



Ethiopia in 2005: The Beginning of a Transition?

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Introduction

Ethiopia is undergoing a volatile process of transition after a dizzying series of squandered opportunities and bad-faith strategies by the major contending parties. The May 2005 national elections offered a glimpse into what a peaceful, multiparty, competitive, political future might look like. But subsequent polarizing accusations, intransigence, violent demonstrations, boycotts, and criminalization of dissent recalled instead the upheavals of earlier transitions in 1991–1992 and even 1974–1977. The situation in January 2006 is both unstable and dangerous.

Beyond conflicting characterizations of the elections and assignments of blame, by November 2005, a dangerous new context began to emerge. The main opposition coalition had been shattered and its principal leaders imprisoned; civil society leaders and the independent press had been harassed and intimidated into silence; and the incumbent regime found it necessary to use massive levels of military force against civilians, and to arrest thousands upon thousands of youths in neighborhood sweeps to keep order in the capital's streets. In December, 131 opposition politicians (including 10 elected members of parliament), journalists, and civil society leaders were charged with crimes that included treason and even genocide. This tense standoff is most likely to move into a situation of further retrenchment by the incumbent regime and increased resort to violent repression.

Concurrent with this escalating internal crisis, the stalemated peace process along Ethiopia's border with Eritrea threatened to erupt into significant warfare, with the United Nations scrambling to save its peace observation mission and reports of war preparations multiplying. U.S. policy toward Ethiopia today remains

in suspense, with policymakers seemingly uncertain whether continued support of the incumbent regime is the best option to maintain regional stability or whether intensified pressures and new multilateral strategies are needed to manage the potentially violent transitions ahead.



The May 15, 2005, elections presented the Ethiopian people with a remarkable opportunity to express their political views by participating in a poll that, for the first time in history, offered them a meaningful choice. In contrast to earlier elections in 1995 and 2000, opposition parties did not boycott the polls but instead competed vigorously across the country. Opposition party mistrust of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), reports of intimidation and violence, and highly polarizing rhetoric raised concerns during the pre-election period but did not deter opposition parties from campaigning in nearly every constituency. Live televised debates on matters of public policy, opposition party access to state-owned media, and huge, peaceful rallies in the final week of campaigning made it clear that these elections would represent a decisive moment in Ethiopia's political development. The Ethiopian people seized this opportunity with great hope and turned out in overwhelming numbers to express their choice.

Controversies relating to the counting process, subsequent allegations of fraud, and post-electoral violence, however, threaten to return Ethiopia to the more repressive politics of the past. Both the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and the opposition claimed victory in the days immediately after the poll as official results trickled in and partisans from all sides circulated contradictory claims. In this edgy and anxious environment, rumors

and allegations of fraud circulated feverishly, and apprehension grew as many Ethiopians became convinced that the election results were being manipulated.

On June 6, police arrested thousands of students protesting at Addis Ababa University, stormed a technical college near Mexico Square the following day, and most shockingly, engaged in running street battles with rock-throwing demonstrators in the Merkato area on June 8. The June 8 violence included military forces firing heavy machine guns indiscriminately into large crowds, killing at least 36 and wounding more than 100. The government was unapologetic over the violence and blamed opposition political parties for creating the trouble.

This immediate crisis ended with the signing of a pact between the opposition and government, negotiated by the Ambassadors' Donors Group. This agreement set up Complaints Investigation Panels, which held hearings and recommended re-votes in parts of 31 contested constituencies, eventually held on August 21. The NEBE finally announced official results on September 5. According to these figures (see table 1), which were disputed and rejected by the opposition, the EPRDF won 327 seats, allied parties a further 40 seats (for a total of 367 seats or 67 percent), and the opposition took 172 seats (31 percent)—with 109 going to the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), 52 going to the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), and 11 to the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM).

