

TRONVOLL

&

ONE-PARTY DICTATORSHIP IN ETHIOPIA

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Perhaps arguably the most sustained, but woefully unsuccessful, attempt to debunk the 2010 Ethiopian national election and subsequently cast a dark shadow over the country's political future is Kjetil Tronvoll's *Briefing: the Ethiopian 2010 Federal and Regional Elections: Re-establishing the One-party State*¹. Startlingly hawkish in rhythm and alarmist in tone as it is, it is surprising that the article slipped through the 'mental detector' of an otherwise scholarly journal reputed for its dispassionate objectivity. Frankly, on first reading, it is tempting to consign *Briefing* to the dustbin as an angry piece of pamphleteering. Of a lightweight variety, one might add, which edgy academics occasionally churn out during moments of personal frustration. As a specimen of such a fly-by-night script, *Briefing* would have been at best treated with benign neglect as an innocuous venting of a fleeting fit of rage. Yet, the inequity of the spirit that seems to animate every single of its pages provokes one to treat it with the contempt it deserves as an affront to the voting men and women of Ethiopia. Warrant for this harsh rebuke easily comes to light with as little as a scant glance at the text's audacious snub at how Ethiopians vote. What compounds its venality is the unsettling conclusion that the author draws from his jaundiced point of departure, suggesting that an even more sinister motive might be at work than meets the eye. But what is certain is that a closer look lays bare that the text, scholarly pretensions aside, is a meanly conceived plot as it is a vengeful retaliation. Targeting as it does the Ethiopian government for apparently thwarting the author's effort to sneak into the 2010 EU Election Observer Mission (EU-EOM). Had he been successful in his deft infiltrative scheme, the august European pantheon of ostensibly infallible polling inspectors would have provided Tronvoll the perfect cover. So perfect a mask behind which he would have appeared as scholar, witness and judge of Ethiopia's 2010 election all rolled into one.

It may be useful to keep this no inside scoop in mind as one plows through Tronvoll's rambling text, fraught, among other pitfalls, with superficial journalese. If for nothing else, than in the outside chance that this telltale background information might shed a flicker of light on the mystery of the article's blatant one-sidedness. And, along the way provide a clue to the author's

¹ Kjetil Tronvoll, 2010, *Briefing the Ethiopian 2010 Federal and Regional Elections: Re-establishing the One-party state*. African affairs, 1-16, Published by Oxford press on behalf of royal African society.

infidelity to the protocols of equanimity and balance that we have come to expect from disinterested academic inquiry. But by the sheer reputation of the Journal it appeared in, Tronvoll's *Briefing* has to be gauged and probed in its own terms. Not least as an obligation that comes with the ethics of intellectual responsibility. Indeed it is a mark of principled moderation and sobriety to circumscribe rejoinder within the author's expressed claims, rigor of argumentation, and validity of conclusion. It is from this perspective, then, that we intend to interrogate Tronvoll's analysis and, to borrow a post-modern diction, deconstruct the sources-material that he compiled to buttress his scathing judgment and scary conclusion that we quote below.

The facts speak for themselves...: In the 2010 federal election for the House of Representatives, EPRDF and its affiliates won 545 seats, while the opposition got one. There is no other conclusion to be drawn from Ethiopia's electoral development than to consider it as the re-establishment of the country as a one-party state. Many opposition leaders, as well as local academic observers, fear that the total closure of plural democratic representation in the country will feed into recruitment to the many armed opposition movements roaming the Ethiopian countryside.²

Tronvoll makes this unwarranted induction from a sweeping analysis mediated through three broad arbitrarily constructed conceptual categories. Collectively, we are told, these triple classifications offer an Archimedean vantage point that yields a deeper insight into the 'darker' side of Ethiopian politics. We will have an occasion to examine this abracadabra that translates into 'open sesame' and magically unlocks the decisive determinants of the 2010 Ethiopian election outcome. But first it is useful to begin by a quick inventory of the scaffolding on which the whole project stands. For, the 64 footnotes fine-scripted across the 16-pager underscore that the author could not have arrived at a grimmer conclusion than the verbatim quote cited in the preceding paragraph. In other words, given the asymmetry in documentation that Tronvoll chose to work with, any number of researchers, (regardless of political orientation) would have inescapably reached at the same exceedingly flawed conclusion as he did with thoughtless abandon. For instance, among the 15 individuals which the author interviewed for the article, the citation features 9 opposition leaders, 1 independent candidate, 3 unnamed resident diplomats, 1 Amhara businessman, and 1 individual which Tronvoll describes as re-ideologization campaign attendant. (*sic*) Similarly, a breakdown of the 8 news-networks credited for valuable information reveals 6 Western media outlets as against 1 local bilingual private weakly and, 1 ruling party-affiliated radio broadcasting service. Worse still, in an unabashed self-adulation, out of the 20 footnoted academic literature,

² *Ibid*, p, 15.

the author cites his own previous works on 15 occasions (sometimes twice in the same footnote.)³

This is not all. As we scratch a little below the surface, we discover an equally subjective predilection in his source reference to international human right advocacy publications and election observation reports. Predictably, Human Rights Watch (HRW) looms large. For the central contention of the article is predicated on this organization's 2010 election take which is retrospectively intuited by a vicarious gauge of the pre-election political environment. Hence, despite its distant remove from the election scene, it is not surprising that HRW is cited on 5 different rounds. Rather, what raises an eye brow is why the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission is not even mentioned once. On second thought, this too is not terribly shocking. Since, as it would be recalled, the Commission has exposed at least one serious case of anti-EPRDF allegation hyped by HRW as an instance of extra-judicial killing of an opposition candidate.⁴ The Commission has also made public its meticulously-investigated findings of the cause and circumstances of the death of the said candidate. Tronvoll, nonetheless, latches on to HRW's version of the story and parades it as a portent of worse things to come in the not too distant future.

