

ETHIOPIAN DEMOCRACY COMES OF AGE

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Twenty years ago, Ethiopians went to the polls to elect their representative legislators and so was born the country's democratic parliamentary governance. With the country going to the polls in less than two months, it is as good a time to reflect on what has been achieved so far in the democratization process and what lessons are learned to meet the challenges.

Ethiopia's venture in to democracy is relatively young [four elections old]. The previous elections have been anything but smooth, yet each has become a turning point in the voyage towards democratic society. Today though there is strong evidence that the country's democratization process is entering in to the formative stage.

Why Democratic Election Matters?

Democracy, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary, "is a form of government in which the power resides in the people and is exercised by them either directly or by means of elected representatives"

In the history of democracy there are three major turning points: **Direct democracy**, **Representative democracy**, and **Mass democracy**.

Direct or Participatory democracy was born in Athens in 500 B.C. In that era of kings and empires, the Athenians' idea that the average, citizens should decide policy rather than the elites is one of the most important revolutionary innovations in the history of government.

However, direct democracy on the Athenians model had one major flaw: once you get beyond certain size, it is not possible to put all your citizens atop a hill or around campfire.

The British solved that problem by the next invention of governance - a Representative legislation; citizens wouldn't decide issues individually, as in Athens, but they would elect representatives to do so on their behalf.

The Pynx of the citizens' assembly would evolve in to a **parliament** of representatives. Initially, the parliament's role was to ensure that the monarch heard the voices of the people as he/she wielded the executive power of the government. In other words, the source of real power was the emperor/ king.

In 1256, the British parliament evolved toward a government dependent on the votes of majority of the members of the House of Commons (and thus, in theory, the people). And gradually the post of the **prime minister** began to supersede that of the monarch.

But there was one issue both direct and representative democracies failed to address. That is, if “**people**” were to choose their representatives, who made up the “people”?

To address, the above question, there comes the third milestone in democracy’s evolution: Mass democracy. During the first two stages of democracy; the right to elect and be elected was privileges reserved for the male segment of the society. That is not all; they were exclusive to certain religion, class, and the wealthy.

In other words, nations were slow in eliminating boundaries of citizenship and expanse the franchise of mass democracy. In fact universal suffrage was slow coming. Nonetheless, currently democratic governance, especially, parliamentary democracy has become killer app of the day.

From historical perspective the upcoming Ethiopian election is being held on the 750th anniversary of the first West minister parliament. Most importantly, from the national perspective, it has the potential to be historic.

- The major competing parties; including the governing one, are led by new crop of leadership.
- The parties’ main ideological boundaries are well defined.
- Judging by what has transpired so far, we are in for a treat: the liveliest, peaceful and exciting election yet.

Reasons for Optimism

I know when it comes to Ethiopian politics, one shouldn’t draw a hasty conclusion, but we can’t overlook the changing characteristics of the current electoral eco-system and feel sanguine.

- ✓ There are 57 political parties registered to contest for parliamentary seats and regional councils.
- ✓ As part of their commitment to a peaceful, credible and transparent campaigning; almost all of the parties have signed the Political Parties Code of Conduct. Those who are not signatures have pledge to abide by it.
- ✓ The parties have created the **Joint Council of Political Parties**; a body, in cooperation with the Electoral Board, Investigates issues and allegations of irregularities and takes the necessary and legal steps to mitigate problems.
- ✓ One of the thorny issues the Electoral Board and the Joint Council has to deal was – campaign financing. Namely, distributing public funds to all parties based on some agreed upon criteria. Eventually, it was resolved in reasonably.

- ✓ Another paramount achievement was the allocation of free air-time on public broadcast media and free column spaces on the print media, to all contestants.
- ✓ Then come the next breakthrough; laying the ground work for a comprehensive debating forum.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE CURRENT POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

1. A Movement in Decline

For years the groups that have been working to derail the democratic process have been the ones who have to lose the most in the absence of democracy – the opposition.

Many blame people with narrow agendas or simply grudge to grind with the governing party, for the diminishing influence and popularity of the opposition groups, esp. the hardliners.

The hard-liners' "all or nothing" principle was dictated by the Diaspora extreme elements, whose staple is, envy for EPRDF, resentment of its power, and hatred of its success. Such pathological antipathy held toward the EPRDF has prevented the hard-line parties from evaluating national policies in a rational way.

Take for example – Coalition for Unity and Democracy (**CUD**), a.k.a. **Kinijit**. In the 2005 election, this group had all the makings of a strong viable national party. But, it made a strategic mistake when it let itself be the Trojan horse for the Dergists and pursued two courses simultaneously.