Despite increasing its share of seats in the parliament from 12 to 172, the opposition refused to accept this outcome, claiming it had irrefutable evidence that it had defeated the incumbent regime and that massive fraud had taken place. International observers from the European Union and the Carter Center also noted problems with the count and with intimidation of the opposition, although they stopped short of accepting the opposition's claim that it had won the election. When the new parliament met on October 11, some opposition leaders took their seats, but others, particularly leading members of the CUD, refused. The government stripped those who boycotted of their parliamentary immunity, and Prime Minister Meles Zenawi suggested that CUD chairman Hailu Shawel and others had been engaging in "treason."

Violence erupted again in the first week of November, with a further 48 people killed (including several policemen) and the arrests of most of the CUD leadership

along with journalists and civil society leaders. On November 9 the government announced that these leaders would be charged with treason (a capital offense). The opening for a more open and democratic Ethiopia that seemed possible during the spring ended with key opposition leaders in prison and the most critical voices in civil society silent.

The 2005 Elections

The May 15, 2005, elections were the third set of national elections under the 1994 constitution. Earlier elections in 1995 and 2000 were marked by government harassment of opposition parties and a boycott of the polls by the most influential opposition organizations. The EPRDF won both earlier elections with over 90 percent of the seats. Most observers agreed that these elections were well administered but did not offer most voters a meaningful choice because of restrictions on the opposition and boycotts.

In the lead-up to 2005, the EPRDF indicated that it wanted to run an election that was perceived as free and fair by the international community and that included greater participation by opposition parties within Ethiopia. The government agreed in October 2004 to meet some of the demands put forward by leading opposition groups, notably allowing international election observers and ensuring opposition access to state-run media. Although the opposition's more structural demands that the NEBE should be reorganized and that the electoral system be changed to a proportional representation system were not accepted, the main opposition coalitions decided to participate rather than boycott. For the first time in Ethiopia's history a nationwide multiparty competition seemed possible. Neither the ruling party nor the opposition had ever faced a competitive election before.

The EPRDF went through a period of turmoil in 2001, as the Central Committee of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF)—Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's core support base—erupted into two rival factions. With his base in the Tigray heartland at risk, Meles took advantage of his central position within the broader EPRDF coalition to outmaneuver his rivals, sack a number of senior officials, and successfully weather the storm. It was this reformed EPRDF party that participated in the 2005 election, although, despite apparent unity, questions about the depth of Meles' support and the fault lines of 2001 remained open.

Two main opposition coalitions competed against the EPRDF. One, the CUD, included leaders from the All

Ethiopia Unity Party (such as former All Amhara People's Organization leader Hailu Shawel), Rainbow Ethiopia (led by Berhanu Nega), and the United Ethiopian Democratic Party (led by Lidetu Ayalew). The other main opposition coalition was the UEDF, which included several exile groups as well as the Oromo National Congress (ONC, led by Merera Gudina) and the Southern Coalition (led by Beyene Petros). A third opposition party was the OFDM (led by Bulcha Demeksa). Ethiopians in the diaspora actively supported opposition parties by providing funding and by mobilizing the power of Web sites and e-mail to campaign against the ruling party. While the diaspora is diverse, many of the most vocal and best-funded groups pressed for hard-line positions and polarizing rhetoric.

On May 8 the opposition's campaign climaxed when an estimated 1 million Ethiopians rallied in Meskel Square in the heart of Addis Ababa in a massive and peaceful political rally. Beyene Petros toured the Southern region in the week before the election, speaking from the back of a truck in provincial towns and small villages that had never seen an opposition campaign event. Across the main regions, most Ethiopians saw more political debate and multiple candidates actively and peacefully soliciting support than ever before in their history.

The 172 seats officially declared for the opposition (CUD, UEDF, and OFDM) therefore represented a potential sea of change in the breadth of participation in the formal institutions of Ethiopian politics. Never before had power potentially been shared so widely or had so

List of Party Acronyms

EPRDF—Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. The ruling coalition composed of the Tigray People's Liberation Front, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization, the Amhara National Democratic Movement, and the South Ethiopian People's Democratic Front.

