

Politics of transition in Ethiopia

Confronting stubborn poverty

Ethiopia is a country with a history of violent conflict and widespread poverty. **Mizanekristos Yohannes** takes a look at the political transition that took place in the country and how economic policies are making attempts to improve livelihoods for workers and the rural poor

The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) seized power in May 1991 as a coalition of ethnic parties that led an insurgency war against the military regime of the Dergue (Amharic for committee) for 17 years. This front is one of the offshoots of the radical groups that emerged out of the university students' movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It toppled the long reign of Haile Selassie under a slogan of 'land to the tiller' while taking ideological inspiration from Marxist-Leninist thinking and left-leaning liberation movements of Africa and Southeast Asia.

During the liberation period (1960s to 1980s) violence was seen as a necessary means to bring about a just and equitable state. So it was widely accepted among all the parties who contested one another. It was justified on the merits of the type of violence or the targets of violence. This reached its peak when the Dergue declared its reign of 'Red Terror'.

These violence-ridden transitions are quite in keeping with the tradition of pre-colonial rivalry among kings, dukes and warlords. However, they later evolved into

empire-building and conquest, serving the victors as a double-edged sword against foreign colonisers and local contenders to the throne.

STRANGERS TO DEMOCRACY

Except for a brief spell after the relatively peaceful fall of Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian people have never experienced liberal democracy as we know it today. Moreover, democracy and human rights as it is to be applied in the Ethiopian context has not really had a lot of players, as all debates remained among Marxists, ethnic nationalists or other interests who largely preached to their own choirs, while demonising, or seeking to defeat their rivals.

Hence, leftist advocates who stood for the democratic and human rights of oppressed workers and peasants saw nothing wrong in advocating for the 'dictatorship' of the proletariat. By this they would claim a mandate to do violence to anyone who differed from them by labelling them oppressors or agents of the enemy class.

In the end, at least until the downfall of the Dergue, Ethiopia had become - leftist and

nationalists alike - at best a nation bent on ethnic divisions, and at worst, committed to wiping out the opposition. It is hard to find any party at that time that sought to inspire trust or dialogue among all contestants, nor a neutral outsider - amid the Cold War - that could or would mediate.

EPRDF ran on a peace and democracy platform once it seized Addis Ababa as a victor, which it largely achieved through inclusion of warring ethnic nationalist and separatist parties into the transitional government that ratified a new constitution. Its invitation to join the transitional council was open to all interested parties including individuals.

The transitional government was successful in demobilising and disarming the Dergue's army of 600 000 as well as a large contingent of its own guerilla army that had reached almost 150 000 by the time it rose to power. By integrating the best of both, it successfully created a leaner professional army.

FEDERAL CONSTITUTION

The EPRDF promoted a democracy that emphasised group-rights to



Farmer winnowing grain in Bochessa, Ethiopia.

self-determination where members of each ethnic or linguistic group could choose their leaders and make them accountable. The transitional period, which lasted four years, was one of peace and democratic freedoms, during which the new constitution was drafted and ratified.

The constitution is considered compliant of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with greater adherence to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights. The constitution introduced a decentralised federal structure that goes beyond focusing only on administration, but adopts the 'Peoples Rights' aspect of the African Charter whereby it recognises historically evolved national groups by their language, cultural identities and traditional territorial claims.

The new constitution, in Article 39, sought to democratise the process by which 'peoples' become part of a voluntary federal unity from which they could, through a local referendum, vote to break away from the federation, or equally, to choose to join another ethnic sub-entity. The constitution also allows communities to form a new

district (*woreda*) on economic grounds, a constitutional license which has raised the number from 547 in 1992 to some 714 *woredas* today.

One of the major secessionist movements, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), was the chief campaigner and negotiator of this provision of the constitution, which enabled it to also define a sizable territory (Oromiya Regional State) combining a number of previous 'provinces' as the claim of its constituency of 'peoples' who spoke the same language. One of the most diverse regions formed the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, to bring together a number of ethno-linguistic groups who saw their small individual sizes as politically weak.

