The Problematic of Democratizing a Multi-cultural Society:

The Ethiopian Experience

Merera Gudina
Associate Professor, DPSIR
Addis Ababa University

I. Introduction

Following the change of regime in 1991, a model of federalism based on ethnic-linguistic criteria has been introduced to democratize the multi-cultural state of Ethiopia. And, in what appears to be a dual transition, the central project was to create a nation state of equals by empowering ethnic groups as collectivities as well as empowering individuals as citizens. To this end, a constitutional engineering designed to enshrine both groups of rights has been introduced to create a delicate balance between the two.

This paper argues that the practice of experimenting ethnic federalism has neither been easy nor appears to succeed. In fact, it seems to have created more problems than it set to solve partly because of the hegemonic aspiration of the ruling elite, and partly because of the tensions in the attempt to implement both collective rights, which is the moving spirit of competing ethnic nationalisms in the country as well as the individual rights of citizens, which are basic to the now universally accepted liberal version of democracy. Put differently, the most serious flaw in the Ethiopian experiment is its failure to meet neither the demands of competing ethnic nationalisms nor the individual demands of citizens as citizens. And, contrary to the expectation of the engineers of the Ethiopian ethnic federalism - it has contributed more to political polarization and fragmentation than to the building of a democratic polity.

The central objerctive of this paper is to identify the major pitfalls in the on-going experiment at the democratization of Ethiopia's multi-cultural society so as to suggest possible ways of creating a political structure that can accommodate both groups of rights in a more developmentalist way.

II. Theoretical Discussion on the Democratization Problematic

With the end of the Cold War, which appears to have led to the historic opening that Huntington (1993) has characterized as 'The Third Wave of Democratization', liberal democracy and the attendant free enterprise have become the ideological hamburger both for the legitimating of the state by the regime in power and the social movements fighting to redefine the state. However, in spite of the subscription of the hegemonic forces controlling the state and the political movements arrayed against the former to the 'liberal political philosophy' trajectory, controversy often arises on the question of democratization

and democracy both at the theoretical and practical levels. The controversy is much more serious under situations of ethnically divided societies where political demands and their articulation easily take the ethnic fault-lines.

The controversy over theory arises as the result of competing interests, which leads to competing conceptions of democracy. The central issue in such controversy is: which rights should be given primacy in the political restructuring of the state, i.e. individual rights or collective rights. The central question here is: what type of democracy fits multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious societies, i.e. whether ethnic and/or cultural pluralism can serve as the bases for political pluralism. On this score, academics who have ventured to write on identity politics are divided into three broad categories. Academics in the first group totally reject ethnicity as a basis of political organization of any democratic polity; those in the second group support the accommodation of demands and claims of collectivities in one form or another in the constitutional engineering of a democratic polity. Those who belong to the third group take ethnicity as a 'libratory ideology' and ethnic-based political restructuring as a panacea for the present political quagmire found in much of Africa.

Ironically, in the arguments against ethnicity being the basis of democratic governance, there is a convergence between the liberal and leftist scholars. For instance, Keane (1995) and Fukuyama (1994) argue against ethnic nationalism as basis of democratic transformation from the liberal stand points while Milazi (1996) and Mafejie (1999) strongly argue against ethnicity from the Marxist tradition. In this connection, Mafejie (1999), who is one of the strongest opponents of rights based on ethnic collectivities, writes:

> *Political crisis in Africa has nothing to do with imagined, invented or real tribes or ethnic groups. It has to do with struggles among modern African elites for power at the national level. These are centered in the African capitals and not in the African hinterlands. The people in the hinterlands are only used as voting cattle or cannon fodder ... To achieve this; the various elites invoke primordial sentiments. Hence, the unwary can be deluded into thinking that the issue is 'tribalism' and 'ethnicity'. Properly understood 'tribalism' and 'ethnicity' are ideological ploys, stratagems, cunning culturally informed maneuvers so as to gain political advantage. This is an instance of the worst kind of political cynicism wherein the supposed leaders are prepared to sacrifice unsuspecting masses of people for their own immediate and mundane interests. (1999: 68).*

In a dramatic contrast to Mafejie, Mohamed Salih (2001) who writes from a liberal perspective, sees in ethnicity the untapped potential, which, if used can help as path-breaking in addressing the emerging debate around the triple quest of Africa, 'peace, democracy and development'.

Here, what is important to note from the out set is that, in the linkage between ethnicity and democracy several thinkers advise the cautious approach – a middle road between total dismissal of ethnicity as instrument of elite manipulation and extolling of it as a panacea of all ills of multi-ethnic polities. Broadly speaking Nnoli (1995); Markakis (1996) Nabudere (1999) and Ghai (2000) among others

argue for a balanced approach to ethnicity and its use in the reordering of the state. Especially, Ghai (*Ibid:* 18) underlines a need for 'autonomy arrangements … negotiated in a democratic way' to ensure the much needed democratic governance, political stability and meaningful economic development in multi-ethnic states. In an attempt to establish a linkage between democracy and real autonomy, he further notes that 'Democratic structures are necessary for the exercise and protection of autonomy, and that 'Democratic politics in a region both compel regional leaders to protect autonomy, as well as empower them to do so (*Ibid:* 22). In fact, as we shall see further down, the most serious pitfall in the Ethiopian democratization/decentralization problematic is the absence of 'democratic politics' in the on-going experiment.