CUD—Coalition for Unity and Democracy. The largest opposition alliance, composed of the All Ethiopian Unity Party, Rainbow Ethiopia, the United Ethiopian Democratic Party—Medhin Party, and the Ethiopian Democratic League.

UEDF—Union of Ethiopian Democratic Forces. The second largest opposition coalition, composed of the Oromo National Congress and the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Coalition along with a wide range of small and exile-based parties.

The lead-up to the 2005 elections saw both greater political space for the opposition to operate and a commitment by the opposition to participate. Civil society organizations sponsored a series of televised debates on public policy issues, including such critical issues as land and foreign policy, during which government officials engaged leading opposition figures in live, four-hour-long debates.

many contenders engaged in the competitive processes and institutions envisioned in the constitution. In addition to this new pluralism in the national parliament, the main regional assemblies saw a similar transition from their one-party pasts. The opposition swept the Addis Ababa regional council and significant blocs in other regional councils (107 out of 294 in the Amhara region and 148 out of 537 in Oromia, according to the official results).

Table 1. Final Results of the 2005 Elections as Announced by the Ethiopian National Election Board

Government and Allied Parties			Opposition Parties		
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front	327	CUD	Coalition for Unity and Democracy	109
BGPDUF	Benishangul-Gumuz People's Democratic Unity Front	8	UEDF	United Ethiopian Democratic Forces	52
ANDP	Afar National Democratic Party	8	OFDM	Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement	11
SPDP	Somali People's Democratic Party	24			
	Total seats	367		Total seats	172
	Percentage of total seats	67%		Percentage of total seats	31%

Note: All figures are from the Ethiopian National Election Board Web site <http://www.electionsethiopia.org/>. The opposition disputes these results.

Regardless of the precise allocation of seats, a huge number of voters stood up to the powerful incumbents and sent an unmistakable message of “no confidence” to the party that has ruled for 14 years.

The opposition had strong support in urban areas but, more surprisingly, demonstrated the capacity to mobilize significant constituencies and win seats across the key Amhara, Oromia, and Southern regions. International observers substantiated reports of intimidation, particularly in the East Gojam and Welo parts of the Amhara region and around Hossana in the Southern region. Despite these problems and the formidable advantages that incumbency granted the ruling party, the opposition won seats in both the cities and the countryside. The CUD did particularly well in Addis Ababa (sweeping all 23 seats), in East Gojam and North Welo (Amhara region), the Gurage areas (Southern region), and in East Shewa (Oromia region). The UEDF ran strongly in Hadiya (Southern region) and in West Shoa, East Welega, and Arsi (Oromia region). The Oromo Federal Democratic Movement of Bulcha Demeksa captured 11 seats, most in West Welega (Oromia region).

Most observers expected the EPRDF to win the May 15 elections handily. The ruling party had what was presumed to be the overwhelming advantages of incumbency, particularly in the rural areas where 85 percent of Ethiopians live and where local government and party officials control access to land and fertilizer, keys to survival for small farmers.

Contrary to these expectations, however, huge numbers of farmers and small town residents voted against the ruling party that had appeared to be so strong in their day-to-day life. Widespread and deeply felt anger about how the EPRDF operated explains a large part of this pattern. At the local levels in particular, observers regularly reported resentments over *kebele* (village or neighborhood) officials and how they abused their power. After 14 years and a record of poor economic performance, many Ethiopians had had enough and were ready for a change. Some (particularly in the urban areas and the Amhara region) clearly supported the CUD’s platform with regard to Ethiopian nationalist themes (“Ethiopian Unity” in contrast to the ruling party’s commitment to ethnic federalism). Others saw leaders of the UEDF and OFDM as more authentic and legitimate representatives of their ethnic group or nationality than EPRDF ethnic parties such as the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization.

