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Closing the Transition: the May 1995 Elections in Ethiopia

by TERRENCE LYONS*

THE Ethiopian transition, that began with the overthrow of military dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam in May 1991, formally ended with the swearing in of the newly elected Government of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia in August 1995. The intervening four years were a contentious time of clashes among rival political forces to determine the rules under which the transition would be conducted and hence which forces would be favoured. The first act of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) after deposing Mengistu was to convene a National Conference and establish a Council of Representatives that initially included a wide array of political groups. The EPRDF led throughout this transitional period and capitalised on its commanding position to consolidate its power. The party dominated the political landscape by virtue of its military power, effective organisation and leadership, and control of the agenda and rules of competition. It structured the transition around new ethnically defined regions, a constitution that emphasised self-determination, and a series of largely uncontested elections.

A collection of diverse political groups, often disorganised, sometimes irresponsible, poorly led, and split by numerous internal differences, sought to divert the EPRDF plans for a controlled transition. They convened an alternative council, appealed to the international community (particularly the United States) for assistance in forcing the EPRDF to negotiate, and boycotted elections in the hope of delegitimising a process they believed they could not influence. These tactics proved to be no match for the EPRDF's intricate mechanisms of control. The well-managed May 1995 elections ended the transitional period and served to consolidate the EPRDF's dominance. What had begun with a noisy diversity of views among a broad array of political organisations ended quietly with the clear hegemony of the EPRDF.

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UNCONTESTED ELECTIONS, FAILED TALKS, 1991-4

Mengistu's régime collapsed from the combined pressures of the EPRDF and the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF), which conducted much of the fighting that eroded the *Derg's* power and sought independence for the northern territory of Eritrea. The EPRDF, a multi-ethnic coalition established and dominated by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF), had moved from its original area of operation in the north to surround the capital of Addis Ababa in central Ethiopia in early 1991.¹

The US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Herman Cohen, responded to a call from the remnant of Mengistu's régime and the insurgent groups to chair a peace conference in London. By the time the talks commenced on 27 May, Mengistu had fled into exile in Zimbabwe, the EPLF had seized Asmara and declared a separate provisional government, and nothing stood between the capital and the troops of the EPRDF. Cohen publicly 'recommended' that they enter Addis Ababa, 'in order to reduce uncertainties and eliminate tensions', after receiving reports of growing disorder and hoping to prevent the sort of chaos that had devastated the Liberian capital of Monrovia and Somalia's Mogadishu in somewhat similar circumstances. He also made explicit the linkages between US assistance and political reform: 'No democracy, no co-operation'. Although some Ethiopian opposition leaders regarded the American initiative in London as a nefarious deal to impose a set of authoritarian leaders bent on dismembering Ethiopia, Cohen simply made the best of facts on the ground that he could not change.²

1. *The Transitional Charter and Politics of Ethnicity*

The first steps taken by the new EPRDF-led Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) suggested a surprisingly inclusive transition that welcomed a variety of actors into politics.³ In July 1991, just five

¹ On the origins of the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front, see Theodoros Dagne, 'EPRDF's Rise to Political Dominance', in *Ethiopian Review* (Los Angeles), December 1992, pp. 17-20; 'The EPRDF First Congress: a milestone in the Ethiopian People's struggle', in *EPRDF News Bulletin* (Washington, DC), 1, 2, 5 March 1991, p. 1; and 'Ethiopia: from rebels to rulers', in *Africa Confidential* (London), 32, 11, 31 May 1991, pp. 1-3.

² For more details, see Terrence Lyons, 'The Transition in Ethiopia', in *CSIS Africa Notes* (Washington, DC), 127, 17 August 1991, pp. 1-80.

³ For early assessments, see Stephen Morrison and Jeffrey Clark, 'Ethiopia, Eritrea and Democracy: significant opportunities amidst a fragile transition', Report to the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, DC, October 1991, and Herbert Lewis, 'Ethiopia: beginning again', in *Africa Report* (New York), September-October 1991, pp. 60-1.

weeks after seizing power, the EPRDF convened a National Conference to which it invited representatives from over 20 political movements.⁴ Some of these were small ethnic parties, newly organised under EPRDF tutelage, led by urban élites with weak ties to the countryside. A few had participated in the struggle against Mengistu and had autonomous bases of support, including the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), a potentially powerful political force to the extent it could mobilise the Oromo (estimated to represent 40–50 per cent of the total population) behind its programme. Two notable organisations were not invited: the discredited Workers Party of Ethiopia (WPE) that had collapsed when Mengistu fled, and several non-ethnic parties that had united in exile to form the Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF).⁵ The absence of these multi-ethnic organisations reinforced the leadership rôle played by the various ethnic parties (principally the EPRDF and the OLF).

The National Conference represented an encouraging early sign that the leaders of the EPRDF intended to reach beyond its original base and include a variety of political groups, thereby fulfilling the promises made in London. Not surprisingly, they managed the Conference and kept participation, the agenda, and therefore the eventual outcome firmly under their careful control. The OLF, however, also played a key rôle, acting in tactical alliance with the EPRDF in developing the Transitional Charter. This established an 87-member Council of Representatives (COR) in which the largest block of 32 seats (20 more than the OLF) was held by the EPRDF. Its leader, Meles Zenawi, was selected as President and his party retained the key portfolios of Defence and Foreign Affairs, while the OLF received four lesser Cabinet posts. The Conference also moved to settle the Eritrean issue, a source of debilitating conflict for 30 years, by pledging to accept the outcome of an internationally supervised referendum.⁶ Despite numerous unanswered questions and future challenges, the transition seemed to start off with a commitment to pluralism and a working

⁴ For some additional details, see Edmond J. Keller, 'Remaking the Ethiopian State', in I. William Zartman (ed.), *Collapsed States: the disintegration and restoration of legitimate authority* (Boulder, 1995), pp. 133–5.

⁵ 'Ethiopia: from rebels to rulers', in *Africa Confidential*, 32, 11, 31 May 1991, pp. 1–3, and 'Ethiopia: majorities and minorities', in *ibid.* 32, 14, 12 July 1991, pp. 1–2.

