

**THIS MONTH'S FOCUS - POLITICS**  
**The May 7 elections : Transition ends - problems remain.**

Elections for the Federal and regional legislatures took place in all the regions with the exception of regions 2 (Afar), 5 (Somali) and 13 (Harar). The elections which were earlier scheduled to take place on 27 May have now been postponed «indefinitely» according to the National Electoral Board in a statement issued on 25 May. Although the NEB advanced vague «technical» reasons for these postponements in the two regions, observers say that security problems and the desire of the government to consolidate its newly reorganized Ogaden National Liberation Front are the main factors which led to the postponement.

According to the NEB, 15.6 million Ethiopians out of a population of 55 million and an estimated 25 million eligible voters registered to vote. The turn-out figures given at nearly 100% on Ethiopia radio and Television were questioned by many foreigners who are said to have «hailed the poll which took place calmly, good naturedly and without incident» according to AFP quoting a western diplomat in Addis Abeba.

The least one can say is that these elections had produced no surprises. Although all the results are not officially announced, it is now clear that EPRDF and satellite organizations have won «landslide victories» as was expected by everyone. All available figures show that both the Federal and the regional Councils will be totally dominated by EPRDF member organizations or satellite groups.

Candidates fielded by EPRDF have 21 of the 23 seats reserved for the capital at the Council of Peoples representatives while the 92-seat Regional Council of the Addis Abeba zone will be controlled entirely by the Front which secured all the seats contested by 209 candidates from nine political parties and 71 independents.

In his native region of Tigray, President Meles got 27,772 votes in his Adwa constituency with only 133 votes going to his rival, a certain Fisseha Afeworki, school teacher by profession. Prime Minister Tamerat Layne fared no worse in his constituency of Gondar region where we won 37,431 votes out of 37,674 votes cast.

**The fate of the «loyal opposition»:** According to a statement by electoral officials (May 11) it was said that «The ruling coalition has routed opposition parties in the country's first multi-party elections». Mr. Meshesha Biru, leader of the main «loyal opposition» organization, the Ethiopian National Democratic Party (ENDU) and all 84 candidates it presented lost the contest. Some of the candidates, who

were prominent figures of the transitional government - but not members of EPRDF - who lost the elections are Mr. Fekade Gedam, Vice-President of the outgoing Council of Representatives, Tesfaye Habisso, the Council's General Secretary and Members Nebiyu Samuel and Haile Wolde Michael. Loyal opposition leaders remained however loyal to the end. One leader told Radio Ethiopia reporter that he admired the fairness of the elections and the massive participation of the people. Although most rank and file candidates claimed they lost the contest because of irregularities and unfair practices of election officials, the leadership was not moved by such «allegations». Mr. Meshesha tried to calm his troops by attributing the debacle of his party to «irregularities» but he was quick to add that «such irregularities were to be expected in third world countries».

**Independent candidates:** They seem to have fared better than loyal opposition organizations as many individuals with considerable following in their constituencies were impossible to beat even with massive irregularities. The most prominent among these independent candidates are Major Admassie Zeleke (70 years old) and Mr. Zenebe Alemayehu who took 2 out of the 23 seats reserved for the Addis Abeba region in the Council of Peoples representatives. The 70-year old Major Admassie, a prominent critic of the government who swept to victory in his Addis Abeba constituency told reporters who rushed to his house after the results were announced that the coming battle in the Council of Peoples Representatives will be «like the one between David and Goliath».

#### Reactions and comments:

**Western governments:** No official reaction to the elections have been announced by most western governments. Although many diplomats had blamed the opposition for boycotting the contest, the general feeling in Addis Abeba is that westerners are embarrassed by the whole process which they could not label as «Free and fair» by any stretch of imagination without alienating the Ethiopian people. All governments have therefore kept a low profile. Just after the elections the US ambassador was reported to have said that he was «still studying the process». But no official declaration has yet come from other US officials. One notable exception to this «wait and see» attitude was the Dutch ambassador to Ethiopia who literally rushed to give unqualified support to EPRDF and who was quoted by Radio Ethiopia (8 May) as saying that the elections had been fair and free and «comparable to the election process in Holland».

**The OAU:** The OAU which had deployed an 81-member election observer group said on 12 May it was satisfied with the overall conduct of the elections and that its observer group «noted efforts made by the National Electoral Board to ensure the transparency of the process». Although OAU observers noted certain isolated irregularities, it was of the view that «these did not add up to an organized pattern for interfering or impeding electors from the right to vote freely».