Efforts on the part of the opposition at home and in the diaspora and some sections of the media were directed mainly at questioning the patriotism of EPRDF on the grounds that it was not dedicated to the territorial integrity and unity of Ethiopia. Their Ethiopia was inclusive of Eritrea whose secession, they claimed, severed the former from its gateway to the seas.

The oft-cited evidence was that the EPRDF was led by the Tigray Peoples Liberation Front, an ethnic party, which facilitated the peaceful secession of Eritrea and promulgation of ethnic federalism, particularly Article 39, which allowed any federal unit to secede through popular referendum. These were seen as deliberate attempts to break up Ethiopia along ethnic lines by way of enabling Tigray and Eritrea to dominate the political economy of the Horn of Africa.

This was also a period of boycott and self-exclusion by opposition parties, which allowed EPRDF to further expand and consolidate its hold on all levels of government and most parts of the country with little challenge. By contrast, lack of results in the midst of high expectations of removing the EPRDF by followers of the opposition led to its weakening.

A growing tension between the EPRDF and the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front – former allies – that had remained hidden by virtue of their mutual military interest in defeating the Dergue, suddenly erupted in May 1998 into a bitter war that saw the patriotic realignment of the opposition with

the EPRDF. This new-found solidarity was also a major determinant in convincing the opposition to operate within the constitutional electoral system immediately after the war which Ethiopia won.

However, the 2000 election left the balance of powers in parliament highly skewed in favour of the EPRDF and its allies who won more than 90% of the 547 seats. They also won elections in 2005.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

In relating to donors, who had also supported the military demobilisation, EPRDF had taken the moral upper-hand by equating good governance with food security. This meant government responsibility for emergency preparedness and famine prevention. It dismantled the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, which was the focal point of the previous regime and the non-governmental organisation (NGO) dominated emergency food relief operations. Instead the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Agency that drew intelligence from the Famine Early Warning Systems (FEWS) was set up.

This move led to a clash with the NGO community that saw the government as taking over its work. Vulnerable as it was to dependency, this was also the moment that the government showed its muscle to resist donor pressure – official and NGO alike. Official donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), European Commission (EC) and the World Food Programme (WFP) seemed to like the new arrangement, while some relief giants such as the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and World Vision also adjusted with little problem.

This period also coincided with international campaigns to reform aid, particularly to *drop the debt* to focus on poverty, to promote participatory policies, and to enable community-driven social

development. However, this was also a period when the geopolitics of aid had nearly abandoned Africa and the UN System in favour of American/EU interests to consolidate reforms in Eastern Europe and recovery of the debt crises in Latin America.

In Africa, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa was also drawing the lion's share of aid resources and international attention, while Egypt continued to enjoy high windfalls of Camp David, leaving little for the rest of sub-Saharan Africa.

This is the context that enabled insurgent victors in Ethiopia, Uganda, Eritrea and Rwanda, who had changed regimes at that time, to manage change with little interference or support from donors, except for the praise that they heaped on them for their 'independent vision'. This was, in a way, the post-Cold War blessing – African leaders changing African political life without Western intervention or blame.

AID POLITICS

Aid, throughout the last 19 years, had found one or another excuse to keep flows at a minimum. Structural Adjustment of the World Bank and IMF was the first, having worked successfully since 1992, to transform the state-driven economy to a market-driven economy. This adjustment, however, was not quite as prescribed, the government having insisted on moderating the market fundamentalism of donors by holding on to banks and other important public enterprises, especially the profitable ones, while also opening up numerous sectors to the domestic private sector.

The war with Eritrea, according to Robert Wade, provided the second excuse to penalise Ethiopia, by further reducing aid below what was needed and what was deserved. The 2005 post-election crisis also saw the withdrawal of multilateral development banks (MDBs).

These measures of penalising the government had more effects on the poor, through reduced development aid, while helping to strengthen the government's decentralisation effort. When donors withdrew the MDBs, the government also cut off talks with the World Bank for two years. It started disbursing most donors' financing as block grants directly to the *Woredas*.