This unrelenting man's disregard to the norms of academic citation does not stop here. For instance, one would expect that a competent researcher working on a topic as serious as a national voting process would consult all official election monitoring documents on record. Not Tronvoll. Typically, out the 3 recorded reports, he chose only 1. Obviously, as the reader can by now predict, Tronvoll prefers to exclusively focus on the single exception which reinforces his theory and conclusion. Without, of course, any thought of providing justification for ignoring the others. Thus, the EU-EOM's preliminary and final reports are cited 7 times. Yet none of the election observation findings released by the Ethiopian Civil Society Coalition for Election Observation (ECSCEO) are footnoted. The irony of this oversight is amplified by the fact that this Coalition of 11 civil organizations of 15,000,000 members had more manpower to cover as much 40,000 polling stations. In fact, as the largest election monitoring team ever assembled in Ethiopia, the ECSCEO was better placed to access reliable voting information than its European counterpart could ever imagine.⁵

As we shall show below, the author obviously believes that civil society in Ethiopia has been emasculated long before the election bout. Hence, he feels no obligation to even glance at any election report issued in its name. Awkward as this is, a more intriguing question is what accounts for the absence of any reference to the African Union Election Observation (AU-EOM) Report? Why does Tronvoll think that this write-up merits not even a single footnote? Such a

³ *Ibid* p. 3 see footnote #6

⁴ Human Rights Watch 2010" Ethiopia: Repression Rising ahead of May Election"

⁵ ECSCEO preliminary and final election monitoring reports June, 2010

brazen omission is all the more confounding in the light of certain details to which Tronvoll is privy. For unlike the upstart novice that headed the EU-EOM, the AU-EOM report was supervised by an ex-African president respected for his moral uprightness both in and out of office.⁶ Puzzling as it is, Tronvoll's deafening silence when it comes to the AU-EOM's findings, nonetheless, betrays his latent Euro-centricity and disingenuousness of intellectual makeup. This is not the only explanation why he bypassed this document as if it never existed. There is another no less important reason, albeit in his case a justifiable one. This has to do with the fact that the AU-EOM report belies the willy-nilly story which he prefers to tell as the only objective third-party rendition of the 2010 election. And, even bolder, as the only analytical insight which foretells the chilling fate the election outcome has in store for the people of Ethiopia. Naturally, Tronvoll is racing against time to establish his fictionalized version of the story of Ethiopia's descent into the dark ages of Mengistu Hailemariam. Lest, of course, a rival account based on the AU-EOM report straightens the record and sets the standards. Haste, therefore, he has to make, for he knows that the AU-EOM document could generate an alternative text much nearer to the truth than he is willing to openly admit. In this studied oversight Tronvoll is no doubt aided by a stereotypic paradigm of a noxious past as the history of the nonwestern world bears testimony.

Euro-centricity of the crudest kind certainly grants *Briefing's* author the license to privilege a European statement over an African testimony unperturbed by the slightest of moral scruples. For his underlining assumption is that by the misfortune of being African, an AU election observation team must ontologically lack the requisite moral fiber to dispense impartial judgment where a member state is concerned. Thus, fortified by such double-standards that Africans have to endlessly endure, Tronvoll feels he can scribble whatever pops to his head free from the burden of intellectual honesty or academic evenhandedness. Hence, like so many second-rate Africanists of his stripe, Tronvoll knows that he has the luxury of intellectual latitude to commit to writing whatever captures his fancy in any way he sees it fit so long as he sticks to African issues. It is not a mystery, then, that he writes on Ethiopian elections with capricious whim reminiscent of 19th century muckrakers in post-bellum America. One wonders whether his *Briefing* would have appeared in a respectable journal as it did had his chosen subject been a European election: Most probably not. No serious journal could lower its intellectual bar to this level in an editorial decision involving an article that deals with a European subject and expects to survive.

What is even more unnerving of Tronvoll's temerity is not only the inordinate lopsidedness of his selections of source material alone. But also the manipulative manner he wields it, casting it as he does as an unassailable foundation on which his otherwise featherweight tract on Ethiopia's recent election rests. For instance, material from opposition sources is invariably embedded as constitutive component

⁶ Former president of Botswana Festus Mogae

of the evidentiary underpinning of the linchpin of his arguments. As a granite hinge, as it were, without which any of his freakish postulates about the “*reestablishment of one party state*” in Ethiopia could even for a second be confused with a plausible conjuncture. Much less as a solid basis, warranting the kind ominous premonition quoted above. A quote, no serious analyst could possibly countenance without being unfaithful to ones moral conviction. Consider further, if you will, how he justifies his claim to have discovered how a state could undergo a totalitarian metamorphosis via a multiparty election. Shockingly, he expects his readers to take this phenomenal regression on the words of a no less an ardent opposition figure as the OPCO chairman. Merera Guddina’s routine pre-election wailing mantra “... *our party offices are forcefully closed*” is, therefore, taken as an oracular augury of Ethiopia’s relapse to a one-party state.

