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## Democracy deferred: Understanding elections and the role of donors in Ethiopia

Jan Abbink

*This chapter revisits the issue of elections and democracy in Africa, a theme that emerged as dominant in scholarly discussions in African Studies in the 1990s. The trigger for featuring Ethiopia as a case study was the May 2010 parliamentary elections when the incumbent party, which had been in power since 1991, took 99.6% of all the seats. While the various Ethiopian elections will not be discussed in detail, the political culture or wider context in which they occur – and always produce the same overall result – will be highlighted to demonstrate the enduring mechanisms and problems of hegemonic rule and how difficult it is to create a democratic system that allows for changes in power (i.e. alternation). The relationship between one-party rule and economic development will also be discussed – the latter being a donor obsession that clouds the political agenda. The chapter closes with some reflections on the recurring donor-country dilemmas when it comes to dealing with electoral autocracies, such as Ethiopia.*

‘One can neither plough the sky, nor take the King to court’  
(an Ethiopian peasant proverb)

### Introduction

While somewhat unfashionable nowadays, the issue of elections and democratization is still being discussed in comparative political studies (cf. Diamond & Plattner 2010; Lindbergh 2009a, 2009b; van de Walle 2009; Rakner & van de

Walle 2009). It also still appears in development policy towards Africa, especially when related to issues of governance that currently feature prominently in international donor discourse. The emergence of democratic structures is generally seen as the desired end to international development policies. Some authors have argued that overall economic development is enhanced by democratic rule in a country, including multiparty elections, a free media, responsive state institutions and a vibrant civil society (cf. van de Walle 2009), but I contend that there is not necessarily a relationship between the domains of economics and politics.<sup>1</sup> Many autocratic systems in- and outside Africa permit and enhance economic development that is often accompanied by human-rights abuse, rent seeking, patronage and corruption.<sup>2</sup> China is the most obvious example with its huge economic success, continued repressive and state-led politics, its illegal occupation of minority regions (e.g. Tibet) and huge social inequality. Ethiopia, Angola and Equatorial Guinea can be considered as examples of developmental autocracies in Africa and it is only when the social and political costs of these practices become too great that moves towards public accountability and democratic decision-making develop, but not in any predictable sequence. This uncomfortable truth has led to policy mistakes as well as contradictions in the approach of donor countries and international institutions towards developing countries, notably in Africa. A donor country or UN-sponsored focus on multiparty elections as a panacea or means of installing democracy in a developing or post-conflict society can be helpful but only if elections are seen as one element in a wider context of societal democratization. Seeing the existence of some form of elections as being sufficient *per se* to encourage democracy is a fallacy.

The general contention in this chapter is that elections in divided African societies marred by underdevelopment, poverty and elite autocracy are precarious and do not, by definition, enhance a democratic culture or institutional stability, especially not if a professional, independent judicial structure is not in place. For the elites in place it is not democratic political inclusiveness and equity that are the priority but rather their hegemonic and ostentatious display and exercise of power – these are the mark of success (cf. van Beek, this volume). Democratic systems in Africa exist but, apart from the longer-established positive exceptions like Botswana, Senegal, Ghana and Mauritius, the other examples are far from stable. Ethiopia may have started out well in 1991 after the demise of its military regime but it has not lived up to its initial

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Anneloes Viveen at the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs for her input in a draft conference paper that formed the basis of this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> As Robert Kagan noted (2008: 57): “Growing national wealth and autocracy have proven compatible after all. Autocrats learn and adjust”.

promises (cf. Aalen & Tronvoll 2008; Tronvoll 2011; Vestal 1996, 2008). To understand the reasons behind this, we need to recall the wider political context and political culture of power and governance in this complex society.

It may be wishful thinking but if the aim is to achieve a durable process of political democratization one might say that it would be better to support the creation and professionalization of a strong and credible justice system, preferably based on international rule-of-law principles as well as indigenous notions and procedures of just law and the rights of persons. An electoral process alone is not enough. In this view I follow Gerti Hesselning (2006: 36-37) who pleaded for an inventive reinforcing of the constitutional state, while recognizing the African specifics of history and culture that make up the 'living law' and preclude a direct 'transplant' of Western or other foreign rule-of-law ideas on African settings. But a constitutional state with core principles is shared fairly universally (*Ibid*: 31) and is recognizable too in African traditions of just rule and limits on the sovereign's exercise of power (cf. van Binsbergen, this volume).

A judicial system within a constitutional state should ideally protect citizens from the arbitrary use of power by the state or sovereign; maintain autonomy and distance from the Executive (the ruling government); enshrine liberal freedoms similar to those laid out in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981). It should also allow the right of appeal to all by law; offer protection of property and investment; and make the Executive accountable to the judiciary. But it can also take inspiration from the local traditions of justice and rights that are formulated by collective and individual actors. A more serious consideration of the societal contexts of politics and law in Africa is therefore important, as Gerti Hesselning (2006: 39) noted.<sup>3</sup>

Whether the development of such structures of constitutionalism, the rule of law, and independent justice is still a realistic proposition for most African countries – or many other developing countries – is a moot point. Practice rarely matches rhetoric and the often-touted panacea of the 'rule of law state' for conflict-ridden and undemocratic abusive regimes sounds over-optimistic (Carothers 2006: 3). Conditions are not good (cf. Erdmann 2011). Despite a new economic dynamics, many African states are mechanisms for reconstructed autocratic elite rule and are 'fragile' or contain significant 'un- or under-governed' spaces where new and violent formations of power are emerging and

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<sup>3</sup> The same argument, but even less heeded, goes for development policies (cf. Bergendorff 2007: 195), that usually ignore cultural complexities, seeing them as irrelevant or cumbersome. The long-term result is (costly) resistance, sabotage or armed revolt by citizens.

holding sway. Here we could mention, for example, the bases of piracy in Somalia, bandit-ruled areas in central Africa and the rebel militia-run spaces in Nigeria and Chad.<sup>4</sup> These will not soon turn into ‘orderly states’ as we like to see them in the West. One might also note that the popularity and feasibility of classic Western liberal democracies themselves, with their diffuse multiparty structures, sovereign parliaments, slow decision-making and the crucial role of elections, are strongly contested, both within and in the world at large, due to forces of globalization, transnationalism, populism, and the ethnic and regional fragmentation of domestic constituencies.<sup>5</sup> Debates about new approaches to democracy and the constitutional state are thus also evident in the rest of the world (cf. O’Flynn 2006; Forst 2006). In addition, in the face of the more overriding global *economic* ideals, of growth, increased GDP, energy security, market expansion and poverty reduction that are touted daily by global institutions, issues of democratic governance and respect for political and human rights often appear secondary.

