

ADDIS DIGEST

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Editorial

FREE AND FAIR OR FREE OF VIOLENCE ?

The idea of non-partisan election observers is a recent phenomenon which developed mainly in connection with the democratisation drive in Africa and the rest of the third world as well as Eastern Europe. It is clearly and intimately linked to pluralism and multi-party elections and presupposes the presence of different political parties competing to offer an actual choice to the electorate.

Non-partisan election observers are not deployed to verify whether a choice is offered to the electorate or not, but to ensure that among the different alternatives offered, the people are able to express their will through an electoral process that is free, fair and genuine.

They are there to verify the genuineness of the election outcome, to decrease the likelihood of intimidation and fraud, to instill confidence in the electorate and thereby to increase not only the electorate's willingness to participate in the process but also the people's ability to freely express their political will in the ballot booth without fear of reprisal.

If there is no choice, there is practically nothing to observe. The difficulty - or the absurdity - of «observing» an «electoral process» which offers no choice to the electorate is that one cannot even conclude they were «unfair» and the results not genuine. In a contest where only one organisation is competing, it is hard to see how and why this organisation can be unfair to itself.

It is this realisation of the futility of deploying «non-partisan observers» in a non-pluralist electoral process that convinced many would-be observers to refrain from making the trip to Ethiopia and engaging in what, at best, would have been a dubious exercise.

Although many Ethiopians interpreted the decision of the donor community to deploy «non-partisan» election observers as yet another manifestation of incomprehensible partisanship, they were anxious to read what the «donor diplomats» would produce after their «observation» and especially to see if these non-

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partisan observers would give a clear answer to the basic question that any observer mission is expected to address: Were these elections free, fair and genuine?

The Americans replied with a clear «yes». The elections were «on the whole free and fair». To add a touch of «neutrality» they «admitted» some irregularities which, however, were «not of a pattern and of a magnitude to have affected the outcome of the elections». This standard phrase, used by many election observer missions in the Third World, can only apply to an electoral process which is generally free and fair, and not to Ethiopia where the whole process was «irregular» and where, in any case, no irregularities, however serious, systematic and massive, could have «affected the outcome of the elections».

The Final Analytical Report of the Donor Elections Unit (DEU) was much less categorical but no less disappointing. It is hard to understand why it took these donor diplomats 78 observers and more than two months of «observation» to discover that there was not much to be observed in the May 1995 elections and to conclude that elections are «after all about choice and the choices offered to the people of Ethiopia were limited».

We are sure that most foreign friends of our people who receive this «final report» will read between the lines and conclude that despite the donor diplomats' reluctance to call a spade a spade, no free, fair and genuine elections have taken place in Ethiopia. They may also find it understandable that an observer team composed of «50 embassy officials» and «28 other observers sent from outside Ethiopia by European governments» and from which observer candidates were rejected by EPRDF «due to their NGO backgrounds» may be using mild diplomatic language when it refers to «limited choices» whereas actually there was no choice at all. But the feeling among Ethiopia's democratic and peaceful opposition forces is one of bitterness.

In the first place, the case for a straightforward pronouncement to the effect that the May elections were NOT free, fair and genuine and against diplomatic duplicity was there in the final report itself. When the observer mission started its work in

March 1995, there was some hope that some of the major opposition organisations would participate in the elections. In April such hopes were dashed away and it was crystal clear that the May elections were to be a strictly one-party affair. Although it regretted the boycott by all the major opposition groups which it said «could have the potential to offer a significant alternative choice» the mission was maintained. Hope of saving the «pluralist» facade - the only possible rationale for the observer mission's continued existence - rested entirely in the participation of individual candidates and what the government press calls «loyal opposition» organisations. But in the course of their «observation» the embassy officials «discovered» that most of the so-called independent candidates were either «encouraged and assisted by EPRDF in order to make the elections "more democratic" or «supported the EPRDF programme» or were simply «party members». As for the loyal opposition organisations «which offered an element of electoral competition» not only were they perceived by the people as being no different from EPRDF, but their candidates were harassed and intimidated and thus in no position to offer even this «element of competition». The discovery that the so-called independent candidates were not that «independent» after all and that the loyal opposition groups were in no position to offer even an «element of electoral competition» would have been enough for these embassy officials to conclude that the situation was worse than they had imagined when the mission was launched and to state clearly what transpires from their final report: No pluralist elections had taken place in Ethiopia.