Although the state-run radio quoted the OAU statement that the May 7 elections were conducted in a free and fair atmosphere, the statement itself made no mention of whether the polls were free and fair. However, even this vague statement by the OAU was too much to take by African diplomats in Addis Abeba who accuse OAU officials of «meddling in Ethiopia's complex internal problems and labeled the OAU official attitude a «manifestation of immaturity» (see below).

#### Western diplomats in Addis Abeba:

**- A daring gamble:** «In a country of 55 million, with more than 80 ethnic groups and a history of civil war, dictatorship and famine, the May 7 election is a bold experiment that will put into effect federal system that grants regional and ethnic groups the right to secede if they choose. This is a daring gamble in a continent ruled by strong central governments and increasingly torn apart by ethnic conflicts». (Western diplomat, New York Times, May 7, 1995).

**- Authoritarian regime needed:** «It is a question of real politik. We do not think Meles is an ideal democrat, but Ethiopia still needs an authoritarian regime without which it would be threatened by disintegration». (Western diplomat AFP, May 9, 1995).

**- Blaming the opposition:** «This is hardly a contest, which is a great disappointment to us who worked hard for there to be one. The EPRDF has the resources, the organization and the motivation. The opposition shot itself in the foot by boycotting the elections, but it is largely too divided and disorganized to take on the EPRDF, which has the very real advantage of already being in power». (Western diplomat, Reuters, 10 May, 1995).

**- A frightening experiment:** «Ethiopia has recognized ethnicity for what it is - a very powerful issue. They are sitting on an ethnic time bomb. They have come out with a possible solution, which is to tackle it preemptively. It is a frightening experiment. Will it work? I don't think anybody knows». (Western diplomat, New York Times, May 7, 1995).

#### African diplomats in Addis Abeba:

The independent Addis Abeba weekly, TOBIA (16 May) collected the opinion of African diplomats in Addis and came out with a document entitled «African diplomats do not meddle in Ethiopian politics». All the interviewed without exception seem anxious and bitter, condemn official OAU pronouncements and speak of a «time bomb that can affect the entire African continent». Here are some of the statements by the anonymous African diplomats as reported by TOBIA:

**- A galloping fire:** «The ethnic politics played up by the EPRDF signifies the possibility of another volcanic eruption. The Ethiopian government policy of ethnic hatred should be regarded as a galloping wildfire that can easily spread far and wide beyond the Ethiopian confines and affect all other African countries. We therefore chose to advise our governments to be cautious and keep posted to examine and study the situation.»

**- Dangerous policies:** «The government is openly soliciting African diplomats and representatives of international NGOs for public support. It would be on our part a reflection of immaturity and irresponsibility to give any support to these dangerous policies.»

**- The enemies of Africa:** «The Constitution is an invitation to revolt. In Africa, we have been witnessing instability of national constitutions. Each incoming usurper of political power throws away the incumbent constitution and imposes a new one of its own, and the process is continuing to date. The new Constitution of Ethiopia is just awaiting this tragic fate. I feel disappointed by the currently concluded elections, basically because it calls for undesirable, unlawful actions of reversal. The more other political forces are alienated, the greater the chances of eroding peace. Crisis follows! This is exactly what is happening in Ethiopia at present. The enemies of Africa dream for such occurrences.»

**- Bewildering system:** «By establishing a communist regime in Africa and by insisting on being the epicenter of socialism, the Derg regime had presented a great problem for the continent of Africa. Today, we have a system that is not less bewildering than that of the Derg. It seems to me that the incumbent regime of Ethiopia is pursuing a policy that deliberately adds fuel to the already smouldering inferno of African tribal politics. The fellows at the helm need to be advised.»

#### What Next?

The protagonists of the Ethiopian crisis are on mutually exclusive platforms and are forecasting diametrically

opposite possibilities for the coming months and years.

**The government's view:** The main actors of EPRDF's officialdom and media under government control are trying to draw a bright picture under democratic rule by the Front in total control. This was the tone of the May 28 pronouncements of President Meles at a carefully staged press conference to which no free press journalists were invited. Meles stressed the view that he was not concerned by election results saying he was sure that EPRDF would win.

participating of opposition forces and claimed that the May elections were multi-party elections. «They were not contested by the EPRDF alone. There were independent candidates and they were strong contenders and in some cases they even won. There were also political parties who contested these elections, and some were successful. Therefore, we cannot say there was no opposition at all.» The main issue according to Mr. Meles was «The introduction and implementation of a system where the people can decide who is to rule the country. This is a new phenomenon in the history of

Ethiopia and it is a big change. Thousands of combatants have sacrificed their lives to this noble cause.»