If we have to make sense out of the general debate on ethnicity and its linkage to democracy, arguably dismissing ethnicity as wholly evil appears to be counter-productive while extolling it as a panacea for the crisis of multi-ethnic societies may be a recipe for disaster. Credible evidences to both extremes are all around us: evidently the major source of crisis of states in much of Africa is the attempt to suppress ethnic identities and the demands thereof by force while the Ethiopian case is a good example of both. The Ethiopian novelty is recognizing ethnic rights to the full, even making them part of the constitutional engineering on the one hand, and using naked force to suppress the same demands on the other. Here, a point that should not be missed in any intellectual venture to understand ethnicity is the paradox that surrounds identity politics. As I have argued elsewhere, ethnicity has got a propensity to lead to conflict when it is suppressed by the state and by the same token a propensity to lead to conflict in the event of democratizing the state and society. The latter creates a condition for claims and counter-claims, rising expectations and hegemonic aspirations, which in turn create a double pressure on the democratizing polity. (Merera, 2002) Hence, the problem of democratizing the Ethiopian state partly emerges from such a paradox.

III. The Historical Setting: The Modern State Formation in Ethiopia and the Incorporation of Various Communities on Unequal Terms

When the process of the creation of a modern multi-ethnic empire-state started by Tewodros around the 1850s, historic Ethiopia had been under feudal anarchy for over eighty years and central authority existed only in name (Bahru, 1991; Teshale, 1995). The dream of Tewodros was to unite historic Ethiopia by ending both feudal anarchy and the supremacy of the Oromo elite during the period. In fact, although the then dominant mobilizing factors were religion and region, Tewodros was the first modern Ethiopian ruler who explicitly recognized the ethnic factor in his project of empire building and consciously challenged the supremacy of the Oromo princes over the Abyssinian kingdom. Thereafter, ethnicity was to become one of the key factors in the

modus operandi of the Ethiopian State, although it remained as an undercurrent up to the 1960s.

After a brief period of Yohannes' rule, which came in 1872, a new power centre emerged in Shewa under the leadership of Menelik. It was this new power centre, though peripheral to historic Ethiopia that destined to transform profoundly the history, geography and demography of the Ethiopian State by the turn of the 20th century (Donham & James, 1986; Bahru, 1991; Teshale, 1995).

Shewan expansion started in Shewa itself with the Oromo (Bahru, 1991) and rapidly extended to the rest of the south. One kingdom after another, and one independent principality after another succumbed to the vast Shewan army. And, outnumbered, out-gunned and mostly divided, some of the local people submitted peacefully while others put up heroic but futile resistance (Getahun, 1974; Bahru, 1991; Addis Hiwot, 1975). Menelik's campaign successfully tripled the size of the empire and brought in not less than several dozens of ethnic groups of diverse languages and cultures.

The core of the power élite of the emerging empire-state was the Shewa Amhara élite who successfully incorporated and assimilated the various peoples of the South. And, for a century to come the Shewan Amhara elite, the embodiment of Orthodox Christianity, Amharic language and the Abyssinian cultural values, dominated multi-ethnic Ethiopia in a manner hitherto unprecedented in the country's long recorded history.

After the creation of the empire state was completed, the building of 'one Ethiopian nation' continued under what was then termed *Makinat* (pacification and/or colonization). *Makinat* involved evangelization of the local population, institutionalization of a new system of political control, and imposition of a new political class, culture and language on the indigenous population such as the Oromos, Somalis, etc. And as the result, new centres of political and military control, generally known as *Ketemas* or garrison towns were mushroomed across the South. (4)

As part of the same process, cultural subjugation was carried out through Amharization, which accorded the Amhara culture pride of place as national culture and the Amharic language the *lingua franca* of the Ethiopian state (Addis Hiwot, 1975; Teshale, 1995). The imposition of the Amharic language became increasingly critical over the years as it became the sole language of the court and administration and non-Amharic speakers such as the Oromos, Somalis, etc.; had to depend on interpreters. It also became the language willy-nilly to be learned at school and later the medium of instruction for students below the secondary level, which negatively affected the employment opportunities for non-Amharic speakers. The cumulative effect of all these measures was exacerbation of ethnic domination that left a permanent grievance in the memory of the subjected peoples of the South where most Ethiopians live (Getahun, 1974; Teshale, 1995). Here, one of the more enduring, repressive and damaging parts of the 'nation-building' measures was the imposition of a new type of political control in the newly conquered regions of the South (Markakis, 1974). The conquest had been

bloody and the fate of millions was left to the mercy of the conquistadors. The subjected peoples paid very dearly in land, produce and the corvée labour imposed on them by the military and quasi-military administrators and the soldiers under their command (Addis Hiwot, 1975; Gebru T., 1996). Furthermore, to grab the new opportunities created in Oromo areas and much of the South, the élite and the surplus population from the North flocked to these areas as administrators, court officials, soldiers, interpreters and priests. An alien system of rule known as a *neftegna* (settlers) system of political, military and economic control through the intermediary of the gun was imposed on the southern peoples (Markakis, 1974; Teshale, 1995). Notably, this was a vastly different system from that applied in the North. Underscoring the North-South dichotomy in the country's political economy until the democratic upsurge of 1974, Addis Hiwot presents the following picture:

> *After the creation of the multi-national empire-state by the Shewan feudal principality, especially after the conquest and the effective occupation and incorporation of the south, southwest and southeastern areas, a classical system of feudal serfdom was established. An extensive process of land confiscation and the enserfment of the indigenous peasants took place. The religious, cultural and linguistic differences between the feudal conquistadors and the process of enserfment gave a still more brutal dimension; the aspect of national and religious oppression accentuated the more fundamental aspect of class oppression. (Addis Hiwot, 1975: 30f)*

As Addis Hiwot has correctly observed, oppression was very severe, and can be equated to 'internal colonialism', a term preferred by Oromo and Somali nationalists with the agenda of separation (Holcomb & Sisai, 1990; Asafa, 1993).