Ideally, an independent and professional judiciary, based on universal principles regarding equality before the law, legal rights and due process, and recognizable as such in most societies (cf. Hesseling 2006: 31), would contribute favourably to a democratic culture. It would enhance a safer judicial environment, thus furthering the protection of property, stimulating equitable socio-economic development and business growth, reducing patronage and corruption, and protecting civic freedoms (the human and social rights of citizens), as well as encouraging free and fair elections with the possibility for changes in power. An indirect result might also be greater social stability and the emergence of a middle class instead of a crony party-cadre class linked to the regime in place. A precondition to a functioning judicial system is a conducive political culture<sup>6</sup> of tolerance of diversity and communication, i.e. some measure of leeway in the political system that allows conflict and does not suppress dissent. But this is an element of history that a country either has or does not have, and is relatively scarce in Africa beyond the level of local societies. Empirical

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<sup>4</sup> Compare also the new phase of war on the Nuba in South Kordofan, Sudan, by the North Sudanese army, which was starting in July 2011 as this chapter was being finalized.

<sup>5</sup> The more than a year-long post-election crisis in Belgium in 2010-2011, which prevented a government from being formed, is a case in point.

<sup>6</sup> Defined here loosely as: a value-based set of political ideas and practices among elites and the wider population relating to what legitimate authority is, how politics should function and how political consultation is achieved. But there is a split in political elite views and popular views of political culture: the political elite often appropriate aspects of it that buttress its rule and authority *beyond* the shared and accepted values of the political sphere.

assessment is required in every country to establish its nature and scope, and any emerging interaction with statutory (state) law.

### The Horn of Africa

In her 2006 inaugural lecture at Utrecht University, Gerti Hesselting (2006: 6) discussed the case of Somaliland, which she found interesting because of its original democratic experiment rooted in a history of decentralized political practice and normative clan law mediated by elders. The country is indeed a remarkable example of an emerging democratic state of a hybrid nature that combines 'modern' and 'traditional' elements: parties, elections, an independent press and civil society, a negotiated political order, the incorporation of decentralized clan-organization elements in the legislative structure, and a relatively independent judiciary partly based on customary (*xeer*) law. It has in fact seen three peaceful changes of president and government in the post-1991 era. The contrast with Southern Somalia, which is mired in chaos and violence, is striking but it is not clear whether the experiment will last. Gerti hoped that resorting to rule-of-law principles and having a creative, adaptable state responding to 'living law' traditions would play a constructive role in conflict prevention. This normative legal argument has its merits but we need recourse to other factors to explain the recurrence of conflict, repression, inequality and political stagnation in economically emerging states and then to gauge the scope and chances of law.

Ethiopia, the most prominent economic and political player in the northeast African region has been less successful in establishing representative democracy than its neighbour, Somaliland. The Ethiopian political experience since the fall of the military *Derg* regime in May 1991 deserves close comparative scrutiny in order to assess its potential and its setbacks. It has indeed elicited many studies, among them: Aalen & Tronvoll (2008); Lefort (2007, 2010); Abbink (2009); Tronvoll (2011); Abbink & Hagmann (2011) and Merera (2011). In our joint book on election observation and democratization processes (Abbink & Hesselting 2000), which was edited at a time when optimism about political reform and democratic consolidation in Africa was still strong in both academic and policy circles, we were already pleading for a proper contextual analysis of politics and elections in African societies, and we were sceptical about democratic openings in the face of the unchanged societal conditions and the observed tendency of autocratic elites to manipulate 'elections' and democratic reform for their own purposes. Analytical assessments of democratization since 2000 have borne out our caution and shown the clear societal and historical impediments to political liberalization in unequal, divided societies, as well as the limited (and limiting) impact of donor countries and other global

powers. Most of the contributions to the international debate on the issue have increasingly touched on the social and cultural constraints of politics, showing the relevance of these ‘context factors’ (cf. Hesselning 2006: 29-30, 37).

The debate on democratization in Africa seems to be fading and is being replaced by one on ‘failing states’, ‘ungoverned spaces’ and, paradoxically, economic growth and foreign investment. Here a new and overstretched Afro-optimism is evident that is suddenly blind to the armed conflicts, environmental problems and the democratic deficits of Africa as well as to the dubious role that donors and other foreign countries are playing. Human-rights issues now feature as a largely rhetorical frame of reference that is perhaps generally being subscribed to but not actively pursued and is indeed difficult to put into practice, even by donor countries. Furthermore, in the wake of China’s economic advances in Africa, the entire rights and democracy discourse has been put on hold and even donor countries, notably European ones, are reluctant to pursue moral political agendas. They seem to primarily become salesmen for their own countries.

The remainder of this chapter presents an overview of the state of play concerning democracy and elections in Ethiopia and, as Gerti advised in her 2006 work, calls for a better understanding of the long-term factors and attitudes that locally shape power, politics and law.

Ethiopia is probably the most important country in Northeast Africa. A relatively strong state with about 82 million inhabitants, it is a partner in international efforts against (Islamist) terrorism and has a growing economy under one-party leadership. It has also been receiving significant donor support – almost US\$ 2 billion annually – as well as growing Chinese and other foreign (agrarian and infrastructural) investment in recent years. In the first half of 2011, when popular uprisings rocked some of the countries in North Africa, Ethiopia (and Eritrea) remained out of the spotlight and their populations showed no wish to join in the fray. One might contend: why should they? The last elections in May 2010 demonstrated overwhelming support from the voters (545 out of the 547 parliamentary seats) for the EPRDF<sup>7</sup> ruling party and its allies. The same happened in the local elections in 2008 (Aalen & Tronvoll 2010). So the Ethiopian people have apparently been happy with their rulers since 1991. At least, the government and the EPRDF party (they are virtually identical) have tried to convince themselves and the outside world of this.

The phenomenon of repeated massive election wins for the incumbent is part of a broader trend of ‘successful’ authoritarian restoration in Africa over the last

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<sup>7</sup> The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front developed out of the insurgent Tigray People’s Liberation Front. For a recent history by a former insider, see Aregawi (2009).

several years. It is undoing most of the post-1989 gains made in political liberalization and freedoms for civil society. The flexible, adaptive behaviour of old and new political elites has yielded mutations of the neo-patrimonial systems of power and hegemony (cf. Erdmann 2001). This time the elites have been buttressed by intensified global economic competition by other powers for land and mineral resources, fears of declining security in conflict-prone zones, and a resurfacing appreciation of stronger state influence in economic development (e.g. in the guise of the developmental state) provided the state cooperates with global capital and economic forces. The post-1991 regime in Ethiopia has shown itself to be a prime example of this process. It has neither the inclination nor the capacity to share power with other parties and is increasingly orienting itself economically and politically towards the Chinese model to escape the conditionalities or governance demands tied to classic donor-country funding.