The first course was to demonstrate it is for democratic politics – a demonstration more or less forced on it by events. At the same time, it didn't want to abandon the strategy of grabbing power by any means, including violence principle - as dictated on by its Diaspora buckers.

Eventually, all of Kinijit's endeavors were proven to be an exercise in futility.

In the 2010 election, Forum for Democratic Dialogue a.k.a. **Medrek** took the helm of "leading" the opposition camp. At the time; Medrek, formed as a loose alliance of divergent parties, has been slated as the most influential group to emerge from the opposition camp and had an ample opportunity to make an impact on the election.

But in no time its problems began to emerge as it tries to replicate the failed tactics of Kinijit; chose confrontation over intelligent engagement with the governing party or the Electoral Board. Moreover, its refusal to sign the **Parties Code of Conduct**, led the public to question its motives.

In addition Medrek's demand - absurd entitlement like special treatment - didn't go well with the people. The impression that the group simply inflated its influence continued to the Election Day. Consequently, the party managed to win only one parliamentary seat.

Ever since, its popularity and membership rolls just keep dwindling. Its ideas keep getting whittled away and these days its leadership often sound resigned.

But, there is silver lining; Medrek seems to have realized that its provoking tactics are not working and, lately, it has begun considering the wholesale reimagining it so clearly needs. As the saying goes "Better late than never", but, would it be enough? We'll wait and see.

Yes, the extremist concoction is in tatters and the end game for discordant politics may be nearing, but still have some life left as is manifested by **Semayawi party**, which is hard at work to resuscitate the "Kinijit Spirit".

Semayawi party is, a party wedded to the traditional anti-peace and questionable strategy. In its frequent PR moves, it endorses and stands behind actions perpetuated by those outlawed elements.

Its leaders have developed a habit of ambushing the government in an attempt to drag it to the mud. They are practically begging the government to turn on them, thankfully it didn't so far.

Obviously, it has become the darling of the extreme Diaspora - it shouldn't surprise us if, some time before Election Day, it attempts to be adventurous.

The good thing is, such stubborn hard-line groups or individuals may be louder and more apt to be quoted in the Diaspora media than their conciliatory peers, but they represent the minority block.

2. Moderation On The Rise

The vast majority of Ethiopian opposition parties fall in the moderate political spectrum. Their leaders are reasonable and modest, they are not a leap forward, but they are a step that way.

Absurdly, these parties are the ones which face the most challenges, as they are forced to fight on two prongs.

On one front are the hard-liners - who accuse them, as a sellout which weakened the opposition camp - when they fail to subscribe to the dogmatic narratives set out by the extremist special interest groups.

The moderates have to spend a great deal of time and their limited resources to refuting such accusations that they are assimilationists who have grown too close to the EPRDF government.

Moreover, they don't hold back their view on the hard-line politics. They occasionally denounce the confrontationist fringes for poisoning the country's political climate and for failing to recognize their polarizing tactics is the reason the opposition camp as a whole, lost whatever popular support it ought to have.

The claim they (the moderates), have divided the opposition caucus and made life difficult for the opposition and encouraged the government to act arbitrarily is hallow, especially since they, themselves have stood their ground when dealing with the government. They of course, don't talk trash about the government, but never shy away from hammering it for its" failed policies", from the narrowing of political space to social issues such as corruption or inflation.

Nevertheless, their main goal remains simple; they wanna play their role in cultivating a civilized democratic society. Together with governing party, they want to open the door of the political space wider or knock it down.

It should go without saying, the moderate opposition groups deserve credit for spearheading the changes that are needed to rid off the poison in the political atmosphere. They do so quite handily under the circumstances, and such courage is helping them win public praise

In a nutshell, there are signs that indicate both factions of the opposition [moderates and hard-liners], seem to have hit a sort of giant reset button, so they can have another kick at the democratic election can – let's hope; this time around they get it right.

3. The Governing Party

No one can deny The EPRDF government's commitment to democratization. It recognizes political disagreements and contradictions are part of the democratic process. It has always believed that what differentiates it from most of the opposition parties are not significant enough to deter their ability to work together.

However, sometimes the way it deals with the opposition has been less than desired and more often than not, we hear someone in high echelon in the party making unnecessary and unflattering remarks about the opposition without distinction.

The opposition, esp. the moderates also blames it for contributing its share to the polarizing atmosphere, by failing to negotiate with them in "good faith".