In the second place, the use of «diplomatic language» would have been understandable if embassy officials in Ethiopia, some of whom have not as yet «cleansed themselves from the plantation owner mentality of their forefathers» (as an independent paper put it) refrained from arrogance and double standards in their dealings with Ethiopian affairs. The general pattern of western diplomats' attitudes in dealing with Ethiopia is now becoming clear for everyone to see: arrogant and undiplomatic in dealing with the opposition; polite, diplomatic and «measured» in their treatment of EPRDF. A perfect example of this is the unwarranted and partisan intervention «deep into Ethiopia's internal affairs» made in December last year when 18 western diplomats issued a statement «congratulating» the TGE for the new constitution that was just approved quasi-unanimously by the

Constituent Assembly. At that time, they did not stop at labeling as «democratic» a Constitution which a recent and devastating analysis by COEDF exposed as «a text book case of a Stalinist constitution». Their statement almost «summoned» the opposition organisations to participate in the coming May elections and, as if to add insult to injury, they promised money handouts to those parties and organisations accepting to field candidates for the May elections.

Third, this urge to accommodate EPRDF is all the more unacceptable to Ethiopians as these diplomats so often go beyond «the call of duty» to find some «positive elements» in the emerging totalitarian rule in the country. These officials know that opposition groups are not allowed to operate outside Addis Abeba. That they are not able to open offices in major towns let alone in rural areas; By their own admission, the rural areas «where 85% of the Ethiopians live are solidly under the control of the EPRDF». Anybody, however novice in politics, would have seen some link between this «control» and the impossibility for opposition organisations (which by the way are said to have the «potential to offer a significant alternative to the EPRDF in the major regions of the country) to operate in the regions. Not our diplomats. Incredible as this might seem, they attribute this «solid control» to «EPRDF's ability to mobilise the countryside». There is no doubt that if these same diplomats were «analysing» this phenomenon of «solid control of peasants» under Mengistu, they would have denounced the situation as a clear case of «indoctrination», «ideological captivity», «totalitarian rule», etc.

So after having «observed» the electoral process for more than two months, the embassy officials failed to answer the one and only question that any non-partisan election observer team is expected to answer: were the observed elections free, fair and genuine? Instead, they tell us that these elections were «free

from violence». Apparently forgetting that, in general, uncontested elections organised under authoritarian regimes rarely lead to violence simply because they are of no significance. As we noted in our last issue of ADDIS DIGEST, Ethiopia's historical experience shows that elections have always been considered as marginal instruments of power by the rulers and irrelevant and futile exercises by the ruled. That is why they were conducted peacefully under Emperor Haile Selassie and the Derg, and are free from violence now.

If Westerners are serious about peace and democratisation in Ethiopia, they must first realise that if the May elections were «free from violence», the country's political crisis is not yet over. If anything, these «non-violent elections» and the blessings EPRDF got from the west - would only lead to more frustration and ultimately to more violence as has happened so often in Ethiopia.

In the letter addressed to foreign minister Seyoum Mesfin, the seven western diplomats who sponsored the DEU mission have «warned» that: «A serious interest in human rights and democracy will continue to be an important aspect of our governments' relations with Ethiopia». We cannot but endorse such pronouncements. But we are sceptical. This is not only the result of past experience. A few days after, these diplomats expressed their «serious interest» in human rights, EPRDF showed, once again that it was not taking them seriously: According to the last report from the embattled Ethiopian Free Press Journalists Association (EFJA), the campaign to silence the free press has taken a dramatic turn in «post election» Ethiopia. During the month of June, no fewer than ten journalists including the editor in chief of the popular weekly TOBIA have been thrown into jail and nine others have gone into hiding to avoid arrest. The seven diplomats have not as yet reacted to this latest violation of fundamental rights in the country.

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