⁶ The Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front attended the National Conference as an observer, not a participant. In any event, no Ethiopian régime had the capacity in 1991 to prevent the EPLF from opting out of the proposed federal republic, and in April 1993 Eritreans voted overwhelmingly for independence.

coalition around a broad-based pact that most major social groups supported.⁷

As the National Conference and Transitional Charter indicated, the EPRDF intended to build new structures on the basis of ethnicity. Such a focus largely derived from the fact that few other political groups existed in 1991, and it was the ethnic issue and the resulting civil strife that toppled the old régime. Meles Zenawi argued that ‘We cannot ignore that Ethiopia is a diverse country. Previous attempts to do that have led to wars, to fueling nationalistic tendencies...’⁸ The Charter accepted the rights of all Ethiopia’s nationalities to self-determination, including secession (Article II) and established ‘local and regional councils defined on the basis of nationality’ (Article XIII). Rather than denying ethnic or national differences or trying to bolster a sense of pan-Ethiopian identity, the EPRDF chose to construct a political system that reflected on-going realities.

The Charter seemed to be designed by the northern-based EPRDF to capture the support of the Oromo and other southern groups who favoured a weak centre as well as the right to self-determination,⁹ and who felt oppressed by the series of central régimes that had been dominated by the Amhara.¹⁰ The EPRDF initially lacked strong partners in the south, most of which had remained under Mengistu’s control throughout the war, and seemed in 1991 to be seeking to make an accommodation with organisations that were already established there.

The decision by the National Conference to favour ethnically defined regions significantly shaped the patterns of competition and the character of politics over the next four years. In January 1992 the Council of Representatives reorganised the country into 12 regions, gerrymandered to be as ethnically homogeneous as possible, plus two chartered cities (Addis Ababa and Harar) that were given the same status.¹¹ The history of migration and intermarriage in Ethiopia, not

⁷ J. Stephen Morrison, ‘Ethiopia Charts a New Course’, in *Journal of Democracy* (Baltimore), Summer 1992, p. 127.

⁸ Cameron McWirter and Gur Melamede, ‘Ethiopia: the ethnicity factor’, in *Africa Report*, 37, 5, September–October 1992, p. 33. According to Michaela Wrong, ‘Ethiopia Buries the African “Nation State”’, in *Financial Times* (London), 5 May 1995, Dawit Yohannes, a legal adviser to Meles Zenawi, stated ‘We say there is no country called Ethiopia, no state that defends the interests of this multi-ethnic community grouped under the name Ethiopia. That’s why we’ve been immersed in wars for the last 30 years. So we must start again, from scratch.’

⁹ Morrison, loc. cit. p. 129.

¹⁰ See Asafa Jalata, *Oromia and Ethiopia: state formation and ethnonational conflict, 1868–1992* (Boulder, 1993).

¹¹ Proclamation No. 7 of 1992. See ‘Ethiopia: new government, new map’, in *Africa Confidential*, 32, 22, 8 November 1991, p. 7, and Edmond Keller, ‘The Ethnogenesis of the Oromo Nation and

surprisingly, created a much more complicated social reality on the ground than suggested by these regions, and the boundaries became the subject of controversy and strife, not least since they institutionalised ethnicity as the controlling consideration in national politics. In an electoral environment in which the constituencies were defined ethnically, political parties and leaders had few options but to campaign on the basis of appeals that often threatened to incite chauvinism, discrimination against minority enclaves, and inter-communal violence.¹² In addition, the transitional régime's decision to hold regional prior to national (all union) elections stimulated political activists to organise on parochial issues and develop separatist programmes, further risking the break-up of the state and threatening minority rights.¹³

Many of the élites in Addis Ababa and some of the political leaders from the northern Amhara feared that the TGE experiment in ethnic federalism implied the sacrifice of the historical Ethiopian national identity and pride. These forces were alarmed that other regions might follow Eritrea and destroy the state. On the other hand, some southern political groups suspected that the proposed ethnic federalism was a ploy designed to co-opt them into yet another northern-dominated government. Significant numbers of Oromo, for example, opposed anything short of their goal of immediate independence for Oromia. Some Somalis, particularly those from the Ogaden clan, also favoured secession.

The transitional process nearly broke down in late 1991 and early 1992 when tensions between the EPRDF and the OLF escalated from bickering within the Council of Representatives to military clashes that

Its Implications for Politics in Ethiopia', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), 33, 4, December 1995, p. 632, for a map of Ethiopia's 12 ethnically-based administrative regions. For an account of past regional boundary changes, see Daniel Gamachu, 'A Nation in Perpetual Transition: the politics of changes in administrative divisions and subdivisions in Ethiopia', in Harold Marcus (ed.), *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies: papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Vol. II (Lawrenceville, NJ, 1994), pp. 83-113.

¹² For more on these questions, see Marina Ottaway, *Democracy and Ethnic Nationalism: African and Eastern European experiences* (Washington, DC, 1994), Overseas Development Council Policy Essay No. 14, and 'Nationalism Unbound: the Horn of Africa revisited', in *SAS Review* (Washington, DC), 12, 2, Summer-Fall 1992, pp. 111-28.

¹³ Two analysts of European developments conclude that if 'in multinational polities the first elections are regional, we believe that there will be strong incentives for political contestation to focus on antistate ethnic issues and that the day after the regional elections the legitimacy of the state will be weaker'. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, 'Political Identities and Electoral Sequences: Spain, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia', in *Daedalus* (Cambridge, MA), 121, 2, Spring 1992, p. 125. For the impact of proceeding with regional before national elections in the break-up of Yugoslavia, see Susan Woodward, *The Balkan Tragedy: chaos and dissolution after the cold war* (Washington, DC, Brookings, 1995).

threatened to return the country to full-scale civil war.¹⁴ One source of tension was over the appropriate size and rôle of the armed forces of the OLF, another was the competition between the latter and a component of the EPRDF, namely the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organisation (OPDO). This was regarded by the leaders of the OLF as a direct attack on their conviction that they alone had the right to lead the Oromo. The two movements competed for political control over the same strategic areas and manoeuvred for position in anticipation of elections, and the establishment of regional administrations.¹⁵ In April 1992, talks co-chaired by the Provisional Government of Eritrea and the United States resulted in a cease-fire and an encampment of forces monitored by the Eritreans.¹⁶

This tense and tenuous peace finally allowed the TGE to schedule local and regional elections in June 1992, albeit not before a number of potent mechanisms that bolstered the EPRDF's ability to control and dominate political life during the Ethiopian transition were already in place. The EPRDF controlled most of the ground by virtue of its vast military superiority, and by placing loyal administrators in strategic positions throughout the countryside. In addition, the rules set forth by the Council of Representatives greatly favoured the EPRDF. Elections in the new regions gave this ethnically structured party a tremendous advantage. Many of its affiliates, particularly the Peoples Democratic Organisations (PDOs) established throughout southern Ethiopia, used their ties to the EPRDF to supplant local political groups and traditional leaders.