### Ideology unchanged

In 1993, the new EPRDF-led Ethiopian government issued a document on its ideology of governance, containing the following clause:

*We can attain our objectives and goals only if Revolutionary Democracy becomes the governing outlook in our society, and only by winning the elections successively and holding power without letup can we securely establish the hegemony of Revolutionary Democracy. If we lose in the elections even once, we will encounter a great danger.*<sup>8</sup>

In accordance with this principle, the EPRDF regime is still in power and has ensured that all elections since 1991 have gone in its favour. In this chapter, I contend that the incumbent EPRDF regime in Ethiopia *cannot be voted out of power* in elections with the current institutional arrangements. Regardless of the preferences of the voters, elections will always favour this party, as was confirmed in the May 2010 elections. Nevertheless, the regime, like any other authoritarian regime that is part of the world order and a member of the UN, is regularly engaged and challenged on its record, as it carries the risk of generating instability, serious inequality and human-rights transgressions in the country, as well as hampering inclusive growth. The challenging mainly happens in the international arena and rarely domestically. Within Ethiopia, for example, the government has not allowed public demands or claim making for redistributive economic policies. The country knows no meaningful political

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<sup>8</sup> Source: TPLF-EPRDF, 'TPLF-EPRDF's Strategies for Establishing its Hegemony and Perpetuating its Rule' (English translation of a 1993 document in Amharic), first published in 1996 in *Ethiopian Register* (a US magazine) 3(6): 26, which is also available on various websites.

forces that could voice alternative claims regarding the political-developmental path and the national economy. For various reasons, the opposition has not gained a strong foothold. But pressure for redistribution and wider stakeholder participation is a key element in successful democratization processes. The regional and local administrations in Ethiopia offer no alternative basis for politics or power formation, being integral, closely monitored parts of the national political structure. The claim making that does exist is channelled through the ruling party and linked dependent parties, which are ethno-regional in nature.<sup>9</sup> Elections either for Parliament or for the local authorities (*k'ebeles*) have not yielded a voice of opposition, as will be seen below.

Ethiopia is an interesting case in Africa. While it has participated in the new wave of elections in Africa since 1990, it has not seen a decisive breakthrough in electoral reform or sustained democratic politics. The political process offers little room for opposition groups, civil-society organizations or parties to help formulate or even freely debate policy alternatives. It does not yet allow for a change of power to any other party than the incumbent, or for the institutionalization of a really independent justice system. In 1991 the victorious EPRDF regime announced a programme of democratization but this was of a special variant. Led by largely the same group of leaders since 1991 (even during the armed struggle of 1975-1991, see Aregawi [2009]), the EPRDF's line is 'revolutionary democracy', an ideology spawned by Marxism-Leninism, with an ever-dominant role for the party in national politics and overall control of the country's political and economic domains of life.<sup>10</sup> It was combined with the trappings of democracy by allowing ethnic groups' rights and ethnic parties, a freer press, a more mixed and liberal economy and a rhetorical bow to the Western donor community. In this, it has always been compared favourably with the previous, military regime (1974-1991) and that is seemingly enough for most Western donor countries. But Ethiopia is not considered to be evolving towards a *liberal* democracy by its leaders: this form is not seen as feasible or applicable in the underdeveloped and ethnically diverse (not to say divided) country that Ethiopia still is. Furthermore, the stakes of political power are so high that the incumbent party feels that it cannot afford to lose its position of privilege and its political-economic networks of control of economy and society that have been built up over the past twenty years. Donor-country partners and external observers are probably chasing chimeras and have little understanding of the importance of 'revolutionary democracy' as a governance ideology in Ethiopia. It could also simply be the case that they are indifferent, as long as

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<sup>9</sup> The exceptions are some rebellions in parts of the Oromo areas and in the Ogaden where armed insurgent movements are active.

<sup>10</sup> See Bach (2011) for an analysis of this ideology.

good economic growth figures are delivered. They often ignore issues of human rights, freedoms and due processes of law and economic equity as being relevant for their policy of supporting what they see as stability and economic growth. They make recurrent and similar policy errors when dealing with the country, hereby assuming that they (the donors) still *want* to see a more open and level democratic system. Their response to flawed elections is often ambivalence – they offer no unified response to crises in the political process (see Borchgrevink 2008: 209, 213)

The EPRDF-formulated ideology of revolutionary democracy in Ethiopia is based on three core principles: the unquestioned monopoly of state power by a vanguard party with an idea of ‘national mission’ that no one can change; top-down leadership and national policies with internal Leninist-like party control and self-evaluation of civil servants and party officials; and the co-opting of all political and state public sectors under its ideology. After the critical 2005 elections, the EPRDF started a mass drive for membership in order to co-opt as many Ethiopians as possible into its structure. The leadership often appears to adopt a God-like posture where no one can challenge them. The party has also tended to become the state, reminiscent of King Louis XIV’s statement *L’État, c’est moi*. A whole new system of political patronage and clientelism (cf. Paulos 2007) has been established since 1991 that makes autonomous political action by new actors and regional or local authorities very difficult. The problems faced by opposition politics in Ethiopia, which are frustrated and undermined by the incumbent party, have amply demonstrated this. Historically, Ethiopia has of course never had a ‘loyal opposition’ in a regulated, predictable political arena. While the post-1991 change created an unprecedented opportunity for coalitions and issue politics, this road was not followed by the dominant party. Opposition parties had great difficulty mobilizing a support base in the country (notably in the rural areas) due to persistent obstructions and attacks on their leaders and rural activists,<sup>11</sup> and have remained quite divided among themselves.

In addition, it should not be forgotten that elections everywhere, and especially in Africa, are just one part of the process of democratization (or democracy). As emphasized above, the role of a legitimate, independent judiciary is perhaps just as vital, also in Ethiopia.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Compare the case of the popular and promising opposition leader (of the CUD and later of the UDJ party), former Judge Birtukan Mideqsa, who was repeatedly imprisoned and held in solitary confinement since 2008. She was only released in October 2010.

<sup>12</sup> It is currently very precarious. Politics strongly pressurizes the judicial institutions, especially the High and Supreme Courts. In Ethiopia there is no constitutional court either. This role is played by the House of the Federation, the ‘upper chamber’ of

### The context of Ethiopia's electoral politics<sup>13</sup>

Since 1991 Ethiopia has been a federal democratic republic, succeeding the Marxist-Socialist *Derg* government led by the former military leader Lieutenant Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam, who was universally reviled by the West and became deeply unpopular in Ethiopia itself due to his regime's violent record and economic mismanagement. Under this government, there was one unity party, the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE), and parliamentary elections that were held for the *Shengo* (the then national parliament) displayed no sign of democratization. The only positive point was that the smaller, newly recognized (ethnic) minority groups were also invited to be represented by some of its own members in Parliament, albeit under the wing of the WPE.