**The opposition:** All the main opposition groups condemned in no uncertain terms this «latest electoral show-off which was an election for the EPRDF, by the EPRDF and of the EPRDF» (Medhin) and amounted to an «open invitation to civil strife» as COEDF put it. In a statement to TOBIA, Dr. Beyene Petros, Chairman of the Council of Alternative forces of Peace

and Democracy in Ethiopia (CAFPDE) dismissed these elections as «fake and empty» and a futile dream by EPRDF to «Legitimize the monopolization of political power under a single minority group. Such political manipulations are in keeping with the tradition of tyrannical rulers in Ethiopia, who are adept in the art of fabricating new names for



(URJI - Addis Abeba - 16.05.95)

According to the President if «It was only EPRDF who contested the election» those to blame were in the opposition. «We tried our level best to ensure that the opposition forces would take part in these elections .. You can take a horse to water, but I do not think you can force it to drink.» A little later, he forgot what he pronounced concerning non-

the same old dictatorial governance. The problems propelling Ethiopia to the brink of yet another holocaust still remain unresolved. Contradictions and confrontations between the people and EPRDF shall continue to be there.»

### COMMENTS BY GOVERNMENT AND INDEPENDENT PRESS

**The government press:** As should be expected government media endeavoured to convince the people that genuine multi-party elections have in fact taken place. Pronouncements like the one made by the Dutch ambassador comparing the elections with the ones conducted in the Netherlands were given wide coverage leading to some speculation among Ethiopians - who for the most part never heard of the Kingdom of the Netherlands - that this European country was languishing under a one-party dictatorship. All government papers, especially ADDIS ZEMEN and ETHIOPIAN HERALD - were full of front page, bold banner headlines like «Massive turn-out marks first multi-party elections»; «Election results pouring in: EPRDF candidates victorious in all Constituencies»; «The ruling coalition has routed opposition parties in the country's first multi-party elections». «Assumption of power by the first democratically elected government in the history of the country». etc. One typical assessment of the election appeared in the Ethiopian Herald (May 9) which in an editorial comment entitled «Beginning of an era!» wrote «The date May 7 will surely go down in history as a landmark. It marks the end of the transition period, but also represents a milestone in the long history of Ethiopia. It marks a milestone because it heralds the end of the previous chapter of national history.»

#### The independent and opposition press:

As should be expected, the independent and opposition press, both at home and abroad, viewed the elections as a vacuous drama, stage-managed and acted by the EPRDF, as an event marking the legitimization of one-party, totalitarian rule, thus bringing the country «back to square one» as one paper put it and «opening the path to death and a wide gate to hell» as was said by another.

**MEBREQ** (Addis Abeba, May 11): **A wide gate to hell:** «May 7 is the day that opens a pathway to death and a wide gate to hell, especially for those groups, individuals and political parties that carry

the banner of unity, equality, brotherhood, territorial integrity and popular sovereignty.»

**TOMAR** (Addis Abeba, May 12): **Change of seal:** «The election results denote no new alternative, but changes only in the engravings of the state seal. It would in the future read the FDRE instead of the PDRE» (ie The people's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia under Mengistu).

**ANDINET** (Addis Abeba, May 13): **Sinister forces:** «A large retinue of EPRDF paid agents, the state media and other sinister forces have been lending their support to the incumbent regime so that it would stay in its tyrannical throne for more years of worse repression. Those who brag about their victory in the so-called elections are not going to deliver us from our age-old problems but are certainly plotting to put our hands in chains and to bring death to our doors.»

**TOBIA** (Addis Abeba, 14 May): **Fake by all standards:** «Why do these foreign elements exhaust their energy to give credibility to an event that never existed or by all standards was a fake? Voice of America was saying enthusiastically «EPRDF is certain to win!». The BBC was adding «EPRDF is almost likely to win!». Since there were no competitive elections, there could not be victory for a candidate running against itself.»

**ETHIOPIAN TRIBUNE** (Biweekly, Los Angeles, USA): **Plantation owner mentality:** The dreams of all peace loving individuals may not be realized soon. This is partly due to the prevailing post cold-war geo-political realities outside the control of the opposition and the Ethiopian people ... The master-slave relationships in the eco-nomic and political spheres between the developed nations and countries like Ethiopia have been perfected. The countries ruled by these «slaves» become overnight success stories while the rebellious are either denounced and condemned to suffer or are systematically made ineffective. Where there appears signs of resistance, some embassy functionaries of developed countries who have failed to cleanse themselves from the «plantation owner» mentality of their forefathers, even go as far as to pontificate on what level of democracy is appropriate for the people. The rules of the game have changed and the game itself has become more sophisticated.