Lately though, there seems to be a positive development in the EPRDF mantra Vis- a- Vis- the opposition parties. It acknowledges, that the opposition parties may be its rival

in the competition for power, but in the context of democratization process, they are its partners with whom it is willing to work, not write them off.

This policy was further demonstrated during the parties' negotiation for campaign financing and free air time and print column in the public media; it [EPRDF], has gone out of its way and made considerable concessions to accommodate the needs of the opposition parties.

Such solemn moment of reconciliation has the making of a tolerant democracy being built.

4. The National Electoral Board Of Ethiopia

Needless to say, the most important constituent of democratization is the prevalence of independent institutions with jurisdictional mandate and political capacity.

The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) is such organization; which in spite of insurmountable challenges, usually from the not so friendly opposition block, is playing a pivotal role in steering the democracy to thrive.

Today, the NEBE is more organized, professional, efficient, transparent, as well as accommodating, and doing everything possible in its capacity to level the playing field. As a result, when dealing with the opposition parties, gone are the legal and procedural imbroglio.

In the past, some parties made a habit of proposing demands they know to be illegal and unconstitutional, hopping to bask in some micro popular approval – for what is micro popular and what is lawful are not always the same. Notwithstanding the nature of issues, the board has always demonstrated its determination to address them fairly and expeditiously. Such policy is still in effect in the current pre-election process.

Confident in the board's sincerity and ability, for their part, the contesting parties have reciprocated the board's good will gesture with cooperation.

For all the hard-liners effort to undermine its credibility, the board, with its recent string of successful negotiations and rulings is managing to debunk any misconceptions about its independence and authority. It has already triumphed in building immense construct, not only to its own reputation, but to democracy and the election process.

5. The Debates

Debates are central part of a democratic process, more so, during elections. Debates have the potential to illuminate the voting public on characters of party leaders and content of their programs.

In a typical Western democratic election; topics, venues, number of debates, and rules of debating are set by ad hoc consortium of contesting parties and the self-interested cabals [net work media].

Issues usually are restricted to no more than six topics and up to three debates are held. Knowing they have limited chances to make an impression, debating leaders tend to be over-scripted and emotional – not least because the Medias habit of scoring the whole thing like a prize fight.

To prevent such scenario, the Ethiopian political parties agreed the debates to cover as much issues as possible and segregated them in to nine topics. This frees debaters of the pressure to make their case all at once instead of one issue at a time. This allows the leaders to go in to great depth on each subject, even provide them a chance to experiment different formats. It will also calm everyone down as a bad performance on one debate could be recouped the next.

Such set up benefits the public too, as more debates would offer them more opportunity to scrutinize the contestants.

Furthermore, the public and the media would be forced to delve in to the substance of what was said instead of who “won” or “lost” an all party shouting match.

As of this piece is written, in total the parties have held three round of debates. But, By far, the debate that was the most stimulating and informative, was the one that was conducted outside the forum. It was hosted by the Addis Ababa university school of journalism and communication, on February 28.

The participants were the governing party [EPRDF], and arguably, the two most popular opposition parties: Ethiopian Democratic Party [EDP], and Forum for Democratic Dialogue [Medrek].

The parties were represented by Ato Abay Tsehaye, Chane Kebede (PHD), and professor Beyne Petros, respectively.

These states men have managed to reconcile ideology with reason. Of course, there were important issues of distinction, but there was no difference in the fundamental moral values in their presentation, only the narratives.

Both have inspired us with their differing but far-reaching plans. Yet, there was also a point of convergence - commitment and devotion to the national interest.

For the Ethiopian people, who are accustomed to political leaders that long ago, declared their contempt, not just for ideas, but even for the idea of ideas, listening to these gentlemen was mesmerizing to say the least.

It has been so long since they heard politicians speak with such thoughtfulness, sincerity, and social seriousness.

The debates that followed the aforestated didn't live up to the expectations; nevertheless, they have managed to turn the country in to a giant school of democracy and provided the electorate divergent course of menus of action and alternatives.

We have been accustomed to drifting on an oceanic expanse of cynicism for so long, that the sight of firm but earnest debate is quite startling.

To sum up: Ethiopian democracy is at a turning point. There have been plenty of those over the past two decades; from the introduction of democratic principles to holding four general elections. Each has generated a burst of optimism, accompanied by few setbacks. But at this time the sight is sobering and encouraging.

Yes, the strategy of gradual and peaceful steps toward a democratic society and state is well in progress.

Shout out to Genbot 20!