The EPRDF, after having militarily defeated the *Derg* in May 1991, was seen as a breath of fresh air and as the dawn of a new democratic politics. Indeed, new liberties of the press and political organization as well as ethnic and religious expression were initially allowed. Economic liberalization followed, although tightly orchestrated by the party, which kept some core tenets of the *Derg* regime in place, such as the state ownership of all land, and it also started many party business ventures. The EPRDF political dispensation was based on the opening up of political space but also on the 'ethnicization' of politics. Citizenship was now to be primarily 'ethnic' not national, and sovereignty was invested in the 'nations', 'nationalities' and 'peoples' of Ethiopia (not in the 'Ethiopian people' as a whole). These were terms from Stalin's 1913 tract on *Marxism and the National Question* that have entered general Marxist political discourse. Ethnic (not regional, class or territorial) oppression and inequality were diagnosed by the TPLF/EPRDF as the root causes of Ethiopia's problems. All ethno-linguistic groups (a certain number of which are officially recognized in the 1995 Ethiopian Constitution and other documents) or 'nationalities' were to be represented in local government and in Parliament, and party formation among the population had to be on an 'ethnic' basis. This had the positive short-term effect of allowing people to use their own language and not forcibly 'hiding' their ethnic background, as well as, in some cases, releasing long-pent-up group emotions or tensions. But it soon discouraged the construction of an inclusive national political arena. Pan-Ethiopian, issue-based parties were ac-

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Parliament, which is strongly influenced by the ruling party (cp. Mgbako *et al.* 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Data in this chapter are based on intermittent field research, including surveys and the frequent interviewing of political actors and the general public in Ethiopia in urban areas (Addis Ababa, Awasa, Shashemenne, Addis Alem and Dessie) as well as in the northern and southern countryside over the past ten years, most recently in September 2010.

tively thwarted or undermined by the ruling party,<sup>14</sup> and prevented from running campaigns in most regional states. For example, in Tigray Region, the home of the dominant TPLF, all the parties except the TPLF, were banned or later, in the 2010 elections, prevented from putting forward candidates.

While various rounds of elections at the local, regional and federal level were organized under the aegis of the government-controlled National Electoral Board, no broad national consensus was ever reached on the procedures and outcome of these elections and there were few positive evaluations by independent observers. Various reports by external observer missions from the EU and the US Carter Center have, however, stated that ‘encouraging gains’ were made after 1991. But few Ethiopians share this view. Indeed, in no case have elections led to a change in the incumbent regime. The closest Ethiopia has got to this was in the 2005 parliamentary and regional council elections where the newly formed opposition gained control of Addis Ababa regional council (notably the CUD party) and did well in certain other regions and among the emerging urban middle classes. But in the ensuing contestation of the election process and the vote counting as a whole by both government and opposition parties, the opposition felt excluded and either could not or did not take up all of the seats they won.<sup>15</sup> These were watershed elections (Abbink 2006) but were not allowed to run their course.

The EPRDF, which was formally a coalition of four ‘ethnic block’ parties, the TPLF, ANDM, OPDO and SEPDF,<sup>16</sup> has ruled alone for 20 years now and has not been seriously challenged in any round of elections except in 2005. To explain its power position and make the Ethiopian case the subject of meaningful comparison across Africa, a contextual understanding is needed of Ethiopian authoritarian political tradition, the country’s socio-political hierarchies, the way the EPRDF came to power, and the practical implications of the new party’s governance ideology (Bach 2011; Abbink 2009). Suffice it to say, historically the transfer of power in Ethiopia has never been peaceful: power is seen as indivisible and the (rural) masses are cautious about supporting op-

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<sup>14</sup> The first one with a mass following in 1991-1992, the National Democratic Union, was disbanded in 1992. See also Vestal (1999: 24f).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, economist Dr Berhanu Nega, the Addis Ababa mayor-elect and a leader of the then strong CUD (Coalition for Unity and Democracy opposition party that had won 109 seats of the total 547 in the 2005 parliamentary elections), was barred from taking up his position. He is now living in exile in the US where he leads the Ginbot 7 opposition party.

<sup>16</sup> The Amhara National Democratic Movement for ‘the Amhara’, the Oromo People’s Democratic Organisation for ‘the Oromo’, and the Southern Ethiopian People’s Democratic Front for the many ethnic groups in the South. They are basically satellites of the TPLF. Other such parties exist in the less important regional states like Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Somali and Gambela.

position to the powers-that-be unless they have a realistic chance of winning.<sup>17</sup> The acceptance and institutionalization of a plural political system in conditions of economic scarcity and survival is near-impossible because the losers would economically (from loss of income and privileges) and judicially be at risk. Expectations of decisive democratization through the electoral system should thus be tempered.

### Elections so far: Few openings, missed chances

After its military victory, the EPRDF called a national conference in 1991 at which a National Transition Charter was drawn up under its auspices. A non-elected EPRDF Council of Representatives was the result. And in June 1992 the new regime tried its hand at local and regional elections, which were judged unfavourably by external observers due to the lack of a level playing field and a lack of space for the opposition forces.<sup>18</sup>

Elections for a Constituent Assembly were held in June 1994, with the EPRDF taking 484 of the 527 seats (Kassahun 1995). This led to a new constitution that was adopted in December 1994 and published in August 1995. There have subsequently been four parliamentary elections: in May 1995, May 2000, May 2005 and May 2010. Their technical organization was of a high standard but, according to foreign and domestic observers, the vote was neither free nor fair. The 1995 and 2000 elections were marred by boycotts by the opposition parties that felt thwarted in recruitment, campaigning and media access. There were also registration problems among non-EPRDF candidates with the party-controlled National Electoral Board. And the opposition parties themselves were not sufficiently well organized. The May 2005 elections were the most interesting in that new opposition parties participated in the pre-election phase and leadership was demonstrated by both young and veteran politicians and public figures. There were political debates on television and oppositional campaigns in selected parts of the country, notably in Addis Ababa. The local press, including several independent private journals, reported in detail on the debates and opposition party programmes.<sup>19</sup> Hopes were rising, but in the countryside, where there were hardly any donor-country election observers, state repression (arrests, harassment, intimidation and some targeted

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<sup>17</sup> See the response of peasants following the 2005 elections that is analyzed in the perceptive article by Lefort (2007).

<sup>18</sup> See Gamst (1995) and the report by the National Democratic Institute (1992).

<sup>19</sup> Most of the former independent journals have now disappeared, some due to financial problems, others to intimidation and repression and helped by the new and more restrictive 2008 Press Law.

killings) was commonplace and free campaigning was impossible.<sup>20</sup> The day after the elections and before the votes had even been counted, the EPRDF declared victory. The counting of votes after the election was fraught with tension. Demonstrations and gatherings were forbidden and the counting proceeded in secrecy and amid controversy. Some unpopular top government candidates who did not get elected in the first round in 'their' constituency were given a recount and then 'won' a seat. Nevertheless, the opposition parties, notably the CUD, UEDF and OFDM,<sup>21</sup> won many more parliamentary seats than before: 174 out of the total of 547. Still, the opposition cried foul and an electoral process that seemed to have geared up for a free and fair election ran aground when the EPRDF reasserted its control, perhaps due to crucial interference with the counting process. It was thus returned to power with a comfortable majority. There was an opportunity to form a coalition government with opposition groups and this would probably have been the best way forward, but this was unacceptable to the EPRDF government.<sup>22</sup> In the street protests in Addis Ababa in June and November 2005 when people contested the election results and gave vent to their general anger at the government, at least 193 people were killed and tens of thousands arrested.

