Logarithms of Election
Politics in Ethiopia
Why Medrek Lost!
Genenew Assefa
# List of Acronym

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Overture¹

In the lead-up to the 4th general election, foreign media analysts frequently picked Medrek as the likelier contender that could seriously challenge, even possibly upset, the incumbent. Medrek, however, was defeated by huge margins at every election district, save one. Though bunk, the media pre-election forecast, nonetheless, was not totally off the mark. Indeed, considering what it was up against, Medrek has certainly done well. For it alone has received the second highest aggregate vote -- a no mean achievement in the grand scheme of things. Granted, a pitiful one parliamentary seat was by no means what Medrek had in mind when it entered the race. Alas, whatever ambition it may have harbored, it was not to be. For down to almost the last 547 electoral districts, voters seemed to have been unanimous in the opinion that even one more opposition MP was one too many. In a cryptic sense perhaps, this may well be the voters’ way of sending a symbolic message that crushing consequences would follow if any party, like the opposition did in 2005, deflate the value of their vote. Dismal as the situation might be, one must, however, try to look at the bright side. Since what we are dealing with here is the indeterminate fluidity of an election bout where hazarding facile predictions invariably invites disappointment.

No doubt, on paper Medrek looked promising because it entered the election on the combined political strength of several parties, each with its own previous election experience. As a coalition, nonetheless, May 2010 was Medrek’s first candidacy. Losing to a governing party that staked it reelection bid on a spectacular 7-year record of over 11 percent annual growth rate is, therefore, not exactly the mother of all defeats. What counts is that Medrek has lived up to expectation. To repeat ourselves, it has certainly crossed the post ahead of all other opposition parties. Obviously this has to count for something. Not least, because, as it is often the case, competing parties are ranked by their election performance. Thus, Medrek can take comfort in its hard earned recognition as the leading cluster of opposition parties of the year. And hopefully, shorn of its extremist tendencies that intermittently surfaced during the campaign, it could potentially continue to be a relevant voice: Though mute, in all likelihood, might be whatever it may possibly have to say. This is not after all a terrible political fate for Medrek to be despondent about. For like the other opposition parties it could even face relegation or total eclipse as EPRDF’s dominant-party status looms large and congeal into an all too pervasive reality. Indeed, given the ruling party’s impressive feat in launching the country in an unprecedented development trajectory, this reality would scarcely be seen, even by strict democratic standards, as a strange anomaly. At present, in fact, Ethiopian is entering a decisive phase in

¹ This is a sequel to “POLITICAL PARTIES & THE ETHIOPIAN 2010 ELECTION RESULT” That appeared on Aigaforum web site (www.aigaforum.com)
which her economy is poised to double in the next five years or so. If, as it
probably would, the ruling party succeeds in realizing its currently much-
discussed Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP), the phenomenon of
dominant-party is bound to be the enduring hallmark of the country’s political
landscape for years, if not, for decades to come.

**Expectations**

One telling reminder of this scenario is the staggering margin by which the
EPRDF defeated the entire opposition camp, Medrek included. Alas -- a rout --
is the only expression that comes to mind when one casts even a cursory
glance at the opposition’s electoral meltdown. The news must have come as a
shocking surprise to the pundits that never prepared themselves or their
unsuspecting audience for such a debacle. For until the first telling returns
were posted, most were certain about the precisions of their own
overoptimistic predictions. Overly confident as they were, they were willing to
bate on their favorite’s i.e. Medrek’s chances of carrying, at least, majority
Woredas of Addis Ababa, and a sizable number of regional election districts in
Amhara, Tigray and Oromia. Perhaps the reason why the foreign media in
particular overrated Medrek’s prospects may have to do with two factors that
admittedly set it apart from previous coalitions.