More farcical, if only it weren’t tragic, is that the author also alludes to a shadowy circle of anonymous academics who share his certitude in the country’s inverse trajectory to the nightmarish years of the Derg era. One can’t help, but suspect, that this may well be a cryptic reference to the same old opposition leaders, Dr. Merera Gudina, Dr. Negasso Gidada and Dr. Beyene Petros as each one of them have the credential to qualify as quotable scholars in their own right. But, had he been more explicit on this score and name names, he certainly would have blown his cover. In other words, he either would have exposed himself the hack he is who irresponsibly multiplies fear-inducing hearsay by citing the same source over and again under different names. Much like, as it were, replicas of copies of a non-existent original. Or else he would have had to explain why the panic-stricken academics that he is not at liberty to name are not in a rush to leave the country before it is too late. This is indeed an intriguing question that has to be addressed if these educated elites really believe what he quotes them as having intimated to him in private. This is what he claims to have been told. “*We do not even dare to joke about politics any longer, as it might be overheard and interpreted as opposition. We are afraid. We are back to a culture of fear and intimidation reminiscent of the Derg era*”.⁷ Surely, these are not the kind of public intellectuals who have the courage of their conviction to fight for their constitutional rights. But, spineless college lecturers that endlessly complain about the lack of political space in Ethiopia to every white man who cares to listen. Through this gutless ruse, they reckon that they can kill two birds with one stone: furnish an alibi for their own lack of political courage, on the one hand. And endlessly defame the government, on the other, by circulating malicious rumor aimed at driving a permanent wedge between the EPRDF and the public: The latest of which is spreading hysteria by equating the present political climate with the dark shadow of death under which everyone lived in fear during the Derg reign of terror. Consider what Tronvoll reports to have been told by an old friend.

When I arrived in Addis Ababa some few days after the elections in May 2010, a long-term Ethiopian friend greeted me with the

⁷ Tronvoll, 2010 Briefing, p 12

*following warning: Things have changed. Everyone is afraid now.
You cannot trust anybody*⁸

It has now been seven months since the 4th round general election was held. Any half decent person who has lived through the Derg years can, by no stretch of the wildest imagination, honestly claim to feel even a fraction of the anxiety and apprehension that prevailed under the Red Terror regime. Yet Tronvoll's draws parallels between the present and the dark years of the Derg where even a quick glance at any back issues of, say, a Newsweek magazine, was considered as defiance against the state. The incomparability of those times of trouble with the present is too apparent to require argument. Indeed, the absence of fear in today's Ethiopia can easily be gauged by a random glance at the screaming anti-EPRDF headlines that the private weeklies flash across their front pages. The irony here is not even the opposition in Ethiopia, angered as it is by the outcome of the vote, does not go as far as Tronvoll in its reassessment of the post-elections scenario. We can only conclude that, whatever Tronvoll herd from his long-term friend, only speaks to the kind of company he keeps.

Doom-mongering as all this is, we detect the same pitfall -- but in a different form-- in the few cases where the author is forced to cite sources from the opposite end of the political spectrum. Invariably statements or quotes from this quarter are footnoted either out of sheer formality customary in any academic publication. Or, more often as irrefutable evidence of self-admission of official misconduct. A typical example of the latter can be culled from the citation Tronvoll offers as a vivid illustration of EPRDF's intolerance. It begins by whimpering about booklets developed for EPRDF members as part of the party's 2010 election campaign. It says "*In these strategic booklets, Medrek is termed 'the force of destruction.'*" Surely this is too flimsy a ground to take as an indictment of EPRDF's concealed animus towards political plurality. Everyone knows, for instance, that during US presidential elections Republicans and Democrats exchange much harsher words to appear firm in the eyes of their respective constituencies and to placate 'swing voters'. Besides, how could this negative description be any worse than the demonizing epithets that the opposition habitually uses whenever it refers to the EPRDF? In none of his writings does Tronvoll mention how the opposition depicts the EPRDF as a treasonous anti-Ethiopian force bent on disuniting the country. At any rate, had the quote "*forces of destruction*" been attributed to any of the branches of government or state agencies, say, the National Election Board, there may have been a serious cause for concern. But the alleged culprit here is the ruling party which is prohibited by law from taking unfair advantages of government resources on account of its incumbency. Even then the onus would have been on the author to commission an accurate translation of the text that must contain EPRDF's rationale for its dim view of Medrek. Impatient, as he is, however, Tronvoll runs with anything that he thinks he can implicate the ruling party with and tarnish EPRDF's 2010 landslide election victory. On grounds of this skewed pattern of footnoting and peculiar manner of

⁸ *Ibid*, P. 12

making allusions to unnamed sources alone; one could justifiably toss aside Tronvoll's article as yet another shrill anti-government tabloid. Though different in form, we can dare say that Tronvoll's text is no less banal than the platitude-filled publications that the now demoralized EPRDF detractors used to dish out day-in and day-out. Moreover, flawed as it is at the level of empirical support, *Briefing* does not even remotely reflect the reality on the ground let alone tell what the future holds. Neither does the analysis which the author occasionally bandies as a shining example of a scholarly probe can stand logical scrutiny. Much less offer new insight into the challenges that are bound to surface as the country consolidates its sterling democratic achievements in the post-election years to come.