After this dramatic election year, the EPRDF went on to restore its political monopoly and returned to business as usual. It invested in security and political officers (*cadres*) to increase domestic control and prevent a similar situation happening in future elections, especially in the countryside, which is usually ignored by donor-country monitors. Having duly expressed their concern at the 2005 violence, donor countries gradually started again offering the government loans and grants for development. Despite the fact that the Ethiopian leadership was challenged to give serious consideration to the development of a more democratic political system, no serious response was given by donor countries. This has remained the general pattern and since 2005, the EPRDF has shown no intention of relinquishing power and has even tried to convince the foreign donor community and public opinion of the 'lack of alternatives' to its rule.

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<sup>20</sup> Information on such incidents is found in the annual US State Department country reports on human rights: [www.state.gov/documents/organization/160121.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/160121.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> United Ethiopian Democratic Front and Oromo Federal Democratic Movement.

<sup>22</sup> A judgment like that of the Carter Center on these elections is typical of the unhelpful prevarication in donor-country discourse. 'The elections process demonstrated significant advances in Ethiopia's democratization process, including most importantly the introduction of a more competitive electoral process that could potentially result in a pluralistic, multiparty political system'. [www.cartercenter.org/documents/2199.pdf](http://www.cartercenter.org/documents/2199.pdf)

Many donor countries, for example the UK,<sup>23</sup> have bought this argument and are making few efforts to call for inclusive politics or constructive engagement with the opposition. The divisions within the Ethiopian opposition groups are indeed significant, as was evident in the run-up to the May 2010 elections and in the post-election period. But this is also in large part due to the divisive activities of government moles in the opposition parties and to the persistent discouragement, not to say obstruction, of opposition campaign activities by the EPRD government, especially in the rural areas.<sup>24</sup> The base line is that the streak of coercion and control present is a recurring feature in the political system in Ethiopia.

The May 2010 elections went ‘according to plan’: they were well organized by the ruling party and its cadres, with campaigning and voter mobilization being pre-empted by the opposition, few public debates, frequent co-opting of rural voters by the incumbent, and warnings throughout the election campaign period about voting ‘correctly’. The threat that voting for the opposition, which was not a unified movement that could rally all people, would entail great livelihood risks worked. In addition, the regime’s record in the sphere of national economic or infrastructural dynamics also appealed to many voters, despite the lack of freedom and livelihood stability. Millions were also dependent on the party for their jobs. The EU Election Observers Mission issued a critical report on the democratic content of the 2010 elections and their wider political context but after a few months, donors, including the IMF and the World Bank, went back to business as usual.<sup>25</sup>

Regarding the negligible opposition vote in 2010 and apart from the failings in the electoral process (including the intimidation and repression of campaigning opposition members and the restrictions imposed by the National Electoral

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<sup>23</sup> See ‘Britain Keeping Quiet about Ethiopia Repression’, *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 2010 and the criticism on the Department for International Development (DFID) in HRW (2010: 84-85).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. 3 November 2009 Reuters news report: ‘Ethiopian Opposition Says Nearly 450 Members Jailed’: [www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSLT86250](http://www.reuters.com/article/latestCrisis/idUSLT86250). They also recorded the assassination of seven members in that year. See also J. McClure (2010), ‘Ethiopian Opposition Leader Says Supporters “Hunted” After May 23 Election’; Bloomberg news message, 26 May 2010; and ‘Zenawi Crackdown on Opposition to Prevent Protests’, Afrol News message, 19 March 2011: <http://www.afrol.com/articles/37609>

<sup>25</sup> EU Foreign Affairs coordinator Ms C. Ashton gave a predictable statement: ‘The legislative elections in Ethiopia were an important moment in the democratic process in the country. I welcome the peaceful conduct of the elections and I congratulate the Ethiopian voters for showing their commitment to this process with a high turnout.’ Many wondered which elections she was talking about. [www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/114624.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/114624.pdf)

Board), the issue of the political culture in Ethiopia needs to be borne in mind. As Clapham (1988: 21) has noted, historical heritage and engrained attitudes towards politics play a role in shaping political attitudes, and a reference to cultural factors is 'inescapable'. People in the rural areas in Ethiopia, who in many respects are dependent on the authorities, tend to fear and express support for the reigning powers in order to protect themselves. This is the meaning of the motto cited at the start of this chapter: one cannot openly accuse the government of anything. If people are known to have voted for the opposition, they will face adverse consequences. Lefort (2007) has convincingly made this point. Voting for the opposition is a risk and can endanger access to basic resources (land, state support, basic commodities, food aid) and thus reduces one's chances of survival.<sup>26</sup> This is all the more so because the opposition cannot deliver anything tangible as they are held outside the system.<sup>27</sup>

This situation raises the familiar dilemma for foreign involvement. Can or should the international community support electoral processes in an authoritarian environment that does not deliver peaceful elections, let alone power change, and that is not conducive to democratization? If tensions are exacerbated and the threat of violence is present, would it not be preferable to desist from engaging with the regime? However understandable this position may be, it would amount to unreflexively supporting and legitimizing undemocratic politics, underestimating the Ethiopian public, and caving in to authoritarianism and intimidation (cp. Easterly 2010). China, one of Ethiopia's major economic partners and a self-declared 'great friend' of the regime, has adopted this attitude. It is not the model that is internationally acceptable in view of the UN charters and other global treaties and agreements on democratization and accountable government that even the Ethiopian government is partner to. While the options are indeed limited, critical engagement with the regime cannot but continue.<sup>28</sup> And the instruments in the development partnership, through the IMF, the World Bank and Western donor-country programmes providing funds to the Ethiopian government, should be more critically and consistently used.

Below I focus in some more detail on a few relevant analyses recently offered by political scientists Lindberg (2009b) and van de Walle (2009) on

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<sup>26</sup> See also Eskinder Nega (2010) 'Notes from an Interstate Bus: A Farmer on Election 2010': [www.abugidainfo.com/?p=14202](http://www.abugidainfo.com/?p=14202)

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the case of Inderaw Mohammed, an Ethiopian opposition candidate who was beaten up and refused food aid, cited in McLure (2010).

<sup>28</sup> This was to some extent done in the case of the *bona fide* and popular opposition leader Ms Birtukan Mideqsa (see Footnote 10), who was given a long prison sentence on the basis of 'evidence' that would not stand up in a serious court of law. Behind the scenes, this was criticized by donor countries and she was subsequently released from her (second) period of imprisonment in October 2010.