**Coalition Politics in Federal Ethiopia**

First, it is an undeniable fact that collectively, the individual parties that
makeup the Medrek block had more legislative representation than any in the
ranks of the opposition. This visible parliamentary presence was construed as
a solid indicator of Medrek’s sizable constituency that could potentially grow
into a formidable electoral force. A force which Medrek, as we were told, could
potentially marshal and wrest significant House of Representative seats from
the incumbent in this year’s election. Second, it is equally true that the Medrek
coalition is modeled after the EPRDF which cuts across the core
demographically weighty regional states of the federation. The resemblance in
the outward structures of the rivals was interpreted as Medrek’s other potent
asset by which it could neutralize the incumbent’s advantages and prevail in
the election. Paralleling the EPRDF in terms of ethnic diversity was, therefore,
seen as the missing link that Medrek needed to finish what its predecessor had
started. This was Medrek’s silver bullet, as it were, which the CUD never cared
to posses as much by design as by lack of comprehension: Namely that, pan-
Ethiopian rhetoric notwithstanding, no mono-ethnic party or a coalition of
parties that caters to the urban population or to a single ethno-regional state
can unseat the EPRDF. It is equally naïve to think that the ruling party can be
undone by any CUD-like campaign tailored to appeal to formerly dominant-
nationality concentrations of voters. Nor is it possible to end EPDRF’s
incumbency by mobilizing the string of Amharic-speaking urban enclaves that
straddle the country below the River Nile.
Admittedly, in this connection, the Medrek leadership seems to have grasped this truism that eluded many which came and went before it. No wonder Medrek’s precursors vanished without leaving much behind that can be appreciated as salutary. What we are driving at here is that voting in Ethiopia is conditioned by its election laws that reflect the singularities and compositeness of the reality of its ethno-linguistically structured federalism. Recognition of this given in terms of strategizing a credible election campaign with realistic chances of success is often overlooked. As we saw time and again, most opposition parties lacked, on the one hand, a robust acknowledgment of the plurality of the federal makeup; And, on the other hand, an organizational configuration with a decent level of inclusiveness at the highest decision-making hierarchy that reflects the diversity of the citizenry.

Nor have we seen a contender with a political program that concurrently address region-specific and trans-regional issue that often take center stage during an election year. Much less, a coalition of opposition parties that reflects and articulates the multiplicity of local and inter-regional concerns that shape public opinion across the country’s horizontal and vertical cleavages and gender divide. Unfortunately, such a typology of structuration does not seem to enter the political calculation of the Ethiopian opposition. In large measure, this explains why they lack staying-power. Indeed most tend to inadvertently shorten their political longevity often times by their own incomprehension of the political logarithm that governs political competition in the Ethiopian federation. Yet, as if the Ethiopian constitution prohibits alternative modes of political association, including --- ideological, economic, inter-regional interests, or any other associative grounds, but religion -- they often blame the country’s ethnic political structure for their own failure. And, constantly resort to denigrating the federation as an alibi, as it were, for their own inability to adapt to the system including their own ineptitude to utilize to optimal advantage the ample space it avails them. On the contrary, opposition parties’ preferred response at every difficult encounter is to endlessly lament the federal order. Forgetting as ever that the Ethiopian federation was not imposed from above: But willed into existence from below by the overwhelming majority of right-bearing citizens.

In fact, strictly viewed from this perspective, the reality in Ethiopia does not typify ethnic politics per se. If by that we mean the often pejorative definition of ethnic politics as an ontologically exclusionary organizing principle. A system, as we are often reminded, that pits one group of citizens against another by artificial constructs of identity markers of self and ‘other.’ But Ethiopia’s system of governance is a coming-together federation of autonomous nations and nationalities whose interlocutors willingly and freely entered a covenant anchored in bedrock principles of shared and self-rule. Thus, access to political decision-making in Ethiopia is not a zero-sum game in which policymakers are routinely plucked from the same ethnic background.
Unlike the scenario in ethnic-based polities founded under dissimilar historical and political matrix, power in Ethiopia is diffused throughout the ethno-linguistic governance units. Pursuant to the federal laws of the country, it is a shared responsibility that cannot be concentrated in the hands of a single claimant, compelling though its claim to numerical superiority, socio-cultural advancement, or other real or imagined intrinsic attributes.