In a nutshell, Haile Sellasie, who emerged as a real successor to Menelik, despite his Oromo blood continued the 'nation-building' process on a much more naked and narrow ethnocratic basis, which further deepened national inequality among the varied ethnic groupings of Ethiopia, which in turn later led to the rise of ethnic-based liberation movements (Teshale, 1995; Gebru T., 1996).

3.2. The Rise of Modern Competing Ethnic Nationalisms

By 1960 the imperial regime began to show visible signs of decay, which had created a better condition for the forces of change to emerge. As Bahru (1991: 209) summed up the events of the day: 'Opposition to the regime … had many facets. Peasants rebelled against increasing demands on their produce. Nationalities rose in arms for self-determination. Intellectuals struggled for their vision of a just and equitable order.' In the post-1960 period the new challenges against the regime increasingly began to take the form of either class or national struggles. To put more specifically, the Ethiopian Student Movement (ESM) began championing the common class struggles against the imperial regime while the Eritrean and Oromo movements became the bearers of the national and/or regional struggles (Kiflu, 1993).

Ethnic nationalism in the Ethiopian context was engendered, as indicated earlier, in a century of political, economic and socio-cultural domination of the Amhara élite over others (Getahun, 1974; Addis Hiwot, 1975). It was shaped by the collective action of the marginalized ethnic groups against political domination, land alienation and cultural suppression in 1960s and early 1970s (Gebru T., 1977; 1996; Asafa, 1993). As the ESM also recognized the multi-faceted injustice perpetrated against the marginalized ethnic groups, the national and class struggles against the imperial regime reinforced each other. In fact, political mobilization along class and national lines, which were to become the dominant forms of struggle in the post-1960 period, were largely the logical outcome of national and class oppression - the bedrock of most injustices under the imperial regime (Addis Hiwot, 1975; Markakis, 1987).

3.3.1. **'Garrison Socialism' and State Response to Ethnic Nationalism: The Regional Autonomy Formula**

The Ethiopian military with its own limitations as inheritor of imperial Ethiopia wanted to transform the country without making a major break with the country's imperial past regarding the national question, which had been the major source of crisis of the Ethiopian State. Not surprisingly, when they assumed state power in September 1974, Ethiopia's military élite had no well-thought-out political programme of any kind, except the vague motto of 'Ethiopia *Tikdam'* (Ethiopia First). But they moved fast with the winds of the day, and began to flirt with the civilian lefts' political agenda of a socialist revolution soon after their take-over of power. To this end, it immediately adopted socialism as the official ideology on 20 December 1974, both to capture the imagination of the revolutionary youth, who were to be sent to the countryside to organize the peasantry for the support of the unfolding revolution and to compete with the civilian left for revolutionary leadership.

According to the then prescription, to be a revolutionary and to improve its socialist credentials, the military committee nationalized many private business firms throughout the country. Then came the March 1975 Land Reform Proclamation, which mostly addressed the main historical grievance of the varied ethnic groups in much of the South such as the Oromo. The decree on religious equality and the separation of Church and state in Ethiopia was also part of the new regime's response to the religious/ethnic inequality perpetuated under the imperial regime (Kiflu, 1993). However, a more programmatic and direct response to the rising demands of ethnic nationalisms came with the declaration of the National Democratic Revolution (NDR) in April 1976. The regional autonomy formula was included in the NDR programme as part of building socialism in Ethiopia, which reads in part:

The right to self-determination of all nationalities will be recognized and fully respected. No nationality will dominate another one since the history, culture, language and religion of each nationality will have equal recognition in accordance with the spirit of socialism.

The unity of Ethiopia's nationalities will be based on their common struggle against feudalism, imperialism, bureaucratic capitalism and reactionary forces. This united struggle is based on the desire to construct new life and a new society based on equality, brotherhood and mutual respect. ... Given Ethiopia's existing situation, the problem of nationalities can be resolved if each nationality is accorded full right to self-government. This means that each nationality will have regional autonomy to decide on matters concerning its internal affairs. Within its environs, it has the right to determine the contents of its political, economic and social life, use its own language and elect its own leaders and administration to head its own organs.

This right of self-government of nationalities will be implemented in accordance with all democratic procedures and principles Provisional Military Administrative Council (PMAC, April 1976).

On paper the NDR Programme was a radical proposal. However, after the departure of MEISON, which attracted a good part of the Oromo radical intelligentsia and was believed to be the main author of the NDR Programme, ethnic nationalism began to be portrayed as the most serious threat to the revolution. Furthermore, ethnic and regional movements began to be castigated as counter-revolutionary forces and the government's propaganda machine moved against them to complement the war of annihilation unleashed by the regime to destroy them altogether. The Eritrean movements, the Tigrayan, Oromo and Western Somalia liberation fronts had to face the military regime's much enhanced war machine, lavishly supplied by the Soviet Union military hardware (Dawit, 1989)