African elections and present a brief evaluation of Ethiopia's most recent experience with elections in May 2010 in the light of these contributions.

### Policy experiences and theory

Lindberg (2009b) has offered an interesting study on elections in Africa and is, by and large, optimistic about the generally positive influence of elections on the democratization process in Africa. He sees trends such as continued high voter turnout, the improvement of governments' legitimacy through elections and the constraining and cajoling of political leaders by elections as encouraging. His main recommendations are that election observation is needed (and discourages polarization) and that it is useful to invest in opposition forces and their activities.

In theory, these recommendations are attractive but in practice it is not that easy. For example, investing in the capacity of opposition seems an objective, logical step in a process of institutionalizing democratic structures and competitive procedures but donors will be accused by the incumbent regime of not being neutral or unbiased, even if they do not say that they would be in favour of opposition forces. These kinds of activities are easily seen as 'interference in internal affairs', as was evident in the 2005 Ethiopian elections.

Van de Walle (2009) has analyzed two decades of multiparty electoral politics in Africa. He considered three main questions. First, is democracy generally 'a good thing' for Africa? He seems positive about this. Africa's last two decades of democratization have perhaps also seen the continent's best years for economic growth and poverty alleviation in the post-colonial era. Democratization has also resulted in an increase in social spending and there is some evidence of this in Ethiopia too. Over the last two decades, economic growth has been substantial, with a growth rate of above 8% on average in the past few years according to government data. Nevertheless, democratic freedom and rights have not developed well, especially since 2005, and there has not been any causal relationship with this trend.

Van de Walle's second question was whether one could have democracy without elections. He disagrees with the suggestion that the absence of multiparty electoral politics could ultimately lead to good governance. There is no democracy without elections and donors should increasingly focus on the demand side of governance. The best predictor of how well an African country is doing is the regularity of political alternation (i.e. an orderly change of ruling party or national president).

We note that Ethiopia has not seen any change of government since 1991 so this is, in itself, a sign that democracy is not optimal, or is perhaps even absent. The question is whether the ideology of the EPRDF is informed by basic

democratic principles or whether the party is just organizing elections to try to maintain a democratic image for its donors. If it is just about image building then one could say that dysfunctional elections might even contribute negatively to the democratization process. Meanwhile, the population has been losing trust and confidence in the electoral record of a 'façade democracy' and shows little willingness to voluntarily participate in future elections, and certainly not by risking voting for the opposition (cf. Lefort 2007, 2010) because the election results per voting constituency show the power-holders – via the EPRDF-controlled National Electoral Board – what the actual division of votes was. There are plenty of empirical indications that constituencies with significant numbers of votes for the opposition, notably since the 2005 elections, have faced reprisals.<sup>29</sup> Popular faith in the judicial system is even less obvious. In general, a constant refrain in answers given by ordinary Ethiopians to questions about the justice system is that 'there is no law' (Amharic: *higg yälläm*). This may be an exaggeration but there is certainly a deep-seated scepticism about the fairness of court procedures, also regarding election complaints, and about the ease with which many judges can be bribed. The statement also reflects the view of many Ethiopians that the government ultimately can over-rule anything without being called to account.

Van de Walle also considered whether Africa has been continuing to democratize or, on the other hand, is regressing. Based on the *Afrobarometer*, he has suggested a stable commitment on the part of ordinary Africans to democracy (cf. also Bratton 2001) and the election machinery does appear to be grinding forward more effectively with each election. In general, he concludes that democracy is progressing despite the inevitable problems and constraints. But while we see patchy incremental changes in several countries, the process is precarious and reversible, and so this conclusion is somewhat premature. In Ethiopia, for instance, progress has been very limited and there is no firm commitment by the governing party to open and deliberate democracy in evidence. The 2010 elections have in fact shown consolidation of a trend of decreased democratic space, which set in following the May 2005 elections and was confirmed in a spate of restrictive laws. Little room is left for alternative views and votes, and oppositional voices are all too often insulted and delegitimized.

Van de Walle's main recommendation is that donors increase their support to NGOs and maintain communication with African governments on abuses of

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<sup>29</sup> The same accusations emerged in the 2011 BBC Newsnight TV documentary recorded in Ethiopia and screened on 4 August 2011, attracting a lot of media stir and debate: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/9556288.stm>. See also M. Tran, 'Ethiopia Using Aid as a Political Tool', *The Guardian*, 5 August 2011.

power, notably within the executive branch. Both recommendations are very general, and even on this front, governments can anticipate donor measures to minimize the impact. This has happened in Ethiopia, where the new 2009 NGO law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation, drastically restricts (inter)national NGO activity and prohibits them from being active in the domains of human, civic and women's rights or receiving more than 10% of their income from abroad.<sup>30</sup>

### Donor dilemmas:

#### Measuring elections as a criterion of development commitment

As part of the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia is in a region still plagued by deep-rooted conflicts, stemming partly from colonial intervention and partly from historical and geo-political fault lines. It has been affected by conflicts along the Eritrean border, the Somali civil war, rebellions, refugee flows, drought and famine. However it has been seen by most donors as the most promising entity in the Horn, where peace, stability and sustainable development, terms which are found in all donor documents, can and have to be promoted. The official aims of donor efforts are to enhance public service delivery by the Ethiopian government, strengthen and empower civil society and the private sector, and improve government accountability and transparency.

In the run-up to the 2005 elections, it appeared that multiparty democracy in Ethiopia was taking off: there was active, content-based campaigning in the media by the EPRDF and opposition parties, and an EU observation mission was invited. However, the election and its aftermath were not up to the standards demanded and abuses of power by the EPRDF were shown, probably via the rigging of vote-counting, and there had been serious violations of human rights among opposition voters and candidates. The international community was initially very concerned about these issues. The mechanism for coordination among donors to Ethiopia, the Development Assistance Group (DAG), issued a strong statement saying that it was collectively reviewing the development cooperation modalities to Ethiopia in view of the negative aftermath of the elections. In December 2005, after a second round of killings the previous month, when security forces shot dozens of protesters, the budget-support donors – the UK, Canada, Ireland, Germany, Sweden, the World Bank, the European Commission and the African Development Bank – even planned to withhold a total of US\$ 370-375 million of earmarked support. Donors were then briefly unified in protest against the Ethiopian government, and the EU

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. 'World Bank Urges Ethiopia to Ease Rules on NGOs', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 May 2009.

later mediated pacts between the opposition and the EPRDF. The critical donor dialogue with the government and threats of withholding financial support resulted in a new governance matrix being drawn up in which 'good-governance' improvements and actions were identified. This matrix is now part of Ethiopia's current Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP).