While preliminary official results that trickled in over the summer suggested the EPRDF had won some 60 to 70 percent of the seats, the opposition insisted that it had won a majority and challenged the official results in hundreds of constituencies. An ad hoc process looked into these allegations, but the Complaints Investigation Panels favored the ruling party, which could use its superior resources to make its case, and a number of opposition witnesses and representatives faced intimidation, according to international observers. The opposition disengaged and did not campaign in the ensuing re-votes. As a result, several seats provisionally awarded to the opposition returned to the EPRDF, including those held by such key ruling party leaders as the Minister of Information Bereket Simon (a particularly divisive figure) and Minister of Justice Harka Haroyu.

The electoral process that had seen widespread participation and vigorous, open debate ended with a chaotic and contentious process of disputed counts, street demonstrations put down with excessive force, an appeals process that did not win the opposition’s confidence, and officially proclaimed results that were not accepted by major parties.

Postelection Boycotts and Violence

It was in this dangerous context that the two opposition coalitions engaged in a lengthy and sometimes public series of consultations over the summer to plan their next steps. Some favored a strategy of taking up their seats in parliament and in the Addis Ababa regional government and using these positions to build a stronger opposition in preparation for local elections in 2006 and the next round of national elections in 2010. Escalating violence, these leaders argued, would only play into the hands of the EPRDF, which had overwhelming military dominance.

Others, however, argued that accepting results that they and their supporters believed were fraudulent would make a mockery of democracy. The EPRDF’s unilateral decision to change the rules of parliament to make a 51 percent majority necessary to place an item on the agenda (rather than the 20 signatures previously necessary) reinforced the opposition’s belief that the incumbent regime would never allow it to play a meaningful role. Some of these leaders argued for a boycott rather than participation in a parliament based on the “daylight robbery” of opposition votes. The only way to replace the EPRDF was through a “people’s power” movement of mass demonstrations, according to this line of analysis. Some of the most vocal elements in the diaspora advocated this position and accused those

willing to participate in the parliament of betraying the cause.

These debates were unresolved in early October as the date for the opening of the new parliament approached. The donors organized a last-minute set of meetings between the opposition and the government in an unsuccessful effort to prevent a boycott. When parliament convened on October 11 most UEDF members took their seats, while all but a handful of the CUD boycotted. The EPRDF responded by escalating the conflict, lifting parliamentary immunity for those who boycotted and alleging that top opposition leaders were engaging in treason. On November 1, the CUD announced plans for a general strike and a boycott of EPRDF-owned companies.

On November 2 and 3 violence exploded across Addis Ababa as confrontations between generally young demonstrators and the Ethiopian military resulted in some 42 deaths, the destruction of state-owned buses and private property, the arrests of most of the leadership of the CUD along with private newspaper editors and the leaders of several human rights monitoring organizations, and the detention of thousands of other mostly young people rounded up in sweeps of certain neighborhoods. The government charged the CUD leaders as well as the journalists and civil society leaders with insurrection and treason, a capital offense. "This is not your run-of-the-mill demonstration. This is an Orange Revolution gone wrong," Meles said, referring to the successful 2004 people's power protests in Ukraine.

On December 19, Ethiopian prosecutors formally charged some 131 opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society leaders with crimes ranging from genocide to treason. Acts of genocide, according to Ethiopia's penal code, include issuing "propaganda" that has the intention to "destroy in whole or part a nation." These charges reflect the bitter ethnic divisions generated during the campaign and the government's characterization of the opposition's campaign rhetoric as "hate speech." Among those opposition leaders facing charges are 10 elected members of parliament from the CUD, including Chairman Hailu Shawel, the opposition's choice for mayor of Addis Ababa Berhanu Nega, former Norfolk State University (Virginia) business law professor Yacob Hailemariam, and veteran human rights activist Mesfin Wolde Mariam. The court refused to grant bail, and those arrested have protested that they have had insufficient access to lawyers. Several have gone on hunger strike.