2. *The June 1992 Regional Elections*

In this context, it was not surprising that the June 1992 regional elections failed to provide the transitional régime with a genuine popular mandate. The TGE and the National Election Commission (NEC) lacked the time, resources, experience, and administrative

¹⁴ See, for example, Michael A. Hiltzik, 'Ethiopia Fears New Civil War, Loss of Its Aid', in *Los Angeles Times*, 15 April 1992, p. A1, and Jennifer Parmelee, 'Skirmishes Put Ethiopia "Between War and Peace"', in *The Washington Post*, 4 April 1992, p. A19.

¹⁵ For a sample of the heated rhetoric, see 'EPRDF Statement Outlines Problems with OLF', Voice of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, 29 March 1992, translated in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report, Sub-Saharan Africa*, hereafter FBIS (Washington, DC), 31 March 1992, pp. 6-8, and 'OLF Statement Responds to EPRDF Claims', Voice of Ethiopia, 31 March 1992, translated in *ibid.* 2 April 1992, pp. 3-4. See also, Asafa Jalata, *op. cit.* pp. 181-6.

¹⁶ 'EPRDF-OLF Communiqué on U.S.-Brokered Agreement', Voice of Ethiopia, 15 April 1992, translated in FBIS, 16 April 1992, p. 5. See also, 'Ethiopia: power-struggles and the ethnic weapon', in *Africa Confidential*, 33, 9, 8 May 1992, pp. 6-7.

capacity to prepare for effective elections. More damaging than the perhaps inevitable logistical deficiencies, however, was the behaviour of the ruling authorities who failed to create an atmosphere where free political competition could take place. Charges from opposition parties and reports from international observers established that the TGE and the NEC favoured the EPRDF in conducting the elections.

The ruling coalition's cadres controlled the powerful neighbourhood associations known as *kebelles* in nearly every constituency and, in the absence of functioning independent election committees, this allowed them to determine when and to whom voter registration materials were distributed. The EPRDF militia served as the transitional national army, leaving opposition parties vulnerable to intimidation, violence, and fraud: indeed, they often had their offices closed and officials arrested or harassed. This imbalance encouraged many parties – particularly those unprepared or ambivalent about participation – to seek to discredit rather than strengthen the electoral process.

The EPRDF had two rôles during this stage of the transition. On the one hand, as the leading component of the TGE it had a responsibility to act as a neutral umpire in the electoral process, interested only in facilitating popular involvement and free choice without constraint. On the other, it was also a political contender, seeking victory for its affiliated parties and willing to restrict opposition participation. When these two rôles conflicted, the EPRDF sided with its partners. At the same time, too many political organisations acted in ways that suggested their commitment to democracy was in part instrumental. The OLF, for example, behaved as if it was the only legitimate party in Oromia, intimidated non-Oromo in the region, and did not make use of its opportunity to play a constructive rôle in the various electoral committees.¹⁷

On 17 June, after the Council of Representatives rejected a petition from the OLF and 17 other parties requesting a postponement, OLF officials announced their party's withdrawal from the elections.¹⁸ By voting day on 21 June, only the EPRDF and its ethnic affiliates appeared on the ballot in most areas. The lack of choice made the

¹⁷ Terrence Lyons, 'The Transition Toward Democracy in Ethiopia: observations on the elections in Welega, June 1992', testimony before the US House of Representatives Foreign Relations Sub-Committee on African Affairs hearing, 17 September 1992. See also, *Friends of Ethiopia Newsletter* (Washington, DC), August 1992, and Gilbert D. Kulick, 'Ethiopia's Hollow Elections: observing the forms', in *Foreign Service Journal* (Washington, DC), September 1992, pp. 41–4.

¹⁸ 'Withdrawals From, Postponement of Elections', Voice of Ethiopia in Amharic, 17 June 1992, translated in FBIS, 18 June 1992, p. 2.

formalities of voting largely irrelevant and the outcome foreordained. In the end, the EPRDF won 1,108 of 1,147 regional assembly seats (96.6 per cent).¹⁹ The TGE insisted that the elections 'represent[ed] a significant step toward the establishment of a democratic political order', and that they were 'a remarkable success'.²⁰

Elections, however, are about choice. The consensus of international observers was that the conditions under which open political competition could take place did not exist in most of Ethiopia. According to one assessment, 'What began, ostensibly at least, as a multiparty affair ended in, what appeared to be, the consolidation of one-party rule.'²¹ Instead of working to sustain the initial broad coalition and implicit pact behind the July 1991 National Conference, the EPRDF backed its ethnic affiliates and created a single party dominant political system.

After withdrawing from the elections, the OLF left the TGE and pulled its 15,000 troops out of the camps where they were vulnerable, and a short civil war ensued.²² The EPRDF quickly destroyed the OLF's ability to mount a major military campaign and detained 19,000 Oromo, many allegedly rounded up as suspected sympathisers rather than combatants.²³ This brief conflict demonstrated that behind the EPRDF's political strategy of ethnic affiliates and regional elections was an experienced and battle-hardened military that could act decisively when necessary.

In the aftermath of the failed elections and the military defeat of the OLF, both the EPRDF and the opposition manoeuvred to put in place their different ideas on how to structure politics during the transition. The ruling party insisted that any group that denounced violence and accepted the rules developed by the EPRDF could participate. In the meantime, it moved quickly to create a set of political 'facts on the ground', such as new regional administrations and parties, that encouraged groups and institutions with an interest in defending the *status quo*. The major opposition parties, however, rejected the EPRDF's formula and tried to develop strategies that would force a new

¹⁹ National Democratic Institute, *An Evaluation of the June 21, 1992 Elections in Ethiopia* (Washington, DC, 1992), p. 3.