In sum, regardless of demographic size, endowment of resources, educational head-start or the lack thereof, no one ethnic group can be permanently superordinate or perpetually subordinate. In consequence, the level of political decision-making at the federal level can only be held by an inclusive political enterprise that must command cross-regional allegiance. And, can only acquire legitimacy through the voluntary consent of citizens in at a minimum of two regional states via compulsory periodic elections based on universal suffrage. Thus, the federal system in Ethiopia in which, A) every single nationality has at least one seat in the second chamber of the legislature branch and, B) where representation in the lower house is determined by population, no single ethnic group can ever be a parliamentary majority. Ergo, this built-in mechanism vitiates against political monopoly and places limits on the exercise of executive power. That is why no governing party can neither frame nor implement policies that permanently favor one ethno-regional state at the expense of another.

Yet ethnic federalism in Ethiopia is indiscriminately impugned, at times, as a 'divide-and-rule' scheme imposed on the majority by an edgy regime of mostly minority extraction. And, at other times, its identity centeredness is dismissed as a primordial project detrimental to the most cherished of the Western traditions, i.e., individual right. The loudest in the crescendo of condemnations of ethnic federalism are, of course, the extremist elements in the Ethiopian Diaspora. Partly, this is because they are challenged by a toxic mix of ignorance and fanatical adherence to a retrograde political agenda that has no resonance inside Ethiopia, except among the remnants of the discredited past. The fanatical groupings in Diaspora are, therefore, averse to examine the source of own their visceral animus towards the Ethiopian political order. Had they been self-reflective even for a fraction of the times they spend demonizing the EPRDF, they would have been a little smarter. Perhaps then, as it were, they would have been cleaver enough to hide their transparent political bankruptcy. Self-examination would also have helped them realize that the core premise of their own ultra nationalistic shrill propaganda does not rest on any higher principle. But squarely lies on nothing more than parochialism, hidden though it may be, behind a smokescreen of supra-ethnic nationalist rhetoric.

Since most lack even a modicum of mental inquisitiveness, these extremist never pause to ask one obvious question. Namely, why ethnic-entrepreneurism and its attendant destabilizing consequences are absent in
Ethiopia? And, why if it exists at all, its tentacles never extend beyond the local setting or cause unmanageable problems? Much less acquire the political momentum to influence political agenda at the level of the regional states, let alone, at federal level. Most are oblivious that this is essentially because federal order in Ethiopia was designed on set of categorical recognition of: A) the singularity and overlaps in the multiplicity of the cultural legacies of the Ethiopian population mosaic. B) The imperative of addressing the history of political inequality between and among its citizens. And C) awareness that government at all levels has a constitutional obligation to furnish a policy environment that ensures the Ethiopian peoples’ right to development. A right, no less, that extends up to and including equitable distribution of wealth and resources across the nations and nationalities of the federation where sovereignty lies in Ethiopia. Even less among the enemies of the federal order in the Diaspora seems to have any inkling that the Ethiopian federation has effectively appropriated the politics of recognition. Shielding thereby the body politic, as it has, against destabilizing currents. Namely, against the potential divisiveness inherent in ethnic politics that for years bled the country: And, against the ominous danger that inevitably arises when identity-based claims are denied free political expression within the consensually framed constitutional legal limits. All this, of course, appears to be rocket science to the narrow-minded bigots of the Ethiopian opposition ensconced in the citadels of the Western metropolis.

