

Ethiopia Since the Derg: A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance (Synopsis)

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After the fall of the military dictatorship in 1991, Ethiopia has built up a federal democracy with a democratic constitution and a formally democratic state structure. But underneath the democratic institutions there exists a local reality of control and repression, especially in the rural areas. In elections, it is most visibly applied to safeguard the power of the ruling coalition of parties.

Norway is the only foreign country that had a professional presence in all elections in Ethiopia since 1992. This book summarises the experience of the Norwegian researchers on how democracy is working in practice. While concentrating on the elections, it also draws on Norwegian research experience into the trials for human rights abuses committed under the previous regime, land redistribution, the operation of local power structures, reports on human rights in the last ten years, the rights of minorities. It is not either an election study built on quantitative data, but, as chapter 2 explains, a qualitative study applying qualitative methods from sociology and political sciences.

A Dual State Structure

A dual system has been developed: Below the formally pluralist structure of political institutions a centralist party structure has been entrenched. A federal government system is in place, but advisers from the TPLF control decision-making on all levels. The economy has been privatized, but the ruling parties, first of all TPLF, have bought essential enterprises and service institutions, and built up business empires in the hands of the parties. The local administration is headed by elected councils, but party cadres control kebele and, through it, exert close control over the peasants. There are well organized, formally democratic elections, but the opposition parties are restrained and put under severe pressure, wherever they achieve a local organization that threatens the position of the ruling EPRDF party. Local leaders and cadres assure their victory with all – including illegal – means and violence.

The experience of elections exposes the depth of the structural restrictions on democratic plurality. Norwegian researchers from NIHR have followed all elections since 1991 and published reports on them; they have also followed closely the political development, the Derg trials, the land redistribution in Amhara region, the situation for human rights, minority rights, and social and political relations in urban and rural areas. The reports on the elections, including the recent ones in 2000 and 2001, have each time exposed grave violations of the elections law and a degree of outright repression against supporters of opposition parties. In practice, this structure never allowed more than a few isolated individuals to win seats in the federal parliament or in local and regional councils.

Our researchers have seen that candidates and party workers and supporters of competing parties were harassed and imprisoned already long before the elections. Manipulations with rules – such as delaying the acceptance of candidates' lists of



endorsing signatures until after closing date, or refusing some signature in the last moment and hence disking candidates – were common practice in many places. During the elections, we observed restrictions on party observers, often their exclusion from voting stations;

potential voters for the oppositions were prevented from casting their votes; also incidents of ballot boxes being staffed or stolen after election day were observed. Cheating in the counting was more difficult to detect, but is reported to us from many places. Hardhanded retaliation targeting leaders and candidates of opposition parties followed the elections, particularly in places where a victory of an opposition appeared possible. Arrests, economic sanctions, dismissal from jobs, discrimination in communal services and in distribution of relief food were reported from many areas.

(The book cover shows a picture of voters protesting, their voter cards raised for demonstrating their right to vote, in Hadiya, on December 23, 2001. "We have the right to vote. We have registered, we have voting cards. But we can not make use of our rights, because our candidates have been removed from the lists. We demand our right to vote.")

Democratization and the Identity of State and Party

Each of these incidents isolated could be seen as an error of over-zealous local leaders. We have for a long time followed the argument that after all, the elections were well organized and demonstrated a progress on a path of democracy. But doubt and unease followed an observation of increasing local violence and pressure on peasants. In January 2001, repression also reached the kebele in Addis Ababa in full force. A parallel analysis of political development in the country revealed a general pattern of growing control and repression in the kebele.

Our consolidated analysis of political developments reveals that repression has structural roots. TPLF claims to stand for the interests of the peasant majority. The rural population has been benefiting from the abolition in 1991 of the government monopoly on grain marketing and the compulsory deliveries. The very unpopular villagisation programme was stopped, as well as enforced recruitments to the army. Building on this doubtless merit, TPLF feels betrayed if peasants do not vote for their affiliated parties. Over 80 per

cent of the Ethiopian population live in the rural areas. The government could securely allow the opposition to compete freely in urban centers, as long as it were secured rural support. Once this support erodes, TPLF feels betrayed and attempts to force peasants into grateful subordination.