²⁰ Embassy of Ethiopia, 'A Significant Step Towards Democracy', in *News from Ethiopia* (Washington, DC), 1, 2, 14 July 1992, pp. 1-2.

²¹ National Democratic Institute, op. cit. pp. 3-4.

²² Attempts by a group of Western ambassadors to mediate between the EPRDF and OLF failed. See 'Ethiopia: poacher turns gamekeeper', in *Africa Confidential*, 33, 14, 17 July 1992, p. 7.

²³ US Department of State, *Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1992* (Washington, DC, 1993).

beginning for the transition with a different array of forces and power alignments. Without any form of parity between the two sides and with the EPRDF's power secure, the prospect for successful talks was slim.

A number of opposition groups, including the All-Amhara Peoples Organisation (AAPO), became frustrated and increasingly strident.²⁴ Some leaders tried to increase their influence over the transition by participating in a series of meetings and working to build a coalition that united the major forces outside the EPRDF's transitional framework. In March 1993 an opposition meeting in Paris issued a statement that condemned the TGE.²⁵ Among the participants were leaders from the Southern Coalition who had retained their seats in the Council of Representatives after the 1992 elections, and when most refused to disassociate themselves from the Paris declaration, they were expelled from the Council.²⁶ After these purges only a handful of members were not directly affiliated with the EPRDF.

The opposition tried again to increase its leverage and find a means to reform the transition by holding a 'Peace and Reconciliation Conference' in Addis Ababa in December 1993. The TGE boycotted the proceedings and arrested some dissident leaders who tried to attend.²⁷ Another opposition strategy focused on appealing to the West, particularly the United States, to use its influence to convince the TGE to engage in talks with the goal of forming a new transitional government that would include all political parties before the next elections. In February 1994 a number of Ethiopian opposition groups met with former President Jimmy Carter in Atlanta to explore opportunities for another round of talks. The initiative faltered, however, when Meles Zenawi's TGE declined Carter's offer to mediate.²⁸ As the next round of elections scheduled for June 1994 approached, although support for the régime's framework decreased, the major opposition movements had failed to find a strategy that would force a change.

²⁴ Jennifer Parmelee, 'Ethiopia's New Politics Echo an Old War', in *The Washington Post*, 18 February 1993, p. A33. See also, 'Ethiopia: government arm wrestles AAPO', in *Indian Ocean Newsletter* (Paris), 562, 13 February 1993, p. 3.

²⁵ 'Ethiopia: opposition meeting in Paris', in *ibid.* 567, 20 March 1993, pp. 1-2.

²⁶ 'SEPDU Parties Suspended from Council of Representatives', *Voice of Ethiopia*, 2 April 1993, translated in FBIS, 5 April 1993, p. 5.

²⁷ Jennifer Parmelee, 'Ethiopia Arrests Dissident Political Leaders', in *The Washington Post*, 18 December 1993, p. A22, and 'Ethiopian Opposition: rulers stay too long', in *ibid.* 23 December 1993, p. A16.

²⁸ 'Carter Center Statement on Ethiopia Negotiations', in *News from the Carter Center* (Atlanta), 23 March 1994.

3. *The June 1994 Constituent Assembly Elections*

The next round of elections took place on 5 June 1994 for a Constituent Assembly charged with considering, modifying, and ratifying a draft constitution. This had been debated by the COR and unanimously adopted except for the sections on the controversial issues of land ownership and self-determination, where the official document had two alternative formulations.

After the failure of the Carter reconciliation talks, the major opposition parties again did not participate in the elections, leaving the EPRDF unopposed except by an assortment of generally weak independent candidates. Fifteen million Ethiopians registered to vote (out of an estimated eligible 23 million) for 937 independents and 534 party candidates from 39 political organisations to fill the 547-seat Constituent Assembly.²⁹ With the exception of a few independents from Addis Ababa and some unaffiliated delegates from the frontier regions, EPRDF candidates won 484 seats, a result one report described as 'neither a significant nor an unexpected victory'.³⁰

Observers concluded that although the 1994 elections were an improvement administratively from the 1992 imbroglio, most voters still lacked meaningful choice.³¹ The European Union, while noting the technical progress that had been made, concluded with regret that 'for whatever reasons, the main opposition parties did not participate and it was therefore, for the most part, an EPRDF-dominated election'.³² A-Bu-Gi-Da, an Ethiopian non-governmental organisation, stated that 'the level of competitiveness and inclusiveness... was low', and for this reason found it 'doubtful whether the elected members of the Assembly would satisfactorily represent the range of Ethiopian opinions on the constitution'.³³ Here therefore was another opportunity missed by both the TGE and the opposition to broaden the base of the transition through competitive elections.

The Constituent Assembly convened on 28 October 1994. A few independents raised objections but the overwhelming EPRDF bloc easily ratified the draft desired by the ruling party on 8 December. The

²⁹ *Africa Research Bulletin* (Oxford), June 1994, p. 11470, and Jennifer Parmelee, 'Ethiopia, in Democratic Trial Run, Elects Constitution Writers', in *The Washington Post*, 6 June 1994, p. A13.

³⁰ 'Ethiopia: constitutional dilemmas', in *Africa Confidential*, 35, 13, 1 July 1994, p. 3.

³¹ On the 1994 elections, see Siegfried Pausewang, *The 1994 Election and Democracy in Ethiopia* (Oslo, Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, November 1994), and Gary Ouellet, *Recommendations Report: Ethiopia* (Washington, DC, International Foundation for Electoral Systems, July 1994).

³² 'EEC Statement of Ethiopia', Reuters, 27 June 1994.

³³ Ethiopian Congress for Democracy (A-Bu-Gi-Da), 'June 5, 1994 Constitutional Assembly Election Monitoring Mission Summary Report', Addis Ababa, 22 June 1994, p. 7.