Weak as its source material is by all reckoning, let us now turn to the substantive part of Tronvoll's *Briefing*. For the sake of brevity, we shall focus on Tronvoll's central pre-election factors that ostensibly led to, "a totalitarian outcome in a multiparty election." (*sic*) In what he groups under the first category responsible for this foreboding outcome is:

structural cause; these factors define the overall parameters of democracy in the country. First, we have seen the development of a set of new restrictive legislative acts imposing severe limitations on freedom of expression and organization in Ethiopia. the new media law, the CSO law, and the anti-terror law give the authorities the powers to construe normal democratic initiatives such as alternative development strategies emanating from civil society or peaceful opposition political activities as 'unlawful' and thus susceptible to a government clampdown.....⁹

Hence, according to Tronvoll these laws closed the political space, unlevelled the playing field and, among other unpleasant consequences, led to a totalitarian mongrel of an election outcome. This is obviously not a very original claim. Barring the coda, it has been repeatedly made by many others. Not least HRW, the State Department DHRB Bureau, the International Crisis Group and lastly the EU EOM.¹⁰ At any rate, as a man who claims to be an independent scholar unaffiliated with any of the richly-funded but not equally transparent global institutions, Tronvoll had an obligation to meet. At the very least, he ought to have provided concrete illustrations, highlighting the specific clauses, which adversely impacted the opposition and impeded its election campaign. Instead he chose to simply recycle what had already been exposed as a hoax hatched in the West by Western neo-liberal zealots. Most of which share his claim to have uncovered secrets of diversion of donor money for vote purchase in Ethiopia.¹¹ But in his case, this impudence and derisive condensation towards the Ethiopian voting population that emanates from a bigoted assumption undergoes massive logical contortion.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 12

¹⁰ EU-EOM Final Election Report, Nov. 2010

¹¹ Human Rights Watch Report, December, 2010 "Ethiopia: Donors should investigate misuse of Aid Money"

He manages this unenviable feat via a logical fallacy, by taking as a given i.e. by premising the very claim that has to be argued only to extract a tautological conclusion that is already present in the thesis. In a nut shell, Tronvoll's starting point and analytical progression from which he extrapolated a manifestly *non sequitur* of a conclusion could be reformulated as follows: ---

For the fourth time in a row, a multiparty election was held in Ethiopia in May 2010. But this time around the vote was conducted under a totalitarian climate of fear and repression wrought by three draconian parliamentary legislations. *Ergo*, the polling result can only be '*the re-establishment of a one-party state*'.... which will feed into recruitment to the many armed opposition movements roaming the Ethiopian countryside.

Tronvoll must have been elated by his own profound conclusion. Dazed by a self-congratulatory euphoria, he, therefore, cannot imagine that a radically different kind of analysis and conclusion is possible. Let alone to accept the fact that a more serious analytical survey of the 2010 election have been made with an even deeper insight than his paltry article could possibly offer. But Tronvoll will hear none of it for he takes himself too seriously as the preeminent scholar of Ethiopian elections. A small wonder, then, that there is no reference in his article to any writings less jarring in tone and less sweeping in content than his cavalier appraisal of the 2010 polling. In fact, in one of his moments of flighty escapades, he couldn't resist blowing his horn and footnoting it at the same time. This is how Tronvoll does it in the very article under discussion. "*Since 2005, however, the authorities have stated that they do not want to see me in the country on polling day in order to prevent me observing the actual voting process; apparently they dislike my scholarly interpretation of the democratization process.*" Whoever these authorities are, it seems to us that it is not his "*scholarly interpretation of the democratic process*" they could possibly dislike. But more likely, his claim to tell how elections could turnout in advance of the facts and the power to sense omens of impending totalitarianism. If one goes by his conclusion, Tronvoll's bleak forecast smacks as a self-fulfilling prophesy common among the now sullen extremists in the Ethiopian opposition.

Who, then, can blame anyone for denying Tronvoll a place in an election monitoring team? What authority receives with open arms an election observer who comes with a hidden final draft of what he is commissioned to report before even the first ballot is cast? It is strange that Tronvoll pretends to be surprised by Ethiopia's objection to his inclusion into the EU EOM. He of all people cannot claim to have forgotten that as recently as two years ago, he had published an article on the 2008 local elections that appeared under the title: *Briefing: The Ethiopian Elections: the Return of Electoral Authoritarianism*.¹² Indeed, no one can mistake Tronvoll for an objective election observer when he himself makes no effort to hide his *a priori*

¹² See Tronvoll, "*Briefing: The 2008 Ethiopian local election: the return of electoral authoritarianism*", African affairs 108, 430 (2009), pp. 111-20.

opinion on the matter? What is of interest here is, however, how in Tronvoll's writings Ethiopia, first fell under benign authoritarianism through her 2008 local election. And how, through a multiparty general election, she found herself in the jaws of a ferocious totalitarian state in a span of two years.

