as Gurages, and to urban dwellers as a whole), and an appeal to those specific nationalities that had historically been alienated

from the Ethiopian state, and who had felt at first encouraged, but later betrayed, by the EPRDF's failure to deliver on its promises. There is a parallel here with the enthusiasm that initially greeted the 1974 revolution, and the subsequent loss of confidence in the Derg. It is correspondingly unsurprising that two main opposition parties, the CUD and the UEDF, should have developed to tap into each of these sources of support.

- There were other sources of support, including the economic liberalism of the CUD, in opposition to the persisting Marxist attitudes of the EPRDF regime, and the ability of each of the two major parties to recruit local authority figures in order to gain support in particular areas. I have detected no explicit attempt to mobilise religion as a source of political support (though a 'nationalist' party like CUD must inevitably be associated in some degree with Christianity and especially the Orthodox church).

- I have been entirely unimpressed by attempts to demonise the opposition as Amhara chauvinists, covert Derg supporters, secessionists, Moslem fundamentalists, or whatever. Indeed, the contrast between the present opposition and the TPLF in 1991 is startling: both Ethiopians and outsiders had every reason to be worried about a government of Marxist guerrillas, led by a man whose role model appeared to be Enver Hoxha's Albania; the leadership of the present opposition, on the other hand, are well-known, highly educated, Western-oriented sophisticates. Indeed, both CUD and UEDF leaderships are as liberal as any Ethiopian politician can plausibly be expected to be. Inevitably, they reflect currents in Ethiopian society – that is what political parties are for. One such current is Ethiopian nationalism, which was represented in an extreme and brutal form by the Derg, and which is understandably strongest among Amharas, but which has an entirely legitimate constituency in the country as a whole. On the other side, there is likewise a legitimate constituency for ethnic and regional identities that seek a significant measure of self-government, which indeed have been heavily encouraged, but also disappointed, by the EPRDF. Somehow or other, these two divergent streams in current Ethiopian political consciousness have to be reconciled, and this will undoubtedly be a difficult task. It is however a task that cannot now be achieved by the EPRDF, and for which by far the best option lies in democratic political parties whose leaders are drawn from much the same social strata, and who seek both to retain the support of their constituencies, and to maintain an effective central government which they all need. The current CUD and UEDF, whose leaders know one another well, and which have developed side-by-side in opposition to both the Derg and the EPRDF, provide as good an opportunity of achieving the necessary historic compromise, as Ethiopia can plausibly expect.

- Inevitably, the task of developing effective and legitimate opposition, within a political culture that has never previously accepted it, and against a government prone to resort to violence, is an extremely difficult one. Inexperienced opposition leaders have to find some way of retaining and expressing the support of their constituencies, while at the same time avoiding a breakdown of public order, in the teeth of harassment and government manipulation, and in conditions of great personal danger. It would be a miracle were they to get it right every time.

The Elections

The May 2005 elections in Ethiopia have taken on the characteristics of 'founding elections', such as those of 1994 in South Africa, or of the 1950s or early 1960s in most of the rest of the continent. They marked the first occasion in the country's history when the mass of the electorate felt that they had the opportunity to express their own views on their country's future, and were able to exercise it. Neither the no-party elections to the Chamber of Deputies under Haile-Selassie, nor the one-party elections to the National Shengo under the Derg, provided any such opportunity, while the two earlier elections under the FDRE were multi-party only in name. Such founding elections are historic occasions, and establish enduring political patterns and! claims to leadership. Some of the salient points seem to me to be:

- On the whole, the elections were conducted with a level of fairness and openness completely unprecedented in Ethiopian history. In most areas of the country, parties were able to present candidates and campaign, and people were able to vote, with a degree of freedom hitherto unknown. There were obviously exceptions: it is unlikely that any significant opposition was permitted in Tigray, where the governing faction of the TPLF that won the intra-party struggle in 2! 002 is intensely aware of the need to control its base, or in areas such as western Welega where support for the OLF is strongest. The Somali region, as always, is a law (or lack of law) to itself. But generally, these were real elections.

- This level of openness can only have been permitted by the government, firstly because it was under strong pressure from donors, and secondly because it was supremely confident that it could not lose. There were nonetheless some worrying signs, even before the elections took place. One of these was the expulsion of Dr. Siegfried Pausewang of the Christian Michelsen Institute in Bergen</S! t1:place, a highly experienced observer who had co-authored a report on the 2000 elections.