Some CUD leaders (notably Lidetu Ayalew) and most of the UEDF leadership have not been arrested as of January but it will be extremely difficult for those opposition leaders to operate effectively in such a polarized environment. Some who initially boycotted parliament have now joined, but of these, some claim that they have been threatened with reprisals if they did not end their protest. So long as CUD leaders are in prison, the cooperation of any opposition leaders with the EPRDF will be perceived by many as an act of betrayal.

Among the civil society leaders in jail are Netsanet Demissie, the leader of the domestic observer group that criticized both the government and opposition, and Daniel Bekele, an adviser to the British nongovernmental organization ActionAid who had been a vocal critic of the government's economic programs. Thirteen journalists are among those charged, making Ethiopia one of the states with the highest number of journalists in jail worldwide. Seventeen of the accused are charged *in absentia*, including reporters for the Voice of America's Amharic service and leading diaspora intellectuals and businessmen. By bringing these charges against its leading critics, the EPRDF effectively criminalized dissent and sent an unmistakable message that opposition will not be tolerated.

There is great uncertainty about the next phase of the transition but three broad scenarios may be sketched.

- The first scenario is that some mechanism is found to strengthen the more pragmatic elements in both the ruling party and the opposition while simultaneously marginalizing their respective rejectionist wings. While prospects for this scenario are low and declining, moderation, dialogue, and a return to the nonviolent competition of May 2005 might be promoted by means of an end to the opposition boycott, programs to strengthen parliament and reform the electoral system prior to scheduled local elections, and a release of those arrested in November. Sustained and meaningful international pressure and a transformation in how the international community relates to the incumbent regime will be necessary for this option.
- The second scenario envisioned by some in the opposition is for the EPRDF to collapse under the pressure of massive demonstrations and international sanctions, allowing the opposition to ascend to power. This option has never been realistic, given the EPRDF's overwhelming superiority of power, but has been the dream of some in the opposition

(notably some safely in the diaspora) and the paranoid fear of some in the ruling party.

- The third scenario is that the EPRDF will retain its hold on power by increasing its reliance on military and security forces as its electoral legitimacy declines and international criticism and pressures grow. Control over the media and the courts will limit opportunities for the opposition to mobilize, and when it tries, effective but very violent repression is likely. This scenario seems likely in at least the short to medium term, although the extent of violence may vary greatly.

The year 2005 had begun with the ruling party opening up political space, opposition parties mobilizing to compete in elections that offered voters a real choice, civil society leaders organizing open debates on matters of public policy, and the voters responding on May 15 with historic levels of participation. By mid-November, however, the opposition was in tatters with the CUD leadership in prison, its regional networks on the run or underground, and many of its supporters seeking safety in silence. Much of the independent press and the most vocal elements of civil society and the human rights organizations also face charges of treason. Civil society organizations that struggled for 14 years to create a modicum of space to operate have lost much, if not all, that they had gained. The ruling EPRDF dissipated its authority as the linkages between its ability to rule and its military force became ever more apparent.

Rising Tensions on the Ethiopia-Eritrea Border

The contemporary crisis in Ethiopia has a further alarming dimension—the heavily militarized border with Eritrea—that is linked with the internal political crisis but has its own dynamics and threatens to explode into extreme violence. After cooperating closely during the period of armed struggle against the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam, relationships between the EPRDF and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) degenerated into a vicious border conflict in 1998–2000. The causes of the border war included disputes over access to Eritrean ports, questions of how the Eritrean currency related to the Ethiopian currency, issues of dual nationality, and controversy over the precise location of the international border, particularly around the town of Badme. On a much deeper level, however, neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea felt it could compromise on nationalist positions.