Already in 1995 our research team observed a trend towards re-establishing party control in the rural kebele. Structures inherited from the Derg were revitalized, only the old cadres of the Workers Party of Ethiopia were replaced by a new group of young people recruited locally and trained by the party in power. These people, mostly school leavers who have no other means of livelihood, depend totally on the party for their authority in the village, as well as for their personal position and their daily bread. For them, the alternative to a victory in elections spells ruin, unemployment, and destitution.

The dual structure developed in Ethiopian administration, as reported above, can be shown to be caused by a structural deficit: The local (and even higher) party officials and cadres depend totally on their party for all of their social status and material wellbeing. But the party also depends on their loyalty. A party in a poor country can not exist on contributions and membership fees. Only by giving their members access to state resources can it keep them loyal. There is no other material not social base for a party. Thus, the state and the party are the same, on local as on higher level. This expresses itself in many ways: the office of the governing party is invariably, even in the regions, that of the highest state official. With no sense of wrong, party cadres tell peasants: "According to the Constitution, the land is the property of the State. We don't give you our land if you betray us in the voting..." A group of serious men in Dilla claimed in 2000: "We are here not in our capacity as Central Committee of GPRDM, but as the Zonal Executive Committee. As such we are elected by all people, and are neutral..." Consequently, the cars, the office equipment, all the resources of the zonal and local administrations are used for the ruling party – while an opposition party is excluded even from donations from abroad. It is in the logic of this unity of state and party that administrators do not hesitate to use even the instruments of law and order, the police and the prisons, as resources in their election campaign.

As long as this structure exists, it can not allow elections to challenge to state resources. Every single member, from top to lowest level, depends on it. Therefore a dual structure is needed, to establish democracy on a formal level, but maintain power. Therefore, the National Electoral Board is challenged to organize and secure free and equal elections, but is restricted at the same time to allow the party workers the necessary room to ensure their victory. Loosing even one single seat is serious, as it tends to undermine the loyalty to the local cadres, the most important base for the daily working of the party in power.

As long as this structure is in place, a democratization process can hardly be expected to improve more than details in the formal system. The instruments of rural repression would remain in place and continue to be used for manipulation of elections and for securing the loyalty, by will or by force, of the peasantry.

Some politicians and intellectuals believe that the tradition of holding discussions under a tree until a unanimous consensus is achieved, constitutes a different concept of African democracy. While we wholeheartedly agree that Africans should apply and adapt their own democratic traditions instead of imitating Western patterns, we can not settle down with a manipulated “consensus”. If people are coerced into accepting a prepared “consensus” which is forcefully applied under the label of “democracy”, democracy is discredited, not Africanized.

The Administrative Reforms of 2001 and democratization

In 2001, after the TPLF General Conference which re-consolidated the Party after the split of spring 2001 and the exclusion of the dissidents, the government has embarked on an administrative reform which is intended to separate powers. Introduced in 2001 as “kebele reform”, later expanded into a renewal programme called “Tehadso”, it is to establish on all levels an administrative hierarchy independent of the political leadership. Amendments of the regional constitutions have been voted through, to provide a legal base for the reforms.

This may become a very important reform which could indeed establish a new relation of power. It has a potential to reduce differences in access to resources and enable parties to compete and to develop a democratic dialogue. A realistic competition could eventually lead towards democratic elections.

However, the reform can only succeed in doing so if it reaches the local level with effective guarantees in everyday life. If the party cadres are allowed to continue commanding control over peasants and administrators (just as they presently exert power over local police forces), the new independent administrative institutions will remain restricted in their powers, like NEB is until today. If the informal but real (and practically unlimited) power of the local party cadres is not abolished, no change will occur.

The foreign donors and embassies have expressed great hopes in the administrative reforms. We share the hope that the reforms indeed have a potential of disentangling political party organization from the state administration, and expose the party to effective competition. But we have experienced many incidents of formal structures being undermined by a party structure dependent on state resources to reward their cadres. We have seen an almost uninhibited manipulation of state institutions and processes including elections on their behalf. We have to express a warning that such reforms do not in themselves establish democracy. They will hardly be allowed to tilt the power balance. And without opening for that, at least as a future possibility, democracy cannot be introduced through administrative reforms. It is the result that counts, not the reform as such. Only when it reaches that daily experience of the majority of Ethiopians in rural as well as urban areas, can democracy be achieved in spirit, not only in the formal structure.

We will continue to measure democracy by its consequences in everyday life of rural people.