Constitution stated that 'Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has an unconditional right to self-determination, including the right to secession' (Article 39). Elections to select new national and regional assemblies were to be held within six months. Despite its one-party make-up, the Donors Group of 18 Western embassies congratulated the Assembly for its open debate and free expression of dissenting views, and declared the process 'an important milestone on the path towards the establishment of democracy in Ethiopia'.³⁴

Fears that the TGE's narrow base might create instability prompted some both within Ethiopia and outside to push for another series of talks aimed at restarting dialogue with the various opposition groups. In February 1995, the Congressional Task Force on Ethiopia, consisting of Representatives Harry Johnston and Alcee Hastings, Ambassador David Shinn, and former Assistant Secretary of State Herman Cohen, brought leaders from the major opposition movements to Washington, as well as a special envoy from the TGE. The latter insisted that opposition groups accept the constitutional framework already in place as a precondition for participation and future talks back in Ethiopia. Three of the four opposition parties argued for negotiations without preconditions, and refused to accept a framework they had not participated in constructing.³⁵ As in the earlier Carter talks, the lack of parity between the ruling EPRDF and the weak and divided opposition provided little scope or incentive for an agreement. The Southern Coalition, which accepted the transitional government, continued talks with the TGE in Addis Ababa with the encouragement of the Donors Group, but these ultimately ended without an agreement and the Southern Coalition decided not to participate in the upcoming elections.

THE MAY 1995 ELECTIONS – BRINGING THE TRANSITION TO A CLOSE

The May 1995 regional and national elections were the first held under the new Constitution. The voting marked the culmination of a four-year campaign by the ruling EPRDF to transform the country from a highly centralised, authoritarian state, plagued by civil wars, to a federal republic in which a vast range of powers were devolved to

³⁴ Donors Group, 'The Constitution and Forthcoming Elections', press release, Addis Ababa, 14 December 1994, published in *Ethiopian Register* (Los Angeles), January 1995, pp. 64–5.

³⁵ 'Ethiopia: negotiations in Washington', in *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 658, 11 February 1995, p. 3, and 'Report on Congressional Task Force Talks on Democratization in Ethiopia, February 6–9'.

ethnically defined regions.³⁶ Under the Constitution, the national and regional legislators elected in May 1995 will rule Ethiopia for the next five years. Despite the significance of such a finale, the elections themselves elicited little interest from the international community or even from most Ethiopians. The political evolution of the previous four years and the non-participation of opposition candidates determined the outcome in advance, thereby making the elections anticlimactic.

In contrast with what happened in 1992, instability did not prevent the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians from participating in the 1995 elections.³⁷ Administratively, the National Election Board (NEB) did an impressive job of delivering ballots and other necessary materials to the thousands of polling stations, overcoming tremendous logistical hurdles. According to the NEB, 1,881 candidates from as many as 58 political organisations (mostly components of the EPRDF) and 960 independents competed for both the national and regional elections in 548 constituencies.

Meles Zenawi argued that he had tried to entice the opposition to participate but they had refused: 'One can take the horse to the river but one can't force the horse to drink water.'³⁸ Some voters blamed the opposition for declining to compete but many, particularly in the Oromo region and Addis Ababa, continued to support the parties that had not taken part. Regardless of the reasons for the limited participation, few Ethiopians had the opportunity to use the ballot in May 1995 to choose their representatives from a selection of meaningful alternatives. Only one small national organisation, the Ethiopian National Democratic Party (ENDP), a few minor ethnic or regionally based groups, and a large number of generally weak independents challenged the powerful ruling party. It was clear long before the day of the elections that the EPRDF would win and form the next national government, as well as the regional governments in all but the small frontier regions. Beyene Petros, leader of the Southern Coalition, stated 'We don't consider it a democratic election... This is an exercise where the same party and its surrogates are seeking a vote of confidence.'³⁹

³⁶ Wrong, loc. cit.

³⁷ An explosion in Dire Dawa on 4 May 1995 did not seem to be connected to the elections, and voting proceeded there quietly, although participation was low.

³⁸ Ethiopian News Agency, 'Ethiopia Comes of Age to Determine Leadership Through Election: Meles', in *The Ethiopian Herald* (Addis Ababa), 28 May 1995, p. 1, and 'President Meles Marks EPRDF Anniversary', Radio Ethiopia in Amharic, 27 May 1995, translated in FBIS, 30 May 1995, p. 8.

³⁹ Reuters, 'Opposition Bows Out of Elections', 5 May 1995, reprinted in *Horn of Africa Bulletin* (Uppsala), June 1995. See also, Wrong, loc. cit.

1. *The Regional Picture*

The overall picture of the May 1995 elections was the product of hundreds of local contests with distinctive patterns in different regions.⁴⁰ To generalise broadly, the EPRDF had been longer and better institutionalised in the north (the Tigray and Amhara regions, the home areas of many leading officials), had penetrated and established its roots less fully in the south (the Oromo and Southern Peoples Region where the 'PDOs' were still new), and had not much of a direct presence in the small frontier regions (Afar, Somali, Gambella, and Benishagul), where strong, traditional élites often continued to play important rôles.

Region 1: Tigray

Not surprisingly, the EPRDF was strongest in the northern region that was the home territory of the TPLF, and where no rival political organisations competed in the 1995 elections. Because of its relatively lengthy presence in the villages and countryside of Tigray during the insurgency, the TPLF had a network of committed and locally respected activists who mobilised the population and delivered votes for the party without difficulty.

As in most of the country, some independents occupied ballot slots in Tigray but very few offered the ruling party any real challenge. In fact, some if not most had clearly been recruited by the TPLF to make the elections appear 'more democratic' as one independent put it. Another candidate recounted that although a member of the TPLF, she had been recruited and financed to run as an 'independent' albeit unable, so she explained, to put up the campaign posters that her party had printed because it had failed to provide the necessary tape! Against such feeble opponents, the highly skilled, well-funded, sophisticated, and well-known TPLF candidates won each of the 152 regional and 38 national seats by overwhelming margins.

Region 3: Amhara

In this region, the EPRDF component known as the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) also acted effectively, with the ability to mobilise the population, particularly farmers in the

⁴⁰ This analysis is based largely on personal observations and discussions in Ethiopia between March and June 1995 as part of the Donor Election Unit.

countryside.⁴¹ Although the EPRDF liberated most of Amhara later than Tigray, ANDM operatives had functioned in the region before Mengistu's overthrow, a fact that helped to explain the high voter registration and turnout, especially in the rural areas. With the surprising exception of the town of Dese, where a largely unknown ENDP candidate won, all 268 regional and 134 national seats in Amhara went to the ANDM.