Donors and the government also agreed in 2006 to a package of measures to improve governance and democratic institutions: the Democratic Institutions Program (DIP).<sup>31</sup> Ownership of the programme was with the government of Ethiopia and the UNDP. The DIP is sponsored by many donors but it has not generally been considered a success (HRW 2010: 70-71) due to its focus on government-defined criteria.<sup>32</sup> And interestingly, little is said in this DIP programme document on the importance of party organization, the role of opposition or free and fair elections. Many donors decided *not* to withhold funds after May 2005 but to reallocate them to other programmes, with sector earmarking and monitoring procedures. In this respect, most of the money was reallocated to the Protection of Basic Services (PBS) programme at the local level in an attempt to bypass the central authorities. Most donors thus maintained their aid levels by reallocating funds to the local authorities (*woredas*). Ethiopia's largest donor, the US, has continued to give the country close to 30% of its total aid in bilateral support.

After the 2005 elections, several donors chose to sharpen their strategy towards Ethiopia with a two-track policy. They have sought to contribute to the country achieving the Millennium Development Goals of alleviating poverty and have, in effect, supported its economic programme while improving democracy and human rights. They have supported programmes geared at improving good governance and democracy by strengthening civil society, encouraged the process of decentralization and bolstered democratic structures and human rights. To combat poverty and achieve the MDGs, they have also pursued policy dialogues, provided services at the local level, strengthened rural economic development, improved the investment climate and the private sector, and supported the education and health sectors.

The effects of this strategy, carried out half-heartedly, are difficult to measure. There are many influencing factors, for example, the so-called independent mindedness and unwillingness of the Ethiopian regime to enter into real dialogue on democratic values and power sharing, the insecurity of field data, and the lack of a monitoring structure (and even of *permission* to carry out

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<sup>31</sup> See the DAG website: [www.dagethiopia.org](http://www.dagethiopia.org).

<sup>32</sup> For example, support is expressed for strengthening the state's 'Ethiopian Human Rights Commission' but compared to the already existing, independent Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) this is not seen as a sufficiently credible institution.

proper monitoring). The government has resented what it sees as the conditions and requests of donors and the international community in general, although these are in line with internationally accepted and UN-chartered norms for democratic development, rule of law and accountability. When, for instance, the donor-country Development Assistance Group's report on options after the 2005 post-election crackdowns was seen as 'too critical', PM Meles Zenawi explicitly told donors to shelve it. And amazingly, the donors, again led by the UK, did so (cf. Borchgrevink 2008: 216). Another example was when the Netherlands put the restrictive CSO law, which prohibited most NGO activities, on the EU's agenda in Brussels in June 2008. In direct response, the Netherlands ambassador was called to account for his actions by the Ethiopian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said that the Netherlands was 'interfering in internal affairs'. After the 2010 elections when the opposition won only *two* parliamentary seats (and with one of these, an independent, later declaring for the EPRDF), the Ethiopian PM anticipated a critical EU monitors' report and forbade them from coming back to Addis Ababa to present it. In a speech in November 2010, he incorrectly described the report as 'useless trash that deserves to be thrown in the garbage'.<sup>33</sup>

Secondly, it is difficult to unite donor efforts. In practice, their different national interests are too conflicting to allow them to adopt a common policy towards Ethiopia. There is no discussion about negative governance trends but there are also other considerations too. Ethiopia is perceived to be a loyal partner in the 'fight against terrorism' and in attempts to resolve the problems in Somalia. It is playing a significant role in peace missions too, for example in Darfur, and, in July 2011 in Abyei, also in Sudan. Prime Minister Meles is an active leader on the world stage and has participated in the G20, the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference, the 2010 Cancún climate change conference and the IGAD and has visited both China and India. The ideology of the EPRDF government, advocating a self-declared, reinvented 'developmental state', finds support with many donors and EPRDF policy is seen by many as delivering results, being pro-poor, being directed at achieving the MDGs, and leading to annual economic growth of an estimated 7%-9%.<sup>34</sup> Even though this is a tenuous judgment and is based neither on sufficiently broad research nor on a reading of all the available studies, economic growth has indeed occurred and has positive effects on education, infrastructure and service delivery.<sup>35</sup> How-

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<sup>33</sup> See P. Heinlein, 'Meles Clashes with EU about Election Report', *VOA News*, 15 November 2010.

<sup>34</sup> According to the African Development Bank figures: [www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/countries/east-africa/ethiopia](http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/countries/east-africa/ethiopia); cf. World Bank (2009: i-ii, 1).

<sup>35</sup> Donor support of ca. US\$ 25 billion over the past two decades has played a role.

ever, it is also quite selective and non-inclusive, and is going hand in hand with high inflation (especially food prices) and perennial food insecurity for millions of Ethiopians every year. Nor is the quality of all statistical data and figures provided by the government beyond debate.<sup>36</sup> In July 2011, the government even ran into an argument with the IMF and the World Bank over these figures and also about the World Bank critique concerning the ‘unrealistic assumptions’ of some key government programmes, like the 2010 Growth and Transformation Plan.

In the end, the geo-political considerations and the economic and poverty-alleviation results in Ethiopia are more important for most donor countries than good-governance indicators or the achievement of democratic freedoms and respect for human rights.<sup>37</sup> In other words, Ethiopia has, comparatively speaking, ‘good enough governance’ for many donors. Other considerations, notably from the UK, are that there is ‘no serious alternative’ to the EPRDP and that if donors increase their pressure on Ethiopia there is a risk that this may lead to their own exclusion. Clearly, Ethiopia has become more confident now that Chinese, Indian and Middle Eastern investments are increasing and without any accompanying requirements or conditions on human rights, rule of law and good governance. The Ethiopian government is increasing its leverage and playing one off against the other and some donors are now afraid that if they are too critical, they will lose influence (and business interests). In this bleak situation, support for democracy falls by the wayside<sup>38</sup> and the Ethiopian people will ultimately suffer more. Recent trends in donor-country policy, for example in the Netherlands, represent a shift towards economic investment, business ventures, environment and water issues. Governance and rule-of-law issues are now secondary and, in view of the disappointing 2010 elections, there is a sense of despondency about them.

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<sup>36</sup> See ‘Meles in a Row with World Bank, IMF on Economic Performance’, in: *Capital* (Addis Ababa weekly), 10 July 2011. See also W. Davison, ‘Ethiopia’s Investment Plan May Be Unsustainable, World Bank Official Says’, Bloomberg News Agency message, 8 June 2011.

<sup>37</sup> Many subscribe to the rather condescending TIA (This is Africa) myth (cf. Zimeta 2010).

<sup>38</sup> See the dubious and fearful response by the DAG on the 2010 HRW report on possible aid misuse: ‘DAG Statement – Human Rights Watch (HRW) report: Development without Freedom – How Aid Underwrites Repression in Ethiopia’, 21 October 2010, [www.dagethiopia.org](http://www.dagethiopia.org).