The regional autonomy programme was resurrected in the National Constitution of 1987, which provided a regional autonomy status, albeit, on paper, to some regions. Based on the new Constitution, the country's administrative structure was subdivided into 29 regions. Only a few of these, i.e. Eritrea, Tigray, Asab and Dire-Dewa were accorded the autonomous status, and even for them it was a regional autonomy of a very severely restricted sort (Asmalash, 1997). Constitutionally, the country continued to be a unitary state and the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) was the only legally recognized political party in the country. In fact, political malversation was evident in the elections that followed the declaration of the republic in 1987 in which mostly party members were 'appointed' to the national *Shengo*, and in areas such as Eritrea, the military officers filled the quota of the region (Merera, 1992). No less serious, in some areas, people were told to vote for party officials residing in Addis Ababa whose names they never heard of or for people they never seen. And, if anything, the regional autonomy formula of the military-turned-civilian élite fell considerably short of what the various forces demanded. The end result was yet another façade for soldiers' rule (Asafa, 1993). In a nutshell,, from day one Ethiopia's inept military élite applied what can be termed a military method to solve all the country's societal problems, including the demand for national equality and self-rule, whose end result is a deepening crisis.

IV.   The Post-1991 Experiments at Democratization

4.1. The Promises Made in the Early Years

The Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and its outer covering, the EPRDF assumed state power in May 1991 with triple promises: to create a nation-state of equals by ending ethnic domination and democratize the Ethiopian State and society by ending centuries of autocratic/authoritarian rule (Merera, 2002). It has further promised to create peace and stability, which taken together hoped to bring about quick economic development and prosperity for all citizens of the country.

In what appears to be a practical implementation of the promises made on paper, a Conference to establish a Transitional Government was convened in July 1991, to which some two dozens political movements were invited. And, whatever the real motive of the TPLF leaders, a Charter for the Transitional period, which openly proclaimed the 'right to self- determination, including and up to secession' to the country's diverse communities was approved and an 87-Seat Council of Representatives (COR) was formed to oversee the transitional process. The executive was elected out of the COR and it was also empowered to act as a law-making body for the transitional period. Officially, in what said to be a response to the nationalists' demands for self-rule, a linguistic/ethnic-based fourteen administrative units (twelve regional states and two special regions of Addis Ababa and Harar) were formed in early 1992.

The unholy alliance between the victorious TPLF and the OLF, a major partner as well as a political organization with popular following among the country's largest group, which appears to be lured to the partnership could not hold for long. What created a serious tension between the TPLF and the OLF, among others, were the contradictory aspirations of the two organizations, i.e. the formers hegemonic aspiration to recreate Ethiopia around the centrality of the Tigrayan elite and the latter's aspiration to share power comparable to the size of the Oromo people. The intoxication of the TPLF leaders by the impressive military victory they achieved in the battlefield left no room for political sobriety while the rising tide of Oromo nationalism forced the OLF not to moderate its demands. Consequently, as we shall see further down, there is neither the democratization of the Ethiopian state nor local autonomy that satisfies the various communities quest for self-rule, but 'new authoritarianism' (Ottaway, 1995) or 'tyranny of a minority' under a guise of democracy (Merera, 2002).

4.1.2   The Regionalization Policy and the 1992 Regional Election: The First Major Test for a Real Autonomy

To make the new beginning appear real, various policy initiatives, such as distribution of the council's seats and ministerial posts to dozens of political groups, the linguistic/ethnic-based regionalization

policy, and promotion of the oromiffa language as a working language in the Oromo areas and allocation of television and radio programmes to it were taken.

Following the proclamation of the regionalization policy of 1992, which was based on Article Thirteen of the Charter, the elections of the regional and local councils were scheduled for June 1992. To ensure the fairness of the process, a large contingent of international observers were invited and allowed to be stationed wherever they wanted to be. However, the much-publicized elections, the first acid test for the TPLF sponsored democratization was doomed to fail from the beginning. First, all of the multi-ethnic political groups, which had long years of experience were made out of the game from the start. Secondly, the newly created major political groups, such as Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Union (SEPDU), All Amhara People's Organization (AAPO) were maneuvered out of the game. Thirdly, and more importantly, the thin rope that tied the OLF to the TPLF-dominated T.G.E. was severed as distrust and mutual suspicion reached their climax. Consequently, the OLF, which was the major contender of power, was forced to withdraw from contesting the elections and subsequently from the T.G.E. itself, which made the elections totally an EPRDF affair. (See NDI/AAI Report, 1992)

Since the local and regional elections of June 1992, several national and regional elections were held in 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001 and 2005. The 1994 elections were for a Constituent Assembly, whose role was limited to the rubber-stamping of the TPLF authored National Constitution. The 1995 elections were to bring to a close, the long-delayed transition period and to manufacture public support and legitimacy to the new regime through "popular" elections as promised in the 1991 Charter. The 2000 national and regional elections and the local election that followed them in 2001 were all aimed at further consolidation of power by the TPLF/EPRDF while the May 2005 elections sent a shock wave to the regime.

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VI. The May 2005 Elections as a Political Earth-quake for the EPRDF Regime

The road to the May 2005 Elections :The repressed Ethiopian opposition after years of hides and seek game and having drawn lessons from years of failures, it made two critical decisions to overcome its fragmentation by creating coalitions as well as by stopping boycotting elections – both of which helped it to mobilize the populace to actively participate in the elections. Subsequently, two grand coalitions were created in good time before the elections and were able to mobilize millions. Especially the UEDF patiently negotiated with Government to level the playing field, which removed some major bottle-necks to the fairness of the game. Furthermore, both coalitions pushed five major preconditions central to the level playing field, and aggressively worked for their acceptance by the EPRDF regime. These are:

1. the restructuring of the NEB to make it a truly neutral arbiter;
2. freedom of movement by political party leaders and members;
3. strict neutrality of the government security personal from election affairs, especially their stoppage of harassment of members and supporters of political parties;
4. reasonable access to the government controlled media by the opposition and
5. Presence of international observers.

