

## **Ethiopia: on the brink of civil war**

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Within the space of a few hours, the protest that broke out on 1 November in the streets of Addis Ababa had spread to other Ethiopian towns. Vigorously suppressed, it became a riot and Ethiopia found itself on the brink of civil war. Elite troops brought about a blood bath. Will the dozens of deaths, the thousands of arrests, the detention and isolation of the leaders of the opposition finally sweep away the three myths that surround the regime of Meles Zenawi, the country's master since 1991?

The first one, the most unknown, is probably the most tragic. The government would have us believe that self-sufficiency in food is within sight. Nevertheless, if aid now prevents famine in the countryside, where 85% of the 77 million Ethiopians live, chronic hunger is spreading. In a "good" year, like 2005, more than ten million of them have a vital need of external aid. If nothing else changes and in a "normal" year, within twenty years there will be some forty million of them, according to the most reliable independent Ethiopian research institutes, such as the Ethiopian Economic Association.

The forecasts are equally pessimistic in the event of widespread drought, such as those that recur on average every five years. In 1984–1985, with a million deaths, some five million Ethiopians were affected. In 2003, thirteen million were involved. The next major drought will concern eighteen to twenty million people.

Since he seized power in 1991, Meles Zenawi has pursued a development strategy based on raising the productivity of the mass of peasants. However pertinent this was, its implementation did not succeed. At the very best, yields stagnate. The increases in production, due mainly to extending the cultivated area, could not keep pace with population increase, which doubles every twenty-five years. Production and revenue per rural dweller are still below those in the last years of the reign of Haile Selassie, who was overthrown in 1974.

The natural, technical and demographic obstacles that always receive the blame obscure the fundamental reason for this failure: the ever-spreading and insatiable authoritarianism of the public powers which stifles the peasants. The former take the decisions; the latter carry out massive schemes involving compulsory labour and "voluntary" contributions. This forced development absorbs a quarter of a peasant's working time. They are obliged to do it: the

land that they cultivate belongs to the State which possesses practically a monopoly of agricultural inputs. The result is that the capacities of the authorities and those of the farmers cancel each other out in a smouldering confrontation instead of reinforcing each other. The burden imposed on the peasantry undermines rural development, which first of all needs democracy.

One could hope that, based on the promises of the Prime Minister, the general elections of 15 May would, for the first time, be "free and fair", to the great satisfaction of international donors. Right up until the final weeks of the campaign, this was more or less the case, for, if Meles was anticipating a rejection in the towns, he was counting upon a plebiscite in the countryside. However, as soon as the first vote counts indicated a tremendous rise in support for the opposition and its possible victory, the second myth, the myth of Meles Zenawi as a democratic, fell to pieces. The counting of votes had barely begun when he declared a state of emergency, announced his victory and then, after three long months of fraudulent manipulations, officially awarded himself 360 seats out of the total of 547. But this first bid for power was not enough. He then requested a double surrender on the part of the opposition parties: they had to accept their electoral "defeat" and then agree to play only a silent walk-on role so that the regime could call itself pluralist, without the oligarchy relinquishing one iota of their formidable political and economic powers.

In a hasty move, the out-going parliament decided that, the agreement of 274 members was needed (compared to twenty previously) to place an item on the Assembly's agenda. Afterwards, the newly elected parliament cancelled the parliamentary immunity of those members coming from the main opposition party, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party (CUDP), which refused to take up its seats. To every concession agreed by the Coalition, even including its tacit acceptance of the official results, to every request to launch a true dialogue, to its calls simply for "civil disobedience" as the only way of protesting, the regime's only reaction was to blacken and repress the opposition. Meles Zenawi could not have done otherwise if he wanted that the outcome of his rejection in the ballot boxes to be a popular explosion that the opposition parties would be unable to contain—but for which they were made responsible—and which could be crushed in the name of maintaining public order.

Enthralled, the international community worshipped Meles Zenawi. They had been won over by his claim that his declared liberalism was successful and by the sincerity of his break with the ultra-Maoist stance of his guerrilla years, as well as with the ancient Abyssinian culture of his predecessors, where power was neither won nor lost except by force. They even believed—and this is the third myth—that the introduction of federalism after years of runaway centralization would finally achieve balance in the relations between Ethiopia's nations and peoples.

However, behind this façade of federalism, the reign of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) of Meles Zenawi had been fanning ethnic tensions. What is worse, as if to deflect a political clash into an obviously unacceptable ethnic settling of scores, the Coalition has been accused of embracing the anti-Tigré "chauvinism" of its most extreme wing, and even of nurturing a design for genocide that would make what took place in Rwanda look like child's play.

Despite this situation, international donors have accepted that their aid, amounting to a quarter of gross domestic product and with Ethiopia being the primary recipient in Africa, is not under their control. They also chose to ignore that the regime's authoritarianism neutralizes their development assistance and brought emergency aid under political control. The diplomatic community has supported the power play of Ethiopia's "strong man" without any sharp question. It has acknowledged the "unprecedented openness" of the electoral campaign which signified "an important step" towards democracy. It has endorsed the official electoral verdict, while accepting that the process was tarnished with "irregularities"—as if judgment about expressions of democracy had double standards. It has only been the observers in the mission of the European Union who considered that the ballot "failed to meet international standards".

Finally, the mediation led by the United States and the United Kingdom to defuse the crisis only played into Meles' hands. On the pretext of the scrupulous respect of legality, it obliged the opposition to accept the one-sided arbitration of so-called "independent" institutions, such as the National Electoral Board. The mediators then urged the opposition to take up their seats in parliament.

At no stage have the mediators obtained the least concession on the part of the regime, nor played their master card: the volume of aid or at least the ways it is used. The G8 Summit in Gleneagles in July, to which Meles Zenawi had been invited alongside five other leaders from Black African countries, linked an increase in aid to respect for "good governance, democracy and transparency". Nevertheless, the donor countries immediately promised to double their aid to match the "democratization" of Ethiopia. In their eyes, nothing matters so much as the stability of Ethiopia in the turmoil taking place in the Horn of Africa. In reality, they consider the present leadership to be a better guarantor of stability, all the more so because Meles has firmly decided to stay in power at all costs and when his replacement by the opposition would be hazardous undertaking given the evident weakness of its leadership.

When foreign protests against the "excessive" repression, as well as the calls for "dialogue", became more energetic, Meles responded to them by declaring that the leaders of the Coalition would be charged with "treason" and could face the death penalty for having called for an "insurrection". Nothing can dissuade him

from the conviction that he still has a green light from the international community. But, at the same time, the ultimate hope of the Ethiopian democrats lies on this same community.

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