- There is unanimous agreement on the calm, determination and responsibility of voters throughout Ethiopia, and the patience and orderliness with which they waited and cast their votes. As has happened in many other parts of Africa, the voters themselves refuted any claim that ordinary Ethiopians were not 'ready' for democracy, or were incapable of unde! rstanding the issues at stake. This determination, sharply at odds with the government-orchestrated expressions of opinion familiar in Ethiopia alike under the imperial, Derg and EPRDF regimes, can be seen in retrospect as presaging bad news for the government. People do not behave in that way in order merely to do what the government (or anyone else) expects them to do. They do so in order to express what they themselves want. Given the history of manipulated expressions of opinion in Ethiopia, any such determination was likely to amount to an assertion of independence from, and opposition to, the incumbent regime.

- The official results of the elections are both complex in themselves, and deeply affected by fraud. We simply do not know what they would have been, had they been both fairly conducted (which was generally the case) and accurately reported (which was not).

Nonetheless, some very important conclusions can be reached. First, the EPRDF has completely lost public support in the cities which – in Ethiopia as throughout Africa – are the bellwethers of political opinion. Equally striking, that support has gone overwhelmingly to the CUD: for this to gain every single constituency in Addis Ababa, in both the parliamentary and municipal elections, is a quite extraordinary achievement, and – given the range of nationalities and settlement patterns in the city – indicates support among all urban population groups. It has also gained some regional support outside its Amhara and Gurage heartlands, partly no doubt due to alliances with locally respected politicians. The UEDF also has a significant constituency, especially in regions such as Kambatta and western Shoa that reflect its leadership. On the other hand, some of the constituencies declared for the EPRDF defy any plausible assessment of public opinion in the areas concerned: that it should have won about half of the seats both in Sidama and in western Welega, for instance, is entirely incredible. In Sidama, as a result of the May 2002 massacre, and in western Welega, as the heartland of OLF support, hostility to the regime runs very deep, and the declared results can only be the result either of heavy-handed government pressure before and during the vote, or else of fraud after it.

· The evidence of fraud and intimidation, especially after the debacle suffered by the EPRDF became apparent with the Addis Ababa results, is so overwhelming that it cannot plausibly be denied. The EU observer mission, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, and Donald Levine in his correspondence with Ethiopian diplomats in the United States, have convincingly demonstrated that significant rigging took place. The announcement of the number of seats won by each party by the government, before any such figures had emerged from the Election Board, is likewise telling. Nor do the re-run elections – held after the rebuff to the government had become apparent, when government resources could be concentrated on a small number of constituencies, and after any necessary pressure had been brought on the Election Board – demonstrate otherwise. We cannot know what the results would have been, had the elections and count been fairly conducted, and it is always possible that the EPRDF would have won them; but the charge that the elections were stolen is eminently plausible.

The Aftermath

The aftermath of the elections left Ethiopia in an entirely unprecedented situation, for which the peculiarities of Ethiopian political culture provided no readily acceptable outcome. Ethiopian governance has historically been based on a willingness to obey any ruler who was able to exercise effective power. In the words of the Tigrayan proverb: ‘the sun that comes up tomorrow will be our sun; the government that rules tomorrow will be our government’. It has had no place for compromise or power-sharing, except in so far as these could be disguised behind a facade of respect for the ruling power. When power has changed hands, as happened most recently in 1991, the old government has lost ‘the mandate of heaven’, and people have started to obey a new government that evidently possessed the capacity to rule, with only a short hiatus of potential anarchy between the two. A government divided between rival powers has never been on offer. After the scale of the EPRDF’s loss of support became apparent, especially in the cities, all Ethiopian

politicians were left in a situation of extreme uncertainty and potential personal danger, government and opposition alike. While the personal dangers were most acute for the opposition, the TPLF likewise could not assume that it would be able to cede or share power peacefully, least of all if its own actions in government (including the danger of revelations of corruption) were to be subject to public scrutiny. The resulting confrontation may well have been inevitable. All the same, a few points are worth noting:

- The EPRDF has shown no inclination at all to accept any compromise or power-sharing solution, even though this has been proposed by the opposition. It is certainly difficult to see how this could have been made to work, but a willingness to entertain the idea would at least have helped to tide over the difficult period after the elections, and send a reassuring signal to the outside world.