In the face of mounting national as well as international pressures, the EPRDF regime accepted the coming of the international observers; partially allowed the access to public media; created a relatively relaxed situation for members and supporters of political parties to freely agitate and organize mass rallies in much of the country. However, the EPRDF leaders, who very well know their narrow support base and not sure of what the little opening up of the political space could produce, adamantly refused

the restructuring of the NEB, which in effect left the EPRDF both as a "referee and player". At any rate, when the opposition upon realizing that the EPRDF leaders were not moving on the central issue of restructuring the NEB and the donors' pressure reached its limit it wisely accepted the offers on the table and moved fast to the election campaigns.

Candidates' Registration and the Campaigns

Once the decision was made to participate in the elections, the next political business was voters' as well as candidates' registration, which were immediately followed by election campaigns. Here it is important to note that in a lot of areas, especially in areas where the opposition appeared to have strong support, serious attempts were made by the regime's controlled *Kebele* associations either to selectively register or discourage registration of voters. In such deliberate scheme of things, the youth who were generally known for their opposition to the regime were specifically targeted for exclusion. Furthermore, some eligible voters did not bother much to register because of the widespread political apathy and their little faith in the ballot box emanated from Ethiopia's past political trajectory, which appeared to have lowered the number of registered voters to 26 million from about 39 million eligible voters.

After voters' registration came the candidates' registration, which invited far more troubles from the incumbent party, which never faced hitherto real challenge from opposition parties. In fact, both candidates' registration and the election campaigns had never been smooth. Hundreds of candidates were intimidated and forced to withdraw while hundreds of opposition members and supporters – including potential candidates - were detained and some were even killed. In fact, both stick and carrot were used to reduce the number of candidates. For instance UEDF, one of the two major coalitions did not know how many of its candidates stayed until the elections. What were positively unique and new in the country's long recorded history were the national debates and the mass rallies during the campaigns. Put differently, albeit lately, the unprecedented national debate over key election issues between the ruling party and the opposition and the massive mass rallies across the country by the opposition parties, etc; moved millions for the history-making event. Television programs were eagerly watched and radios were listened to by the public while the turn out for opposition mass rallies was astonishingly high. As the result, the country's hitherto repressed opposition as a whole was able to break its isolation and galvanized the support of millions with the genuine rising expectation that engulfed the nation. Consequently, despite the last minute alarmingly high harassment, people came out in force to vote for the candidates of their choice where in most places voters waited for several hours to cast their votes. In fact, the turn out of 26 millions was a record high in the country's history of elections (see EU-EOM, 2005).

The Elections Day and after: From Rising Expectation to Rising Frustration

Despite mass arrests and harassment of opposition members and supporters at the eve of the May 2005 elections, as well as forcing away of party poll watchers to open the way for fraud, the elections day passed relatively peacefully. But the Prime Minister who had a better grasp of the overall situation and expected trouble, declared a semi-state of emergency in Addis Ababa during the evening of the Election Day, which was practically applied throughout the country by the zealot cadres.

On the morrow of the elections things started to turn for the worse when with the shock of losing Addis Ababa nearly 100%, the ruling party declared its victory in the major regions of the country and claimed to have won enough seats to form the next government (see *ibid.*). Arguably, the ruling party's strategy was both to pacify its bewildered cadres on the one hand, and to prepare the ground for the intended massive rigging in the vote counting - without which it became impossible to win elections - on the other. Surprisingly, the declaration of victory by the incumbent was made even before 50% of the votes were counted. The two major coalitions, the UEDF and CUD countered the move by the incumbent by declaring their own election victory. At any rate, using the hand-picked partisan election executives throughout the country, massive tampering with counting of votes took place in many constituencies, which led to 299 cases of complaints of irregularities, which is more than 50% of the total seats for the whole country (see *ibid.*).

As the results of the declaration of the incumbent victory continued to trickle in even after weeks of the Election Day, the opposition continued to challenge the results while the frustrated populace   started to react. And, in the chain of events, from June 5 – 8, 2005, first the university students of Addis Ababa

and then the larger populace of Addis Ababa came out in their thousands to demand the investigation of the massive election fraud. The EPRDF leaders, who neither prepared to share power nor to give up power, responded with a massive show of the military muscle. And in what can be termed a post-election systematic state repression, tens of people were killed; thousands were wounded while several thousands herded to prisons (see *ibid*.).

The diplomatic community moved fast to defuse the confrontation between the government and the opposition. But, the agreement brokered by the diplomatic community between the government and the two main opposition coalitions on how to address the more serious irregularities following the June incidents did help very little to narrow the rift between the contending parties. The attempt by the opposition to avert the alarmingly tense situation that followed the May 2005 elections by proposing a National Unity Government that includes both the major opposition parties and the incumbent based on the officially declared seats won by each political group- was also frustrated by the outright rejection of the EPRDF before it took off the ground. No less serious, the EPRDF used the agreement to regain lost ground in the first round of the election by bringing in - through the back door - the defeated big fish from the government in the rerun largely boycotted by the opposition. These include the leading party members like the Ministers of Information and National Defense as well as the President of Oromia - by far the country's largest region. Consequently, when the final result was declared by the NEB, the EPRDF said to have won 327 seats, far more than the 274 seats needed to form a government (see the table below).

