

THIS MONTH'S FOCUS: THE MAY ELECTIONS

1. BACKGROUND

The Constitution of the Democratic Federal Republic of Ethiopia on the basis of which the May 7th elections will be organized, was approved by a Constituent Assembly elected in June 1994. Despite appeals from Western governments and the donor community, all opposition groups boycotted the June elections alleging that conditions prevailing in the country were not conducive to free and fair elections.

The result was a "landslide victory" with the ruling EPRDF securing 484 of the 547 seats in the Constituent Assembly. The remaining 65 seats went to "independent" individuals. However, almost all of these later approved the constitution and seemed to have rallied to EPHDF's position. The Constitution was approved almost unanimously with 7 abstentions and 3 votes against.

All opposition groups rejected both the constitutional process and the content of the constitution which they argued was a recipe for one party totalitarian rule and a danger to the peace process in Ethiopia.

This apparently was a view not shared by the international community. On 14 December 1994, 18 embassies representing their respective countries and the donor community issued a statement in Addis Abeba endorsing the document which they labelled as "democratic". Such "partisan interference" which in the words of CAFPDE was a "strange and unwarranted statement" was condemned by all the country's opposition groups and the independent press.

In February 1995, attempts were made by the donor community - specially the British and American governments - to bring the TGE and the major opposition groups to the negotiating table. The aim was to facilitate participation of the latter in the coming elections. These attempts "aimed at adding credibility to the electoral process" did not succeed. The opposition remained adamant in its rejection of the constitution and about its demands for implementation of "widely accepted international standards for free and fair elections" as a prerequisite to its participation in these elections. The government failed to respond to these demands and even to accept the release of political prisoners and to postpone the elections for one or two months.

2. THE PURPOSE OF THESE ELECTIONS

The elections are for the 556-seat Council of Peoples' representatives (the Federal legislature) and the 9 regional or KILIL Assemblies.

The Council of Peoples' Representatives is no ordinary legislature. According to Article 50(3) of the Constitution, this body is the "supreme organ of State authority". It is an all powerful organ: it appoints and dismisses the members of the constitutional court which is neither independent nor has the jurisdiction of final instance in interpreting, protecting and enforcing the Constitution. The Council names and dismisses judges at the federal level, can dismiss the cabinet by a vote of no-confidence while the Executive cannot dissolve this supreme organ without its own approval!

3. WHO PARTICIPATES ?

According to the National Electoral Board (NEB) 49 political parties are contesting the May 7 elections and these organizations have so far fielded 934 candidates for the 556-seat Federal legislature. There are three types of candidates:

EPDRF and satellite organizations: Out of the 49 organizations running for the election 39 are either member or satellite organizations created by EPRDF in various regions. Candidates of these organizations will be present in all constituencies. At least 150 of these will be contested by EPRDF or satellite organizations alone. It is expected that in about 400 constituencies candidates other than EPRDF members will vie for election.

The "LOYAL OPPOSITION": There are about 250 other party-sponsored candidates who are members of what the daily ADDIS ZEMEN calls the "loyal opposition" parties. One such group is the Ethiopian National Democratic Party (ENDP), a coalition of four ethnic and one non-ethnic parties with seats in the outgoing Council of Representatives. Among its leaders are Council Vice-President Dr. Fekadu Gedamu, Council Secretary Tesfaye Habisson and Mr. Kifle Wodajo who was president of the Constitution drafting Commission.

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