Two political parties with the potential to win support from significant numbers of voters in the region, the All-Amhara Peoples Organisation (AAPO) and the Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party (EDUP), did not participate in the May 1995 elections. The TGE arrested several of the AAPO's leaders, including the secretary-general, Dr Asrat Woldeyese, who was convicted and sentenced to two years for involvement in a meeting at which plans for armed activities against the TGE were allegedly discussed.⁴² In the spring of 1995, few Amhara in the countryside mentioned the AAPO, while relatively more in Addis Ababa expressed their support. The EDUP, an organisation that began in the mid-1970s and was widely supported by many older Amhara and Tigreans, suffered from poor leadership and lack of funds, as well as also having some of its leaders arrested on dubious charges. In addition to playing a rôle in the decisions taken by these parties not to participate, such intimidation contributed to a political climate in which many potential candidates and their supporters feared repression and arrest.

Region 4: Oromo

In this region, by far the largest, the OPDO ran in all but three of the 177 constituencies. It campaigned on the common EPRDF five-year plan, but also championed cultural issues such as the use of the Oromo language in schools and the adoption of the Latin alphabet. Despite these appeals, the population in many areas continued to regard the OPDO as seriously compromised by its association with the EPRDF, which many Oromo saw as another 'northern' or *neftenya* (the term for imperial military overlords) régime. A number of potential voters noted and regretted the absence of the OLF: some blamed

⁴¹ The Amhara National Democratic Movement had originally been a multi-ethnic party known as the Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Movement, and some notable ANDM leaders before that had been in the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Party.

⁴² See US Department of State, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1995* (Washington, DC, 1995), and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, *Democracy, Rule of Law, and Human Rights in Ethiopia: rhetoric and practice* (Addis Ababa, March 1995).

its leadership and others the TGE, but nearly all believed that the OLF would have won enough votes to alter the outcome if it had participated.

Compared to the sophisticated organisational capacity and skilled leadership demonstrated by the more established TPLF and ANDF, the OPDO was less effective and relied more on intimidation and patronage to dominate the region's politics. During the 1992 elections, many of its cadres clearly lacked community roots and occupied positions of power largely by their association with the EPRDF.⁴³ By 1994 (and following the military defeat of the OPDO's chief rival, the OLF) the visible presence of armed forces was dramatically lower. A pattern of intimidation, however – from arrests of potential independents in Ambo, and extra-judicial killings in Nedjo and Addis Ababa,⁴⁴ to OPDO cadres telling parents around Nazaret that if they did not vote for them their sons would be killed in renewed war – undoubtedly created a climate of fear that sharply limited the ability or willingness of alternative candidates to compete in the May 1994 elections in Oromo.

The OPDO won every seat (both regionally and nationally) except for three national seats where it did not put up candidates.⁴⁵ Although rates of registration and voter turnout seemed lower among the Oromo relative to Tigreans and Amhara, the OPDO still achieved an impressive level of mobilisation on the day of the elections. In Gara Muleta, for example, an area of Harerge where the OLF was actively supported, the OPDO managed a large turnout in an uncontested series of races.

Regions 7–11: The Southern Region

Following the June 1992 elections, five regions were merged into the Southern Peoples and Nationalities Region, which thereby became a conglomeration of dozens of smaller nationalities. Most ethnic groups had their own constituencies but none formed anything close to a majority across the region. As many as 32 parties participated in the 1995 elections, but only those affiliated with the EPRDF, grouped within the Southern Ethiopian Peoples Democratic Front (SEPDF), won seats. The absence of the régime's major potential opponent again

⁴³ See Lyons, 'Transition Toward Democracy in Ethiopia'.

⁴⁴ 'Murder of Oromo Nationalist', in *Indian Ocean Newsletter*, 1 July 1995.

⁴⁵ The non-OPDO seats were won by the small Oromo Abo and Oromo United Parties. For background of the complicated splits and mergers of these parties, see 'Ethiopia: Oromos get act together', in *ibid.* 21 January 1995, p. 4.

left the ruling party virtually unchallenged, although the aforementioned Donors Group had tried to persuade the Southern Coalition to participate. The latter's allegations regarding the imprisonment on political grounds of a number of its officials – a key sticking point in the pre-election talks – led six Western ambassadors to travel to Jinka in South Omo to investigate. Despite the dubious charges, international pressure did not lead the TGE to release the prisoners or even review the cases. The leader of the Southern Coalition was denied permission to open a political office or even to hold a rally in the town of Hosaina. During talks with the TGE and the Donors Group in March, Beyene requested a six-month delay to prepare for the elections and, when such a postponement was rejected, announced that the Coalition would not participate.

Some of the dilemmas involved in organising politics on the basis of ethnicity are illustrated by the Silte-Gurage conflict in the Southern Region. Many Silte leaders insisted that they constituted a nationality group with their own language, culture, territory, and hence claims on political autonomy and economic resources. Officials from the ruling EPRDF-affiliated Gurage Peoples Democratic Movement (GPDM), however, argued that the Silte were a sub-group ('clan') of the Gurage nationality, and that therefore their claimed privileges and resources should be retained by the GPDM. After the Silte Peoples Democratic Unity Party (SPDUP) had been organised to compete in the May 1995 elections, it decided to support the EPRDF's national programme while regarding the GPDM as its competitor for local power and cultural rights. The question was made even more complicated by the presence of a third party, the Silte-Gurage Peoples Democratic Movement.

A number of SPDUP leaders interviewed in prison in Butajira in April 1995 claimed that they had been arrested following communal tensions over the distribution of relief supplies. In addition, their candidates reported troubles in campaigning, including beatings, as well as limitations on their ability to travel and address rallies. The SPDUP remained engaged in the elections despite being harassed by the GPDM, but lost every race, and its appeal to the National Election Board was denied.

Region 14: Addis Ababa

Political freedoms and levels of activity had been much greater in Addis Ababa than the rest of the country since the beginning of the transition. The capital was a chartered city under the redrawn electoral

map in recognition of its multi-ethnic character and historical development. Most of Ethiopia's independent newspapers were available only in Addis Ababa, for example, and nearly all civic organisations were based in the city. Even opposition groups such as the Southern Coalition and All-Amhara Peoples Organisation that claimed support outside the capital were most active and visible in Addis Ababa. A few irreconcilable opponents of the TGE won seats to the Constituent Assembly and used the televised proceedings to denounce those in power and win local notoriety.