Name of the Political Parties	
Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Forces (EPRDF)	327
Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD)	109
United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF)	52
Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM)	11
Benishangul – Gumuz Peoples' Democratic Front (BGPDUF)	8
Afar National Democratic Party (ANDP)	8
Gambella People's Democratic Movement (GPDM)	3
Shako-Majangar People's Democratic Unity Organization (SMPDUO)	1
Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP)	24
Harari National League (HNL)	1
Alaba National Democratic Organization (ANDO)	1
Independent	1
Total Seats	**546**

Source: Ethiopian National Electoral Board Report

Declaration of the final results had further increased the tension between the government and the opposition. Consequently, as the last attempt to avert the growing danger before the opening of the parliament, the opposition called a mass rally in the capital for October 2, 2005 to exert pressure on the government to change course. Although the intention of the opposition was peaceful demonstration, the call for the mass rally by the opposition alarmed the government, which started to accuse the opposition for intending to organize the Ukrarainian type 'orange revolution'. Following this the diplomatic community made yet another attempt to bring to a negotiating table the government and the opposition at the eve of the opening of the parliament, which was also killed by the incumbent at the agenda setting level as the EPRDF leaders refused to include the main agenda item proposed by the opposition, i.e. the issue of restructuring of the National Election Board (NEB) in the discussion.

In the meantime, the opposition's position that the EPRDF regime stolen the opposition victory was further strengthened by the report of the European Union Election Observers Mission (EU-EOM) which deployed by far the largest number of foreign observers. To the anger of the EPRDF leaders, the EU-EOM unambiguously stated that there were major irregularities at the counting stage and that the Ethiopian election was short of meeting international standards. In what appears to be a balance sheet of its overall assessment of the May 2005 elections, in its executive summary the EU-EOM has unambiguously noted that:

> The 2005 parliamentary elections were the most competitive elections Ethiopia has experienced, with an unprecedented high voter turnout. However, while the pre-election period saw a number of positive developments and voting on 15 May was conducted in a peaceful and largely orderly manner, the counting and aggregation processes were marred by irregular practices, confusion and a lack of transparency. Subsequent complaints and appeals

mechanisms did not provide an effective remedy. The human rights situation rapidly deteriorated in the post-election day period when dozens of citizens were killed by the police and thousands were arrested. Overall, therefore, the elections fell short of international principles for genuine democratic elections (EU-EOM 2005: 1).

The anger from the EPRDF side was not hidden. The Prime-Minister himself has broken diplomatic niceties and wrote a lengthy open letter accusing the head of the EU-EOM for being biased toward opposition.

The Report of the Carter center, which deployed a much less number of observers and covered a much less number of constituencies, put the government in a positive light, but it too has identified some of the major irregularities, especially during the investigation and rerun periods. At any rate, the stolen election thesis stuck in the minds of people and has become a rallying point for the anti-government forces at home and abroad, which has further undermined the legitimacy of the regime both in the eyes of the Ethiopian people and that of the international community.

The State of Ethiopian Politics Two Years after the Historic May 2005 Elections

About 90% of the elected members took up their seats in parliament partly because of the hope that the political landscape improves for the better and partly because of the government reaction against those who refused to join. Conspicuously, despite the increase in their number of seats from 12 in the last parliament to 172 in the current parliament (see table 2), the fortune of the Ethiopian opposition has not been improved as the result of the introduction of a new parliamentary rules of procedure, which totally hampers the opposition from tabling any agenda item for debate by its own. Here a good example is according to the new rules of procedure the number of members required to propose an agenda item for debate was raised from 20 to about 200 members in what appears to be changing a goal post to limit the role of the opposition whose number increased about fifteen times. Far worse, because of the new parliamentary rules of procedures the role of the parliament could not even develop to a level of a talking-shop as the ability of the members to engage in a parliamentary debate is seriously undermined through a system of time-budgeting fully dictated by the ruling-party. No less disturbing, the sweeping powers given to the partisan speaker of the parliament, who acts as a chief minister and who has the power to stop members even at the middle of their speech, give orders to the police to drag a member out from sessions as well as take punitive administrate actions against members he thinks have violated the new procedures (see the HPR Rules of Procedures and Members Code of Conduct Regulation No. 3/2006). The measures taken are likely to have a debilitating effect on the working of the country's parliament as a law-making independent institution that can ensure the check and balance principle – a critical factor in the workings of modern representative governments.

The major political groups, which have joined the parliament, have started to engage the government in what has been termed as inter-party dialogue in the hope to bring back the democratization process to track. With help of the diplomatic community the opposition and the government agreed on six major agenda items at the beginning of 2006. The agreed upon agenda items were:
1) respect for the rule of law by both parities, which includes opening of closed opposition party offices;
2) revision of the newly introduced parliamentary procedures in accordance with universally accepted standards;
3) restructuring of the Election Board of Ethiopia, which has been the source of much controversy;
4) new media law and freedom of the press;
5) government support to political parties, which has been hitherto the monopoly of the ruling party and
6) Keeping of honors of parliamentarians.