### Concluding remarks

Elections in a political system that allows no real political communication, i.e. where citizens' voices cannot make a difference, have little meaning. Indeed, elections according to a Western model presuppose a society that is open to alternative views, institutional dialogue and incumbents that could be defeated. These conditions are absent, and while there was some prospect that the 2005 elections would further them the old autocratic pattern was fully confirmed in 2010. Lindberg's (2009b: 31, 45) general view that repeated elections create democratic momentum or are a 'powerful force for political change' cannot be corroborated.

It should be remembered that Ethiopia, like many other African countries, is a 'limited access' society and its political system and resources (including the business world, cf. the World Bank 2009 report) are quite closed and virtually monopolized. Elections are barely useful in such a non-enabling context where even communication about elementary policies is suppressed. As Helen Epstein noted in her discussions with World Bank Ethiopia director Ken Ohashi:

In order to survive, the poor farmers I met in southern Ethiopia may not need a change of government every four to eight years, desirable as this may be. But at the very least they do need the political space to negotiate grievances concerning everyday well-being, such as perceived unfair or politicized exclusion from jobs and humanitarian programs, overtaxation, and decisions about how to manage their land. Right now many Ethiopians don't have this space, and no vertically administered food aid or agricultural extension program will ever substitute for it.<sup>39</sup>

The title of this chapter, 'Democracy Deferred', does not just refer to the Ethiopian leadership's strategy of delay or redefinition of democracy by closely organizing elections. The Western donor community seems to be following the same strategy of delay, judging Ethiopia either as 'not mature enough' for parliamentary democracy, fair and free elections or the rule of law (even according to Ethiopia's constitution), or not realistically seeing themselves as having the leverage required to influence events. They thus remain content with the economic growth figures and infrastructure investments that the government is pursuing. They also see the regime as a beacon of stability in the wider Horn in comparison with Sudan or the Somali mayhem, and while in the latter case there is a geo-strategic grain of truth in this approach, the argument is problematic. As a growing body of literature shows, even Ethiopia itself is not stable, with its rebellions, clashes and significant discontent. The moral and political issues are unresolved about whether and how to support countries with façade democra-

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<sup>39</sup> H. Epstein, Reply to Ohashi, on 'Cruel Ethiopia', 24 June 2010: [www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/24/cruel-ethiopia](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jun/24/cruel-ethiopia)

cies or illiberal systems that impose policies top-down, insufficiently respect human rights, repress the media, co-opt the population into a one-party structure and prevent elections from running their course. Donor countries and their aid policies have not played a visible role in promoting rule of law in Ethiopia or in urging the regime to respect its own constitution. As van de Walle (2005: 83) already noted, the international aid system needs serious reform. But none has as yet been implemented unless we count the growing ‘securitization’ of development aid and the rapid rise of China as an economic competitor of traditional donors in Africa as such.

The 2011 wave of violence and destabilizing protest in various North African and Arab countries however shows that betting on the stability of (now toppled) autocratic regimes was risky and may come to revisit those who support them. Admittedly, the options in the international system are limited – political, let alone military, interference and pressure are fraught with problems – but continued engagement is necessary, even if illusions about meaningful change in the short term are not cherished. Democratization is a multifaceted and slow societal process that took a few centuries to yield mature and institutionalized systems in the West. But there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that it will need as long in today’s developing countries in view of the democratic preferences of their citizens, and it would be condescending to claim that they cannot learn from the experience of others or deal with the totally different globalized setting of today. The Ethiopian government always speaks of the country being ‘in a process of democracy’ – this can be extended into the future indefinitely and they make no hurry. They are stimulated in this strategy of delay by the inconsistent if not indifferent approach of foreign players in Africa. The Chinese and other self-declared ‘political non-interferers’ in Africa have no strategy in this respect. Western donor countries, although betting on developmental dictators or autocrats, sometimes think that when economies grow nicely then in the long run democratic structures, constitutional rule and equitable redistribution policies will eventually emerge by themselves. They appear to run out of options and seem satisfied with ‘good enough governance’ (cf. Grindle 2004), but forget that regimes in developing countries are now so interlocked and influenced by global processes and developmental initiatives that many shortcuts to democratic governance improvement are available, if the political will is there. Ethiopia has also signed international treaties, has a constitution with many (in name) democratic clauses, has an overall developmental rhetoric and societal dynamism, is a partner in multilateral development programmes and international affairs, and should be encouraged to live up to the (basics of) international norms and practices of democratic rule. There is a global politico-legal discourse on rights and consensus governance that countries can no longer retreat from (cf. Merry 2006: 110). In this sense, some (aid) conditionalities

remain inevitable. Policies to enhance political representation and interaction, foster inclusive growth, realize more secure business conditions and create a trustworthy judiciary would produce more domestic and regional stability. In addition, the events in North Africa, Syria and Bahrain in 2011 have shown that the clamour for democracy, justice and law is growing globally. Donor countries that pride themselves on striving for democracy and growth for developing countries would do better to continue to critically engage the neo-autocratic developing countries to whom they give funds, as well as to redefine the terms of their engagement. As a recent World Bank (2009: 103) report on reforming the Ethiopian investment climate said: ‘a tolerance for dissenting views and alternatives to established policies is an essential ingredient to the reform’. This is cautious criticism, and urges a general attitude from which Ethiopia, both in politics and in the economy, would greatly benefit. It also applies to civic and media rights, which still exist in the country but are under serious pressure.<sup>40</sup> More meaningful partnerships – not only with the government elite – could be built that would draw in and benefit the population. The development of a more independent justice system – not only on paper but also in practice – is key here.<sup>41</sup> This is, however, very unlikely in the current political atmosphere in Ethiopia, and donors are not seen to be acting on it. Although explainable in terms of rapidly changing international business competition and a fixation on economic growth as a panacea for everything, donor countries, when dealing with autocratic regimes, cannot match their own alleged ideals of furthering democratic governance and rule of law with their own practices. This apparent incapacity is one of the enduring policy paradoxes marking their record in post-Cold War Africa.

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<sup>40</sup> The latest bad turn was the ‘anti-terrorism’ law (FDRE, ‘Anti-Terrorism Proclamation’, *Federal Negarit Gazeta* 15(57), 29 August 2009) that criminalizes any reporting on or citing of people deemed affiliated to a ‘terrorist organization’ as defined by the government, with indications that this extends to designated opposition parties. The element of arbitrariness and intimidation is obvious, and this may close down independent reporting on opposition activities. See Argaw Ashine, ‘Ethiopian media hit by new anti-terrorism law’, *Africa Review* (Nairobi), 24 August 2011.

<sup>41</sup> There have been various initiatives in this field but the aspect of democracy building via the judicial system is not entertained by donors. See the World Bank programme on ‘Reforming the Ethiopian Justice System’, where the emphasis again is on ‘capacity building’: <http://go.worldbank.org/VFRY47DIR0>.

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