In 1995, this political openness relative to the restricted political space in the countryside was apparent in the types and numbers of candidates, their ability to campaign, and the lack of fear demonstrated by the large percentage of urban residents who voted for non-EPRDF candidates, or who felt safe in not voting at all. Numerous political organisations and independents that clearly represented an alternative to the ruling coalition were on the ballot in Addis Ababa. The ability of opposition candidates to use the media to get their message across to voters was far greater in the city than the countryside. However, many EPRDF candidates won with less than a majority because the opposition was split. In addition, many voters were either apathetic or opposed to the elections, and the ensuing turnout was very low. Two independents, including Major Adamse Zeleke, one of the Government's most renowned adversaries from the Constituent Assembly, gained national seats. The ruling party won every seat in the regional (Addis Ababa) assembly, however, a result that even some EPRDF political strategists conceded did not reflect the range of views actually held by the electorate.

The Frontier Regions: 2, 5, 6, 12, and 13

Along with Addis Ababa, some of the most contested elections in May 1995 took place in Afar (Region 2), Somali (Region 5), Gambella (Region 6), Benishangul (Region 12), and Harar (Region 13). Because the liberation struggle was centred in the north, the EPRDF had less of a presence in these so-called 'frontier regions' which had been allocated only 57 of the 548 national seats and therefore never threatened power alignments in the centre. As a result, the EPRDF seemed content to let a more chaotic, less controlled political process take place in these areas. Furthermore, most of the competing parties supported the EPRDF's national programme. The local interest in the elections derived from a desire to win control over the regional

assemblies and administrations, with the resources and patronage that such a victory would bring.

Competitions in these frontier regions tended to be extremely complicated. In Afar, four parties based in large part on different personalities put forward more candidates than could fit on the ballot (including two brothers who, at one time, offered competing candidate lists for the Afar Liberation Front), creating a political and logistical problem that led to the postponement of the elections in that region. In Somali, the Ogadeni clan believed that EPRDF officials in alliance with the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League had gerrymandered the constituencies to the disadvantage of their clan and the Ogadeni National Liberation Front (ONLF). In an attempt to buy peace in the region the TGE allowed the ONLF to compete despite missing announced deadlines. In Gambella, the Anuak-led and EPRDF-affiliated Gambella Peoples Liberation Party effectively controlled the administrative machinery (including the supposedly neutral election board), and manipulated language requirements for candidates to prevent the Nuer-based Gambella Peoples Democratic Unity Party from competing. In Benishangul, two factions that once were united decided to compete for regional power as the Benishangul North-Western Peoples Party and the Benishangul Northern Peoples Party. The former controlled more polling stations than the latter, and won all the regional and national seats in Benishangul.

The chartered city of Harar, unlike other regions, had a two-chamber legislature, one reserved for Harari nationals and the other that represented the entire urban population, which is largely Oromo. Working out the details of these special arrangements led to the postponement of the 1995 elections in Region 13. The Harari National League (HNL) won all 14 seats in the Harari National Council, while the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organisation won 18 of 22 seats in the Peoples Representative Council, leaving the other four to the HNL.

2. *Patterns and Analysis*

It is inherently difficult to assess elections in which the major opposition parties do not participate. The counter-factual arguments that their candidates either could or could not have campaigned, if they had tried, will inevitably remain hotly debated, contentious, and ultimately unresolvable. The opposition can point to the treatment of some parties that tried to compete in the June 1992 regional elections to support claims that participation was dangerous. The fact that some

officials were arrested from registered parties which decided not to campaign (for example, the EDUP in Gondar and Bahr Dar, the Southern Coalition in Jinka) suggests that harassment and intimidation continued in 1995. The opposition's case was further strengthened when EPRDF officials arrested leaders of the Silte Peoples Democratic Unity Party, when opposition candidates were denied access to the countryside, and when those few, weak parties that did compete were similarly harassed.

By remaining out of the elections, however, the leaders of the opposition played a central part in the consolidation of the EPRDF's control, and it is difficult to see how they will find a way to engage the newly elected Federal Government constructively during the next five years. They pursued a strategy of demanding changes in an all-or-nothing package by arguing that to try to 'level the playing field by playing on it', as many embassies in Addis Ababa urged, would only legitimise the dominance of the EPRDF. The opposition, however, failed to propose realistic mechanisms to address many of its grievances, such as multi-party institutions to oversee compliance with neutral election rules.⁴⁶

Coinciding with the regional variations sketched above, one of the most striking characteristics of the elections was the extent to which the EPRDF demonstrated its coherence and strength as a single party across Ethiopia. By May 1995, the somewhat loose coalition of 1991 had been replaced by a well-led, well-financed, and well-institutionalised hierarchy that controlled nearly all aspects of the political process. Following the second EPRDF congress, held in January 1995, the party had a five-year plan of action that emphasised rural development and promised peace and democracy.⁴⁷ All EPRDF candidates, regardless of whether their affiliation was with the TPLF, OPDO, or any other constituent party, ran on this plan, adopted similar styles of campaigning, used common symbols, and appealed to voters on the same record of accomplishment and promises for continued progress. One important difference emerged, however, as each emphasised his/her credentials as the defender of the given ethnic group's interests.

⁴⁶ I have benefited from discussions on these points with Kevin Johnson and his colleagues at the National Democratic Institute in Addis Ababa from March to June 1995 and thereafter in Washington, DC.

⁴⁷ 'President Address EPRDF's 2d Congress', Radio Ethiopia in Amharic, 8 January 1995, translated in FBIS, 10 January 1995, p. 9, and 'EPRDF Adopts Program Ahead of Elections', Radio Ethiopia in Amharic, 10 January 1995, translated in FBIS, 17 January 1995, p. 5.