The war generated large casualties and huge costs, with perhaps 100,000 killed, a million displaced, and a

generation of development opportunities squandered. The two sides agreed to a cease-fire in mid-2000, and talks mediated by the United States, the European Union, and the Organization of African Unity resulted in Ethiopia and Eritrea signing the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in Algiers on December 12, 2000. The Algiers agreement created a 25-kilometer Temporary Security Zone to be patrolled by the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) and the Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission that would delimit the border.

In April 2002, the border commission issued its ruling and determined that key parts of the disputed zone, including the symbolic town of Badme, belonged to Eritrea. Ethiopian leaders strongly objected to the ruling and have done everything short of resuming hostilities to avoid compliance. In October 2005, Eritrea, frustrated with the international community's unwillingness to pressure Ethiopia, began taking measures intended to force action. Eritrea destabilized the stalemate by banning UNMEE helicopter flights, which led the UN to withdraw its forces from nearly half of its deployment sites and effectively ended the mission's ability to monitor troop movements and cease-fire violations. Asmara increased the pressure further by expelling observers from the United States, Canada, Europe, and Russia. Some, including major UN troop contributing countries, are asking whether UNMEE's mission (which costs nearly \$200 million a year) could or should continue if Eritrea effectively withdraws its consent and if Ethiopia refuses to implement the agreement.

The prospect of a failed UN peace mission and renewed conflict in a region proximate to strategic areas of the world has pulled the international community's attention back to the Horn of Africa. The UN Security Council met to discuss the future of UNMEE in early January 2006 with recognition that the status quo is unsustainable. John Bolton, U.S. ambassador, asked the UN to delay taking actions for 30 days while he launched an initiative to break the impasse and to get the peacekeeping mission and border demarcation processes back on track. Jendayi Frazer, assistant secretary of state for African affairs, and Carlton Fulford, director of the African Center for Strategic Studies, were dispatched to the region. This mission represents a major increase in U.S. engagement in the crisis and the commitment of significant diplomatic assets.

Most observers doubt that Ethiopia will launch a new war, in part because Eritrea has maintained an extraordinary high level of mobilization while Ethiopia

has both demobilized and needs to use its troops elsewhere. Eritrea's Isaias Afewerki is a volatile, unpredictable leader, who sees the border issue as essential, and has demonstrated a willingness to end relationships with donors in order to pursue his vision of Eritrea. Both sides have their forces on high alert and very small miscalculations may escalate into large-scale war quickly.

Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

The United States has had close and supportive relations with Ethiopia since the EPRDF came to power in 1991. Meles Zenawi was regarded by the Clinton administration as one of the much lauded "new generation of leaders," and more recently, Washington and Addis Ababa have found new bases for cooperation in the global war on terrorism. In particular, both have concerns regarding *al-Ittihad*, a Somali Islamist organization, and Washington has provided Ethiopia with bilateral military assistance, training, and economic support funds as part of the growing security relationship. Meles Zenawi had support among other donors as well, as symbolized by his position on British prime minister Tony Blair's Commission on Africa in 2004–2005.

Meles Zenawi's credentials as a democratic reformer have been challenged for years, but now, his ability to serve as a reliable partner who can maintain order and contribute to the global counterterrorism agenda is increasingly under question. Until 2005, concerns about human rights and a lack of democratic competition were manageable, but the dramatic and bloody events that have followed the May 2005 elections have forced these issues in ways that make it harder for policymakers to ignore. Many observers have concluded that the end of Meles's 14 years in power is near, with questions remaining on whether the end will be managed within the ruling party or whether it will be violent. In addition to the dangerous internal crisis, Ethiopia's unwillingness to move to implement the border demarcation has put the UN mission at risk and threatens to lead to another round of bloody conflict.