Hence, the government was able to breakup donor interventions, (for example USAID relegated to only US President's Emergency Plans for AIDS relief (PEPFAR) funded health projects and food aid), while the rest were confined to the 'Protecting Basic Services' (PBS), Productive Safety Net Project (PSNP) and Public Service Capacity Building (PSCAP). So-called programme aid was thus removed from the donor agenda.

FOUNDATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

In this sense, the period from 2001 to 2005 is also a time when most of the large-scale infrastructure projects started, while also seeing a highly accelerated programme to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) under the 'Plan for Accelerated and Sustained Development to End Poverty' (PASDEP). Furthermore, with the withdrawal of the opposition from parliament and municipal positions, the ruling party has been able to take full credit for the performance of these programmes with minimal challenge from those against policy alternatives. Hence, the government performed well despite campaigns by the opposition and aid sanctions administered by the pan-European donor community.

After the 2010 elections won by the ruling party, this is going to be the first period in which EPRDF will be ruling in a context where most of the developmental projects which it has led and invested heavily – roads, energy, telecom,

education and health infrastructure – will have been completed and providing their intended benefits throughout the country.

These massive works/ infrastructure projects have been under construction throughout the last decade. These have also been the great voids in Ethiopia's economy, holding back all other sectors – agriculture, manufacturing, services and social development – kept at terribly low levels during all previous regimes of the modern era while the population grew.

While its achievements in this regard – infrastructure, services and decentralised capacity – are commendable, in the current term, the EPRDF regime will be left with few excuses to explain the poverty rate, while its development partners will be saddled with even more responsibility to scale up the volume and quality of aid to eradicate poverty.

The elites must be kept in check so as to promote equitable growth by channeling investments toward the vast peasant and pastoralist population that is still trapped in poverty. Inequality trends in the urban economy also require innovative strategies that promote employment, decent income and better living standards for the large population of the working poor. These appear as economic challenges, but should also be seen as political and governance challenges.

With poverty and misery widespread and deep in too many places, participation and all other ideas of good governance would be meaningless if they are not somehow linked to noticeable improvements in living standards. Limitations of welfare and social development programmes in lifting living standards have to be better understood.

While receiving excellent health and education services, households can remain very poor, therefore lessening the impact of social



Farmers at a meeting.

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services. Living standards should be measured in terms of quality of housing, nutrition status, and access to some basic assets that are important to quality of life.

Living standards are functions of employment, incomes and accumulated assets, including savings and access to credit. In this sense, the creation of jobs or self-employment opportunities, setting of income levels that enable decent living standards and helping households build their assets is a different ball-game to supplying basic services.

GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION

In August 2010, the government released its next five-year plan under the title of Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP). This is an ambitious plan characterised by huge numbers in infrastructure expansion including a five-fold increase in hydropower generation, road network connecting all 714 *woredas* and a 3 000km electric rail network linking the country's major urban centers and its neighbouring countries, South Sudan in particular.

In GTP, industrialisation takes a larger bite of the GDP than agriculture. However, the document needs further analysis to address continued trends of inequality. The effects of accommodating large-scale foreign investment and land grab for

plantations must be investigated as they go against boosting productivity among the majority of smallholder peasants.

Urban development strategies in the GTP, particularly housing and construction, also seem to be promoting concentration of prime land, infrastructure and financing among few wealthy developers – too many high-rises and gated tract mansions – while more distributive low-rise options are avoided. Urban renewal by pulling down vast slum neighbourhoods is following a zero-sum game with most poor and unemployed facing evictions.

The potential of domestic trade to drive growth with distribution is undercut by overemphasis on exports. Remittances as best sources of hard currency earnings are not given adequate thought. Although Ethiopia has a strong tradition of parastatal management, state involvement in new sectors such as mining and metals are sacrificed in favour of foreign and private-sector investment. ¹⁸

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