Even candidates not explicitly campaigning under this EPRDF banner rarely challenged the latter's domination of the political agenda. Parties such as the Ethiopian Somali Democratic League were regarded by voters as pro-government, and some, such as the Gambella Peoples Democratic Party, stated that they aspired to join the EPRDF after the elections. Others who accepted the ruling party's national programme, including many independents and some candidates from small organisations, including the Silte Peoples Democratic Unity Party, explained that they were standing for election because of differences with local EPRDF leaders on local or cultural matters. Only the urban-based ENDP and a handful of independents campaigned on policy issues that differed from the EPRDF.

In addition to dominating the political agenda by the force of its organisation, the ruling party had the enormous benefits of incumbency. The presence of its officials in urban *kebelles* and peasant associations – first created by Mengistu's régime as the local units of administration and control⁴⁸ – provided the EPRDF with a further and perhaps most significant advantage. Under the TGE, these institutions continued to serve as the local structures responsible for distributing vital services, and were used as the basis for building an effective party machine. *Kebele* leaders affiliated with the EPRDF should have been clearly distinct from non-partisan election officials, but in many places, voter registration and balloting took place in the *kebele* building and sometimes in the presence of EPRDF officials, making it difficult for voters to recognise the independent status of the election boards. Particularly in areas that lacked access to the media, most campaigning took place when candidates introduced themselves to meetings of voters called by *kebelles*, and the fact that some opposition speakers had difficulties in addressing these gatherings placed them at an enormous disadvantage.

EPRDF officials in the *kebelles* actively encouraged people to register, using loudspeakers in the community to remind and 'agitate' voters. Some of the inhabitants said they believed that there would be repercussions (such as difficulties in renting a government-owned house from the *kebele*, or losing their allotment of fertiliser distributed by the peasant association) if they ignored local officials, but most of these

⁴⁸ For a detailed analysis of *kebelles* and peasant associations during the Mengistu era, see Christopher Clapham, *Transformation and Continuity in Revolutionary Ethiopia* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 129–94. Also, Dessalegn Rahmato, 'The Unquiet Countryside: the collapse of "socialism" and rural agitation, 1990 and 1991', in Abede Zegeye and Siegfried Pausewang (eds.), *Ethiopia in Change: peasantry, nationalism and democracy* (London, 1994), pp. 248–54.

concerns were vague and by their nature difficult if not impossible to verify. In any event, given the importance of these local institutions to their daily life, many Ethiopians felt such pressures difficult to resist.

The effective use of ruling party activists to mobilise voters resulted in relatively high rates of registration and polling, particularly in rural areas. Most Ethiopians regarded the outcome as a foregone conclusion long before the day of the elections. Some said they voted out of a sense of civic duty, others because prudence counselled going along with what local officials recommended, but few seemed enthusiastic. An Oromo farmer in Kurmursa expressed a common attitude towards participation: 'I was afraid. The Government said I should vote so I voted. What could I do?'⁴⁹

Despite the lack of competition, the evidence of harassment and intimidation, and the general disinterest of most Ethiopians, the US Embassy in Addis Ababa released a favourable two-paragraph press statement: 'In our judgment, the [1995] elections were conducted in a manner that was, on the whole, free and fair... [They] represent an important milestone along Ethiopia's road to greater democracy.'⁵⁰ Similarly, the Organisation of African Unity concluded that 'the Federal and Regional Elections were on the whole conducted in a free and fair atmosphere'.⁵¹ No international non-governmental organisations observed the elections, leaving the US and others with an interest in maintaining good relations with the régime to make their evaluations unchallenged. The Donor Election Unit, established by Western embassies to co-ordinate their observations, produced an analytical assessment that was shared confidentially with the Ethiopian Government but not released.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The May 1995 elections represented the final act in a four-year process of political closure. The EPRDF skilfully employed a variety of mechanisms to control the transition, and to assure that it ended with the ruling party in firm command. Its political operations were backed up by a powerful militia which, as was seen in the clashes with the OLF after the June 1992 elections, was capable of overpowering any armed

⁴⁹ Quoted in Stephen Buckley, 'Ethiopia Takes New Ethnic Tack: deliberately divisive', in *The Washington Post*, 18 June 1995, p. A21.

⁵⁰ American Embassy, 'U.S. Applauds Elections as Key Step on Road to Democracy', Addis Ababa, Press Release, 22 June 1995.

⁵¹ Organisation of African Unity, 'Statement by the OAU Observer Group to Ethiopia's Federal and Regional Council Elections - May 7, 1995', Addis Ababa, 12 May 1995.

challenge. The EPRDF political operatives who controlled the critical *kebelles* and peasant associations provided the party with a network of officials that could both penetrate and mobilise the countryside. By organising politics on the basis of ethnically defined regions and creating ethnic affiliates, the EPRDF moulded competition in a way that reinforced its dominance. Elections served to marginalise or delegitimize opponents who refused to participate. The results were new national and regional assemblies completely controlled by the EPRDF, except for the small frontier regions. With a constitutional order based on an intentionally weak central government and nascent regional administrations, the EPRDF emerged as the only national institution of any strength, rising far above any potential rival. The leader of the ENDP, Nebiyou Samuel, one of the few opposition politicians who offered voters an alternative, predicted that 'There will be one, all-knowing, omnipotent party running the country for the next five years.'⁵²

The decision of so many parties not to participate in the elections played a critical part in creating this precarious result. Opposition leaders argued that the behaviour of the EPRDF, dating back at least to the June 1992 elections, and including the arrests of officials from several of the parties, prevented their participation. They believed that to campaign would have placed their candidates and supporters in danger, and done nothing but help legitimise the EPRDF. Whether these fears were justified or not, the result of their 'boycott' was to allow the ruling party to control Ethiopian politics unopposed.

The EPRDF managed to exit the transition with the major opposition parties in disarray, with little prospect that they could mount a serious challenge to the elected Government. Such dominance, however, did not result from a popular mandate or the authority that voters can provide when they have confidence in an electoral system and the ability to select their leaders meaningfully. The gap between democratic forms and international statements of support on the one hand, and lack of choice and political freedoms on the other, resulted in increased cynicism and public disengagement from the process. The population had acquiesced to but not necessarily accepted the new régime. The Ethiopian transition began with a broadly inclusive national conference and ended, four years and three elections later, with a single-party-dominant political system.

⁵² Cited by Reuters, 'Ruling Coalition Wins Ethiopia Vote', in *The New York Times*, 9 May 1995, p. A6.