Surprisingly, while the second year of the agreement is approaching - out of the six agenda items only the first three were discussed; and even from the three - there was no consensus over the two. Out of the two, the most serious one is the failure to reach a consensus on the composition of the Election Board to which the future of electoral politics in country tied. No less disturbing is the lack of apatite by the ruling-party for the inter-party dialogue. Put differently, judged by its record so far, much of what the government doing is public relations exercise for the consumption of the donors than the empowerment of the citizens. Hence, the one step forward and two steps back policy of the ruling-party has pushed the

hoped for Ethiopian democratic transition to a dead-end. Consequently, the country's political crisis has continued to deepen – with low intensity conflict in the Ogaden, Oromia and the Afar regions and politically a tense situation in the rest of the country.

The emerging academic consensus regarding the crisis of the Ethiopian state after the May 2005 elections also points towards the intransigence of the EPRDF regime for peaceful transformation. Both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian academics have already converged in depicting the EPRDF as a road block to Ethiopia's hoped for democratic transition. For instance, Clapham (2005), one of a keen observer of Ethiopian politics since the last days of Emperor Haile Selassie has underlined that "the EPRDF has now reached a state at which it is almost impossible to imagine it winning a remotely fair election against any reasonable plausible and effective opposition". He has further argued that "It [EPRDF] has lost 'the mandate of heaven' and has envisaged three possible scenarios, i.e. that "The EPRDF government might leave power peacefully ---; The government might leave power violently;--- [and that] The government might succeed in retaining its hold on power, in the process converting itself into an overtly repressive regime ---".

Clapham's conclusion raises two important theoretical questions: (1) can a minority regime with a narrower political support base sponsor a successful democratic transition without committing - what I call for want of a better term - political suicide – similar to "the Marxian class suicide" in history; (2) is it democracy which allows "free and fair" elections or 'free and fair' elections which produces democracy? A Somali academic, Abdi Ismail Samatar has also reached the same conclusion regarding the Ethiopian reality after the post-May 2005 elections. He has written among others:

> TPLF's instrumentalist political agenda and practice contradicted the rhetoric of liberation and regional development. The PDOs which the Tigray party spawned won provincial elections in 1992 and dominated federal parliament ever since. Two subsequent elections reconfirmed a new pattern of supremacy in which TPLF held all organs of political sand military power. Such manufacture of puppet parties beholden to federal authorities and pseudo-elections doubly undermined regional autonomy from the center and accountability of leaders to their communities. TPLF's practice to unseat and appoint any regional authority at will has completely alienated the public from the system of governance, and has turned local authorities into sycophants who serve their masters and themselves. The dominant federal party's obsession with retaining power in spite of its narrow popular base has deprived the country of an opportunity to gain a civic footing, and has unnecessarily heightened ethnic political identity (p. 5).

To take the emerging academic consensus, which can move the country forward, seriously and honestly needs a fundamental rethinking on the part the TPLF/EPRDF leaders that their hegemonic aspiration neither has been helping the creation of a national consensus, a *sine quo non* for building democratic institutions such as the Parliament, an independent National Election Board as well as an independent judiciary. Put differently, the EPRDF leaders ought to start learning that both democratic legitimacy and democratic institutions can come only from the ballot box, not the barrel of the gun, and stop defending its authority by the use of the latter.

Summary of our the Discussion

If we have to sum up our discussion with a clear picture of the reality on the ground, the country's political impasse is approaching a dead-end, and as the result, the birth pang of Ethiopian democracy appears to be long as the ruling-party is still speaking about "a developmental state" where its hegemony is ensured by all means under the command of the state. With that remark, let us summarize our discussion by identifying the major road-blocks to the country's hoped for democratic transition with the implications for the ways forward.

Major Road-Block 1: Democratization without national consensus. What I can call, for want of a better term, a bad beginning is that, following its impressive military victory the EPRDF quickly moved to the "remaking "of Ethiopia without creating a national consensus over the basics of state transformation, a badly needed action for countries like Ethiopia where there are contradictory perspectives regarding the interpretation of the past, the understanding of the present and the vision about the future. Contrary to the expectation of many, the EPRDF set the rules of the game and invited others to accept the rules fixed by one party. To date neither there has been a real negotiation over the original

rules set by the EPRDF nor did the EPRDF fully respect its own rules. What is happening is that, the EPRDF easily changes the goal posts at any stage of the game and at any time of its choice.

Major Road-Block 2: Perception of the EPRDF towards the opposition. Judged by its actions, the EPRDF appears to have never envisioned a role for opposition parties. If at all it has envisioned one, it appears, not to include winning of elections. Put differently, it has never considered opposition parties as partners in the building of democratic Ethiopia. More disturbing is the ease with which the EPRDF characterizes major opposition parties with significant followings by giving them tags such as chauvinists, narrow nationalists, or servants of the n*eftegnas*) and its determination to divide and weaken them including by using naked force. In a nutshell, it has continued to criminalize opposition politics.

Major Road-Block 3: The determination of the ruling-party to use emerging institutions to promote its partisan interests. The major institutions, which are supposed to act impartially and promote democratic governance such as the Election Board, the Parliament, the judiciary, the police, the army and the civil administration as a whole are not fulfilling and not allowed to fulfill their duties impartially as per the provisions of the country's constitution. The end result is no separation of power between the three branches of government while there is strong fusion between party and state like the old socialist days. Consequently, what is being institutionalized is what can be termed a "shadow state" , i.e privatization of the state and its institutions - so as to make them work for the survival of the leaders than delivering the public goods for the citizens fairly and equitably.