The crisis in Ethiopia is unfolding in an international context where donor funds are increasingly tied to conditions relating to democratization, good governance, and human rights and where the Bush administration has declared that promotion of democracy to be a cornerstone of its foreign policy. It will be difficult for those who wish to provide Ethiopia with non-humanitarian assistance to make the case that Addis

Ababa has met these criteria. Ethiopia receives approximately \$1.9 billion in aid each year—more than one-third of the government's entire budget. U.S. assistance totals \$800 million a year, including \$500 million of food assistance. The Development Assistance Group of major bilateral and multilateral donors expressed its concern in November and stated, "these disturbances weaken the environment for aid effectiveness and poverty reduction," suggesting that business as usual will not be possible. The European Union reaction to the crisis has been distinctly critical, in part due to the very public criticisms offered by Ana Gomes, the Portuguese member of the European Parliament who served as the chief election observer for the EU mission to Ethiopia.

U.S. policymaking has been significantly shaped by the remarkable mobilization of a large, relatively wealthy, and well-organized Ethiopian-American diaspora. This constituency is diverse and includes many who support the incumbent regime, as well as many such as Oromos who are very apprehensive of the CUD's agenda. The most influential voices in the diaspora, however, are harshly critical of the EPRDF and strongly supportive of the imprisoned opposition leaders. Some articulate a hard-line stance that equates compromise with the EPRDF as betrayal and thereby reduce the room for opposition leaders in Ethiopia to maneuver.

Ethiopian-Americans have developed significant ties to several members of Congress and have succeeded in pressing the administration for a change of policy. After the November violence, Chris Smith, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights, and International Operations, introduced legislation to "encourage and facilitate the consolidation of security, human rights, democracy, and economic freedom in Ethiopia" that includes provisions to suspend joint security activities unless human rights are improved. The decision to charge several leaders of the Ethiopian community in the United States with treason (including reporters for the Voice of America) has raised the level of concern in Washington and provided new openings for the diaspora to mobilize.

The international community has crossed several significant thresholds in its relations with Ethiopia in late 2005 and early 2006. In December, the European Parliament passed a resolution critical of Ethiopia's human rights record, and donors put \$375 million in budget support on hold, citing concerns with the government's crackdown on the opposition. In early January, the U.S. embassy characterized the trials of

opposition politicians and civil society leaders as “divisive” at a time when “reconciliation and communication” was needed. The United States also announced that it would no longer sell certain military vehicles to Ethiopia but would retain its support for humanitarian programs. Discussions within the United Nations Security Council increasingly focused on how to pressure Addis Ababa to accept the border demarcation decision. Each of these moves represents a significant change in how donors relate to Ethiopia and signal that relations between Meles and the donors are entering a transition. It is unclear that these new pressures will compel the incumbent regime to change its stance toward the opposition. Past experience suggests that the new, more critical engagement may well lead to greater intransigence.

The interlinked challenges of the internal crisis in Ethiopia and the heightened prospects for war between Ethiopia and Eritrea require policymakers in Washington to initiate a qualitatively different diplomacy. These dual crises will not be settled in the short run and have a high potential to worsen before they improve. The administration must acknowledge that the transition within Ethiopia and the potential for a border war with Eritrea are major priorities that will demand sustained high-level attention for years to come. The lack of a U.S. ambassador in Addis Ababa since September (with no nominee currently named) is disturbing and suggests a lack of necessary high-level concern for the crisis in Ethiopia. Washington officials must speak clearly and critically, both in public and in private, regardless of the predictable umbrage with which the EPRDF will respond. It is imperative to lay out to Addis Ababa a clear set of options and to specify what types of

relationships and assistance the regime will lose if it continues on a path that suppresses internal dissent and threatens regional stability.

Conclusion

The start of 2005 saw the beginning of a transition in Ethiopia. Now, at the start of 2006, the contours and endpoint of this transition remain profoundly uncertain. Despite a fleeting glimpse in May 2005 of the possibility for a participatory and peaceful multiparty competitive political system, the potential for a very violent transition and downward spiral is today very real. Nonetheless, that brief glimpse, a demonstration of the Ethiopian people’s readiness for a democratic process, preserves a kernel of hope for the kind of peaceful future the Ethiopian people crave and deserve.

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