- It is difficult to exaggerate the enormous amount of damage that has been done to the EPRDF government by Bereket Simon, the former Minister of Information and now information adviser to the Prime Minister, who has become the principal spokesman for the government. His neurotic and consistently inflammatory pronouncements, extending even to threats of an equivalent to the Rwanda genocide, have conveyed a very clear impression, both to the opposition and to the outside world, that the EPRDF is entirely unwilling to engage in any normal or reasonable political process. While Meles Zenawi has remained extraordinarily silent, the impression inevitably develops that Bereket expresses views which he shares, but which he is still wise enough not to be credited with himself.

- The opposition is caught in a bind. On the one hand, it cannot simply accept election results that it has every reason to believe are fraudulent, and it must do what it can to meet the expectations or demands of supporters who are irretrievably alienated from the regime. On the other hand, it has no interest in escalating violence, which would only play into the hands of a government that possesses a monopoly of organised force and has not the slightest hesitation to use it. The resort to peaceful demonstrations and boycotts is an obvious compromise for it to follow, even though there is an evident danger that these may get out of hand, and result in looting or violence.

- The government, on the other hand, has an interest in presenting opposition as violent, criminal or treasonable, and fomenting the conditions under which it will be able to suppress it by force. This indeed appears to be precisely the tactic that it has followed. Its response to demonstrations has been massively disproportionate, and while this may well reflect lack of experience in peaceful crowd control, it also suits at least the short-term interests of the regime.

- In the longer (or even not so long) term, however, the government response carries intense dangers, both to itself and to Ethiopia. It risks an escalating loss of control, paralleling the developments of 1974; it alienates the government's international supporters, on which it depends both for aid and for pressure to maintain the peace with Eritrea; and it carries an extreme risk that the Isaias regime will take the opportunity to re-launch the border war, under conditions which it regards as the most favourable that it

can expect. The parallel here is with the Siyad Barre regime in 1977. Equally, while until recently I took the view that Ethiopia had every interest in maintaining peace on the northern frontier, and that any escalation could only come from the Eritrean government, there is now at least a plausible chance that the EPRDF regime might foment war as a means of re-establishing its own domestic credibility.

Possible Outcomes

It now seems to me beyond any plausible likelihood that the EPRDF government can re-establish its position as an acceptable public authority – entirely regardless of whether that authority be democratic or not. On the contrary, it has now reached the point, reached by the imperial and Derg regimes before it, at which its authority has withered away, and cannot be recovered. It has lost ‘the mandate of heaven’, and in these circumstances, only three possible outcomes remain:

- The EPRDF government might leave power peacefully. This is obviously the best outcome, even though there is absolutely nothing to indicate that the government would be prepared to accept it. On the other hand, there was no indication that the Mengistu regime would make a rapid and virtually uncontested transfer of power possible, until Mengistu himself fled. Now that Meles Zenawi has effectively burnt any bridges that he might have opened with the opposition, it is clearly in the broader interests both of Ethiopia and of the international community that he should be persuaded to go.
- The government might leave power violently. There is a very strong possibility that continuing and escalating conflict in the towns might either spread to the countryside – if not in the form of organised guerrilla warfare, which seems to me unlikely, then at any rate by expelling government representatives and establishing some temporary form of local autonomy – or be reflected in the armed forces’ unwillingness to persist with further repression. Indeed, some kind of forcible showdown seems to me to be the most likely outcome, however horrifying it might be.
- The government might succeed in retaining its hold on power, in the process converting itself into an overtly repressive regime on the lines of Mugabe’s Zimbabwe or Isaias’ Eritrea. The question is not whether it has the willingness to do this, which it has already demonstrated, but whether it has the capacity. My guess would be No: Ethiopia is a vastly more diverse and complex society than Eritrea, and lacks the unifying nationalism that is still able to provide Isaias with a residual element of public support; nor do Ethiopians possess that extraordinary passivity that characterises at least the Shona peoples of Zimbabwe. Ethiopia is now in my view too diverse and developed, and has too many potential alternative centres of power, to make the reimposition of a central dictatorship possible. The attempt to do so would be counterproductive, whether immediately at the centre or over a longer period in the government’s progressive failure to control the rest of the country, and would only eventually result in its overthrow by progressively more violent means.

In short, the transition in Ethiopia is already under way, and the concern both of Ethiopians and of the international community should be to do whatever they can to make it as quick and as peaceful as possible.

C.S.C.

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