To turn to the topic at hand, however, overwhelmed by his discovery, Tronvoll fails to notice that he has not moved an inch in terms unraveling the vicious nexus that binds the much maligned post-2005 legislations and the advent of totalitarianism in Ethiopia. What compounds the hollowness of his putative discovery of the seeds of totalitarianism in Ethiopia's laws is when we pose the following questions. Is there a single provision in any of the three legislations in question that have no equivalent in one or other European democratic legislations? Besides, has any opposition member or supporter been prosecuted under the Anti-Terror Code? Does the Charity Law apply to indigenous advocacy NGOs let alone political parties? Or does the Freedom of the Information Act silence the opposition? Obviously Tronvoll would have had to answer these questions before trying to prove the correlation between the said laws and the putative 'narrowing of political space in Ethiopia.' Rather, as he has not studied these laws himself, he prefers to echo what he only knows from second-hand sources. Had he seriously examined the provisions of each of these legislations he would either have refrained from making such blanket denunciation. Or swallow his pride and level the same accusation against all the Western democracies whose laws in these areas are even harsher than Ethiopia's. But as masters in the art of make-belief, Tronvoll and *Co* reckon that mere duplication of the same accusation will compensate for the lack of solid evidence in their remonstrations of human right violations in Ethiopia. Apparently, these self-proclaimed global guardian-angels of human right (HRW) that Tronvoll takes his queues from believe that whatever they say will be taken at face value. Obviously, their confidence lies on the sheer weight of their public-relations profile. In a generous mood their arrogance could have been forgiven for ego-inflating publicity — which they enjoy at present -- and swollen coffer — which they never lacked -- breeds complacency. Thus, blotted by the impressive roster of virtually the-who-is-who of Western financial magnets in their Board of Directors, the vicars of human rights are clearly in a state of self-delusion. One glaring symptom of their pathological sense of self-grandeur is belief that every cut-and-paste report they roll out would be universally accepted as self-evident truth. Naturally, they find it hard to accept that mere repetition of declaratory assertions, regardless of origin, can never amount to a valid argument. Much less serve as ground for cascading demonization tirades aimed at severing Ethiopia's ties with the Western world.

Unfortunately, Ethiopia's unenviable place in the world renders it vulnerable to this kind of scurrilous campaigns that over-blotted global NGOs who thrive on easy pickings unleash against it. Any disparaging reportage of its public life by, say, Human Rights Watch, for instance, is swiftly leaked to prestigious Western media where it is spiced-up for mass consumption. Subsequently, the calumny takes on

the trapping of authenticity no sooner than it appears as a bonafide referent in revered academic publications. And finally, through this incestuous referentiality, what is at best a simulacrum becomes as a robust actuality without ever being subjected to even a modicum of scrutiny. Occasionally a facsimile of such thinly-veiled disinformation lands at a US congressional hearing chamber as a dossier which contains disturbing material of probable cause for a sanction-levy against the guilty party. Not infrequently, limelight-seeking quislings from the native country in question are quickly flown in for intense debriefing in time before the commencement of the scheduled hearing. These perfidious characters are then whisked into the deliberation hall to provide tear-jerking testimonies punctuated by carefully rehearsed anecdotes of heartrending personal suffering to expedite the sanction motion. In worst case scenario such a counterfeit country-brief is instantly used as a fig leaf for 'manufacturing hazardous consensus' that could unleash the daunting military prowess of a super-power as powerful as the United States: Much, of course, to the delight of the trigger-happy hawks in its defense establishment who need no prompting to act as global policemen in the service of God and country. If proof need be suffices to mention the recent dismemberment of a middle-eastern state by a lightening war waged under the cover of a simulated *cause belie*. A cause sanctified, by high and mighty as the Sultanates of the Whitehouse and Downing Street. In this manner, an unjust war is legitimized as a modern-day crusade against an evil state with undetectably hidden weapons of mass destruction.

Alas, in this world of unequal voice and power of persuasion, what a country like Ethiopia says in its own defense scarcely receives favorable hearing. Much less carry weight in the face of what its nemesis at the summit of the global hierarchy of nations accuses it of with impunity. The latest is, of course, Tronvoll's bizarre fable that, one fine morning, the Ethiopian state suddenly mutated into a leviathan, instilling fear and trepidation in its own citizens, dissenting voices of civil- society including among organized political opposition forces. To add insult to injury, HRW and Tronvoll would have us believe that such a ghoulish totalitarian inversion occurred through a sham election. One in which, according to Tronvoll's phantom informants, citizens were pressured to cast their votes to a single party through either bribery and/or intimidation. Now, readers would agree that only the most credulous can buy this quixotic explanation of EPRDF's landslide election victory. Fortunately, in the last analysis, what tips the scale is the testimony that the people of Ethiopia bear on this and other public matters that affects them most than anyone else. Thus, clear and solid as their opinion is on the process and outcome of the last election, no foreign analyst has ever dared to survey their views or which way they voted. Without doubt this is the reason why the Ethiopian government is unmoved by the litany of hostile publications that the watchdogs of neo-liberalism pour against it. Ethiopia's leaders know too well that it is only the Ethiopian people who have the last say that counts. For all one cares, therefore, Tronvoll and HRW could shed their crocodile tears and bemoan the plight of suffering humanity in Ethiopia to eternity. Or plead with donors to cut aid to the Ethiopian government until kingdom comes. For the fact of the matter is,

barring treacherous Diaspora dissidents, no one in Ethiopia is begging to be rescued from the specter of totalitarian tyranny. Not through termination of international aid. Nor through Western sanction. If anything, the Ethiopian people are appalled by those who claim to speak for them and chart a course of action on their behalf. Recall, if you may, the million-man rally held on the morrow of the 2010 voting day, denouncing HRW's second-guessing of the Ethiopian vote.¹³ That is why *Briefing* is not based on any post-election survey of even a small number of voters in Addis Ababa. The only ones consulted are the inner-circle of the author's colleagues who share his prejudices and ill-will towards the EPRDF. The sole exception is the one individual businessman whose response Tronvoll, perhaps inadvertently, quoted said what the author never factored in his analysis.