Major Road-Block 4: Fixing Elections: The EPRDF leaders never see electoral political as positive – sum – game and have developed a culture of fixing elections, which sometimes include outright harassment as well as manipulation of election results by using such mechanisms as massive tampering with vote counting, manipulation of numbers, damping or burning votes of opposition candidates, etc. In fact, the importance of the May 2005 elections is partly to expose such frauds of the EPRDF regime both in the eyes of the citizens and the international community.

Major Road-block 5: The use of federalism and decentralization of power as instrument of Divide and rule. The Ethiopian federalism has never achieved its historic mission of creating shared-rule and self-rule. Contrary to the claims of the ruling party, what it has achieved is facilitating the divide and rule policy of the regime by pitting one ethnic group against the other. Ironically, the EPRDF and the PDOs have little appetite to respect the rule of law as governing parties while demanding others should respect them. Far worse, there is a fusion of party and state sustained by an omnipotent executive branch that has blurred the separation of powers and the check and balances thereof – central elements in the functioning of modern representative democracies.

The mother of all problems is the hegemonic aspiration of the ruling party, which not only blurred the vision of the EPRDF leaders but also made them think that "we know what is good for the people" and the thinking of others is anti-people. Ironically, the EPRDF leaders novelty of "I know what is good for you" include fabrication of fake leadership for the opposition parties and tell members this is the leadership that best represent your interest and in the meantime make sure the NEB, the court and the government security ensure the desired result. That is what happened to both CUD and ONC, which emerged as the largest parliamentary opposition groups. The problem with such type of thinking is the refusal to allow the people to judge what is good for them and arrogate oneself to the role of judging what is good for the people.

Seen in the above light, in the short run, if Ethiopia is to move forward – the EPRDF needs to transform itself both from within and without. From within its constituent parts (the PDOs) should be allowed to become equal partners if they are to gain popular support; from without, the EPRDF leaders should devise a mechanism of working with independent non-EPRDF political movements as partners by creating national consensus – a *sine quo non* for successful democratic transformation. Above all else, the EPRDF government should initiate politics of inclusion with all the stake holders – the organized political groups, civil society organizations as well as the ordinary citizens – so that all could go back to the drawing board and negotiate the creation of the Ethiopian democratic common home that can be based on a new social contract.

VI. *Quo Vadis* Ethiopia?

After two years, the sequel of the eventful May 2005 elections is still rocking the regime. Still there is no workable *modus vivendi* even between the opposition groups which joined the parliament and the governing party while the court case of those opted to boycott the Parliament is yet to be settled either way. Still worse, the more militant opposition groups working outside the legal framework appear to have stepped up their anti-government pressures. The confrontation with Eritrea and the Somali Islamic Courts Union may likely lead to an all out war that may have devastating consequences for the country and its people.

The crack created as the result of the May 2005 elections is also creating more visible cracks within the politico-security structure of the regime. To put more precisely, loyal army officers, senior judges, diplomats, parliamentarians, etc.; have been defecting at an alarming rate. Journalists, civic society leaders, the youth, opposition members and supporters are running away. All are accusing the government for serious human rights violations, further damaging the image of the EPRDF regime.

Yet, the response of the regime is business as usual. In fact, it is putting the country on a war footing, the target being Eritrea, the Somali Islamic Court and the internal armed opposition. Hence, it is not difficult to conclude that with the sequel of the May 2005 elections still rocking the country and the EPRDF regime continuing to defend its authority with the barrel of the gun than that of the ballot box, the country's political impasse is approaching a dead-end. And, to bring back to track the democratization process real movement towards the creation of national consensus over the basics of state transformation appears to be central in shortening the birth pang of Ethiopian democracy.

Finally, the Ethiopian democratization/decentralization initiative is claimed to be, above all else, a response of the new regime to solve the country's chronic problem of ethnic inequality and the conflicts thereof. To be sure, despite the daily rhetoric about the liberation of the hitherto marginalized ethnic groups and their empowerment, in reality there is little departure from the country's past political trajectory. Coupled with the rising expectation following the creation of an Oromia state, most Oromos are equally resentful of the current state of affair. (See Leenco, 1999; Merera, 2002) And, the OPDO, which has been playing, in the eyes of many Oromos, the role of a devil neither has had an independent existence of its own nor could become a useful intermediary between the government and the governed. Most of its cadres as local operatives of the unpopular government are cursed by the very people they claim to represent and generally tend to be corrupt, very often dishonored and damped through the ruling party's notoriously known instrument – the 'gimgama'. (See Merera, 2002) As the result, according to my informants, the average turn over of local officials have been between 5 and 7 in the last twelve years, which makes them live under constant fear of dismissal. In this connection, as an interviewee with an inside house information in Ambo area cynically put, the cadres enter the government's bad book and put under surveillance for subsequent dismissal the moment they start to work for the interest of the local people'. What such cynics indicates is that loyalty to the ruling-party is far more important than service to the people and that the interest of the ruling-party has very little to do with the interest of the local Oromo populace.

To sum up, as demonstrated in the practice of the Oromia region, the top-down approach of the Ethiopian democratization and decentralization initiative appear to be not working. The hegemonic aspiration of the sponsors of the process has obstructed every genuine movement forward. What the sponsors want is to institutionalize the hegemonic control of the ruling-party under the guise of democracy and decentralization while what a genuine democratization and decentralization require is real share of power between the center and the local authorities and empowerment of the ordinary

citizenry. To be sure, meaningful share of power and empowerment of citizens can only be done under popularly elected accountable governments both at the center and a regional as well as at the local levels. And, any smart political manipulation by the powers that be cannot replace a real institutionalization of democratic governance and/or a genuine decentralization thereof.

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