*I have to admit something to you. For the first time, I actually voted for EPRDF. I am so angry with the opposition (CUD) who betrayed us in 2005. They left the voters to hang, while they were childishly fighting for positions. But EPRDF has also proven that they can deliver; look around you and see all the changes which have taken place over the last five years.*¹⁴

Anyone who even casually followed the last vote would easily agree that this quote contains all that needs to be said about EPRDF's electoral sweep. Indeed these few words spoken by no blind EPRDF admirer provides an infinitely deeper insight into the twin determinants of the outcome of the 2010 election than Tronvoll's 16-pge ivory-tower mambo-jumbo can possibly match. At any rate, weak as *Briefing* might be, Tronvoll, nevertheless, is a tough researcher who '*trades where the gods dread*' as Shakespeare put it in one of his timeless plays. As a descendent of the dauntless Erick the Viking, Tronvoll, in his resolve to get to the bottom of things, is unafraid to explore uncharted territories where others are not gutsy enough to brave. Unlike HRW he is no satisfied to dismiss the 2010 race as undemocratic election on the basis of the unevenness of the pre-election environment alone. Tronvoll is determined to prove that in addition to being an unfair bout fought on an unlevelled terrain, the vote was actually rigged. On what does he base this claim that no third-party even dared to suggest? He does so, believe it or not, primarily on the testimony of Negasso Gidada, who perjured himself by stating, "*EPRDF blatantly stole the election*"!¹⁵

But a little later Tronvoll appears to be s jolted by doubt and fear that Gidada's words might no cut it. It is at this point that he decides to go for the jugular by disputing the official figure of voter turnout. With the certitude of a self-assured smug, he writes. "*Turnout was also extremely high, at 93.4 percent considering the constrained political environment in the country, this is a remarkable level and the likeliest explanations are the use of coercive means to get people to vote, a rigged turn-*

¹³, See the Ethiopian Herald, May 26, 2010

¹⁴ Tronvoll Briefing, 2010 p. 14

¹⁵ *Ibid* p., 11

out number,"¹⁶ Obviously, this self-appointed expert on Ethiopian election has nothing to back his guesswork with. But cunningly he tries to hide this fact behind anonymous witnesses; "*many Ethiopian sources question and argue that it has been artificially inflated in order to give legitimacy to the election outcome.*" Let us for now leave aside how many Ethiopians Tronvoll could possibly know to make this judgment call. Instead, let us briefly focus on the phrase '*to give legitimacy to the election outcome.*'¹⁷ One can overlook this as one of Tronvoll's many off-the-cuff remarks which he repeatedly utters probably against his better judgment. For it is hard to think that Tronvoll is unaware that election outcomes derive legitimacy not from size of voter-turnout but the integrity of the voting process. Had the case been otherwise, not many of the post-World War II US elections would have been legitimate.¹⁸ As every college student knows, high voter-turnout often indicates that serious issues are at stake and that voters feel empowered to have a say on the matter through their ballots. Tronvoll, however, cannot accept this because it does not fit his pre-conception of the pre-election setting as a "*constrained political environment.*" He, therefore, has to somehow explain away the 2010 high voter-registration and turnout by means that reminds us of the saying, cutting the feet to fit the shoes. One device he employs to this end is invoking comparative standards. As readers might have noticed, at one stage, Tronvoll could not hide his puzzlement by the fact that, "*...31,926,520 million voters registered (out of an estimated 37 million potential eligible voters)- a very high number for an African country*". Apparently there is an African threshold of voter- registration, which no country can exceed without resort to '*coercive means to get people to vote*'. Loaded as this statement by "*African Standards*" is, there is another unstated chide to Africa's capability in launching a nationwide election campaign on the magnitude of 93.4 voters-turnout.

As a matter of fact, voter-registration and turnout figure of the 2005 election was not significantly less than the 2010 vote. In this case, Tronvoll, nevertheless, never even hinted the possibility that "*coercive means to get people to vote*" could have been employed. Apparently it did not tally with the kind of objection he raised at the time that had nothing to do with voter-turnout number. Obviously, he shared the prevalent view among pundits that the CUD was instrumental in generating huge public excitement in the 2005 election. Naturally, it was not in Tronvoll's interest to measure the huge 2005 voter-turnout "*by African Standards.*" For some reason, this inconsistency eludes Tronvoll. So does the fact that Ethiopia has a strong state tradition and rich experience in mass mobilization campaigns of wide reach. At least on this score alone, suspicion of--- inflated voter-turnout number -- should have not arisen. For Ethiopia is certainly capable of managing a countrywide election, covering the entire width and breadth of the land down to the remotest and scarcely accessible geographic corner. In this connection, it is tempting to remind Tronvoll his own frightening description of the current Ethiopian government as an '*omnipresent and all-embracing totalitarian state.*' Surely if Tronvoll could believe

¹⁶ *Ibid* p., 8

¹⁷ *Ibid* p., 7 see also footnote # 27

¹⁸ Generally US voter- turnout average is below Western Democracies

that the Ethiopian state can make itself felt everywhere, it can easily organize a general election where around 30,000,000 voters could simultaneously cast vote at 44,000 election posts.

Since this is not lost on Tronvoll, he throws in another argument which he couches as “*soft co-option.*” This includes mass recruitment and swelling the party’s rank-and-file membership. By the time of the election campaign, the EPRDF’s membership is believed to have shot up from 760,000 to 5,000,000 strong. This is certainly a big leap that naturally must have enhanced the party’s election bid. Granted too some of the new members might have enlisted, as Tronvoll argues, out of concern that, “*without government party affiliation personal or organizational carrier opportunities are limited.*” Nonetheless, the ruling party cannot be blamed for expanding its membership just as the opposition parties cannot be faulted for forging alliances and augmenting their followers. In fact, even if the EPRDF were to offer government jobs in exchange for votes, given the availability of civil servant posts, the maximum it could have secured in exchange is 4 or 5 representatives out of a total of 547 parliamentary members. In no way, then, the ruling party’s huge recruitment derive can be taken as an explanation for its landslide victory. Not at least, in Tronvoll’s reading of it where he would have us believe that party-membership enrollment served as a magnet to attract public-sector carrier- seeking voters. In this regard, Tronvoll again forgets his own characterization of the EPRDF as a totalitarian state where there can only be one employer and one job market. As a sole hiring agent, as it were, the ruling party, therefore, need not dangle job-opportunity in the face of its citizens to attract votes. Besides, why would such a party go through all this troubles when it could simply either intimidate voters to comply with its wishes. Or inflate the relevant election data in its favor. As we saw above, this is the kind of argument that Tronvoll heavily relies on to support Gidada’s emphatic assertion that the, “*EPRDF blatantly stole the election!*”

First, Tronvoll claims that the high voter-registration figure must be taken as a function of intimidation. Since not everyone who is ‘intimidated’ to register to vote, may not show up, the high turnout-figure, in Tronvoll’s expert opinion, must have been inflated. Beyond this stage, however, Tronvoll seems to lose his nerve. For, whatever number of voters he thinks showed up on voting day, he dose not dare to come out and openly say that the electors were forced to tick against EPRDF’s bee symbol before entering the secret ballot booth. Nor does he directly say that the ballot-count was tampered to give the incumbent a landslide victory. Instead, he lets second-hand sources to do the talking for him. Thus he writes, “*Credible international citizens of Addis Ababa report that many among the local population expressed disbelief when the results were announced. A typical response was: we all voted for Medrek, how come EPRDF won?*” Voila! We are to take this anecdotal information seriously because it comes from not just ex-pats or foreign residents. But from international citizens who have no national loyalties to misrepresent the truth. At any rate, cosmopolitan as these’ *international citizens*’ must be, they must be talking about voters in Addis Ababa when they reported to

Tronvoll as having herd residents say: *"We all voted for Medrek, how come EPRDF won?"*

Tronvoll should have known that the 2010 election was a race for the national parliament and not the City government of Addis Ababa. Hence, even if every single ballot were to be cast to Medrek, the EPRDF would have still have emerged on top and also retained its lawful jurisdiction over Addis Ababa City administration until 2012. This much Tronvoll himself seems to have sensed at a later stage. That is why he shifts the grounds of his vote-fraud allegation elsewhere. This time, he claims that the questionability of the election could be inferred from the EPRDF's almost total sweep of the contested parliamentary seats. In other words, according to Tronvoll's logic, the mere enormity of the margin by which the EPRDF won the election is proof of fraud. Readers will bear in mind that -- size of margin -- is the salient point in this regressive reasoning. But, seconds after he left us wondering if there might be some hidden profundity in this logic, Tronvoll hits us with a diametrically opposite—wide-margin/close-margin argument. He tells us, *"In several constituencies, in particular in Addis Ababa, the result margin is conspicuously close between the winning EPRDF candidate and the runner-up Medrek candidate. Even more interesting is the fact that in the only constituency where Medrek won, they did it with a margin of only 4 votes.....- had a direct and significant impact on the overall election result."*¹⁹ Alas, in Tronvoll's promiscuous use of the operative term in this strange logic, both the - - wideness and closeness—of the margin of the incumbent's victory constitute irrefutable evidence of election rigging. Anyone would agree that there could hardly be a more flagrant contradiction than this. Nonetheless, this is not the only instance where the author has a hard time making up his mind. His *Briefing* is replete with indeterminacy, including in the cardinal parts of its thesis. For instance, it is not clear whether the totalitarian turn of the Ethiopian state occurred before or after the 2010 election. At any rate, if the former is the case, then, the 2010 vote could not have been a multiparty contest. Whereas, if we are to believe that totalitarianism emerged from the 2010 multiparty election, one inescapable conclusion follows with at least one startling implication. A) Through intimidations or not, Ethiopians must be the first people after the Weimar Republic to vote totalitarian. And, B) as in the Third Riche, we must logically abandon all hopes of witnessing another election in Ethiopia. However, from what one can gather from the general atmosphere, there is no Nazi party to prevent this city's 2012 municipal election or suspend the 2015 general parliamentary voting. Let us cite one more example of the tension in Tronvoll's, *'academic analysis.'* After all the labor and sweat he poured into his work in the hope of proving to the whole world how the 2010 election was stolen by the incumbent, he tells us that *"The*

¹⁹ Tronvoll Briefing 2010 , P 10

opposition parties did not have the capacity to provide a credible, attractive, and likely nation-wide alternative to the EPRDF in the campaign (as CUD did in 2005)”²⁰

Why? Because, the main opposition, Medrek in particular, he adds, “lacked popular leaders with nation-wide appeal, or its core policies on ethnic federalism (as opposed to CUD’s pan-Ethiopian platform)”. While this is an apt observation, it stops short of acknowledging two important factors that better explain the opposition’s poor showing at the polls. In fact, Tronvoll could have almost hit the nail on the head had he pursued a little further what the Amhara businessman had confided in him in these words. “I have to admit something to you. For the first time, I actually voted for EPRDF. I am so angry with the opposition (CUD) who betrayed us in 2005. They left the voters to hang, while they were childishly fighting for positions.” In our view, bitter disappointment at the opposition’s 2005 behavior, on the one hand, and palpable lack of a coherent national program in 2010, on the other, goes some distance in explaining the opposition’s dismal election result than any of Tronvoll’s conspiracy theories. If we are pressed to convert this into percentage terms, we would say about 25 to 30 percent could be explained by these factors. But by far the weightiest causal explanation is what the Amhara businessman said which we have to quote. “EPRDF has... proven that they can deliver; look around you and see all the changes which have taken place over the last five years.”²¹ Although, explainable, it is not without perplexity, that we note Tronvoll and his colleagues at HRW cannot admit how these changes could translate into huge votes. No doubt, as they perceive everything through the prism of a blinkered ideological construct, they are incapable of recognizing what is readily apparent to the naked eye. It is a tall order, therefore, to expect that they would concede that a governing party with an impressive record of double-digit economic growth for seven years running could fairly and squarely win by 70 to 75 percent. And pick up a few additional percentages along the way at the expense of the disarray in the camp of the opposition.

Instead, Tronvoll interprets EPRDF’s landslide victory as “*the re-establishment of the country as a one-party state.*” From the frying pan to the fire as they say, Tronvoll even goes further to warn us that “*total closure of plural democratic representation in the country will feed into recruitment to the many armed opposition movements roaming the Ethiopian countryside.*” Never mind that it is very rarely that ‘many armed opposition movements’ roam around in a totalitarian country. Tronvoll’s biggest mistake is confusing the phenomenon of dominant-party with single-party dictatorship. Granted, Ethiopia today fits the typology of a dominant party state as did, at one time or another, Malaysia, Japan, Mexico or even Sweden. All other things being equal, the EPRDF does not have to make any concession to any opposition party (loyal or otherwise) to govern or implement its policies. It is also more likely to win several successive rounds of multiparty elections to come as the ruling parties in the above mentioned countries have for many years in a row ---some for decades on end. Unlike a one-party state,

²⁰ *Ibid*, P., 10

²¹ *Ibid* , p., 14

however, there is a limit that the EPRDF cannot exceed. First and foremost it has to uphold the constitution and govern accordingly. By no means can the EPRDF abuse its mandate by, say, abrogating the democratic provisions of the constitution *i.e.* freedom of association, of expression, of movement, of due process and the right to vote and stand in election *etc.* In the particular Ethiopia context, the ruling party has an equally important obligation to honor the rights of nationalities to self-rule in their regional states and shared jurisdiction at the federal level of governance.

It would be tedious to go on citing every single feature that separates a totalitarian state from dominant-party governance. It would be sufficient to simply point out that, in the exercise of governmental power, a totalitarian state is not restrained by the constitutional limits enumerated above. It is apt now to end the discussion by a brief comment on Tronvoll's last threat-filled closing remark that *the "total closure of plural democratic representation in the country will feed into recruitment to the many armed opposition movements roaming the Ethiopian countryside"*. As so often, Tronvoll does not claim to say these things himself: rather he incases it 'in inverted commas' as a direct quote from anonymous people which the reader has no way of verifying. This is how he prefaces his frightening forecast, "*Many opposition leaders, as well as local academic observers fear...*" and that the ranks of armed opposition movements would swell as a result of the totalitarian election outcome. Little does Tronvoll know that neither the opposition leaders whose views he echoes, nor his academic friends will be the first to enlist in these phantom "*armed opposition movements roaming the Ethiopian countryside.*" They know that the only ones roaming around the country are frantic expatriate academics who are determined to de-legitimize and ultimately undo the lawful government of Ethiopia. Yet, as it does not have the prerogatives of a totalitarian state, there is very little that the government can do to prevent to this kind of propaganda from circulating around under a glossy academic cover. All it can do is continue to rally the public behind its democratic development agenda as it is only answerable to the Ethiopian people and the Ethiopian people alone.