**Overlap & Contrast**

Let us, therefore, now resume our story from the vantage point of the above observation of this country’s federal arrangement. Though it scored disappointingly less than the CUD at this year’s elections, Medrek had the right ethnic mix that, theoretically, at any rate, rendered it fit to aim for the highest political office in federal Ethiopia. The leaders of its constituent parties could certainly lay claim to some real or imagined indigenous followers in the major ethno-linguistic regional states. This includes the Southern Nations & Nationalities, Oromia, Tigray as well as polyglot Addis Ababa. Hence for these two reasons — parliamentary presence and ethnic diversity --- there was much hope that Medrek would at least do better than its pitiful election results suggests.

As it will be recalled, the Ethiopian Federalist Democratic Unity Forum -- Medrek was founded in 2010 as a loose coalition of eight parties. Among these include, the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), which emerged from the CUD shipwreck under a new name. The party was initially led by Birtukan Midekssa who sadly forfeited her citizenal rights when, in a flitting moment of crowd-pleasing urge, she violated the terms of her conditional pardon grant. No doubt, whether or not the time afforded her to retract her ill-advised snooty remarks crediting her release to external political pressure, was technically in keeping with the law was debated again and again. At the end of
the day, nonetheless, she was kept behind bars only to reaper on the scene on a second pardon plea. In the meantime, the UDJ leadership fell on Gizachew Shiferaw and Hailu Araya. As if to compensate for their loss of a high profile figurehead, these men quickly recruited Siye Abraha — an ex-TPLF ranking official, and Negasso Gidada, the former president of post-Derg Ethiopia.

The two CUD veterans are also credited for negotiating the party’s entry into the Medrek coalition over the objections of a small group of party members (later expelled) led by Professor Mesfine Woldemariam. It seems that, for once this incorrigibly querulous professor had truth on his side - a rarity indeed as he is known for pointing accusatory fingers at any office-holder who might not have a flawless record in the execution of his assigned public responsibility. Responsibility, which he (Mesfine Woldemariam), despite his endless self-righteous monologues and sermons on moral courage, would never shoulder. But, in this instance, the professor might have had the better of the argument when he raised objections against UDJ’s marriage with the Medrek coalition. For, although the UDJ claims to be the legitimate heir to the CUD legacy, it nonetheless was unfaithful to its mother party’s core principles, particularly the ideological injunction against forging any political linkage with ethno-political parties. The tactical pitfalls of this stance especially in the context of Ethiopia, was not lost on Gizachew Shiferaw and Hailu Araya. Ignoring professor Mesfine’s objection, therefore, they pushed the UDJ in the opposite direction, courting parties organized around ethnic claims that the CUD dreaded most. But the two men were selective in their choices. Among the identity-based parties, they picked those that, for some strange reason, tend to pander to the sentiment now dwindling, but vocal urban circles that, unknowingly or otherwise, refuse to come to terms with the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Republic.

Diversity

We are referring here to the ONC. A party led by Merera Gudina whose recent eviction from parliament was roundly applauded as ‘good riddance’. Another Oromo-right advocate enlisted in the tenuous Medrek alliance is the OFDM, better known by its senior deputy, Bulcha Demekssa: A former public official of the ancient regime who ran a very successful campaign in the 2005 election, and subsequently served his party, though not always admirably, as a one-term MP. Among the well-known non-Oromo opposition personalities who jumped on the Medrek bandwagon is, of course, the indefatigable architect of unworkable political alliance, Professor Beyene Petros. Unsurprisingly, woefully narrow as his political base is, Beyene did not wait to be invited. He instantly registered under the Medrek umbrella his newest party -- the ESDFU whose ostentatious sounding name tellingly betrays his own seemingly irresolvable dilemma. What gave Medrek a new dimension in terms of political scope is, however, Arena. A hastily formed regional contender which,
for whatever its worth, made the 2010 election in Tigray a colorful event than any previous contest. Without doubt, credit goes to Arena and its founder Gebru Asrat, for opening Tigray to multiparty election.

Unfortunately, from the very outset the poor man was caught in a double bind. Like Siye Abraha, Gebru Assrat, try as much as he did, could by no means discredit the TPLF before first demolishing his own administrative credential as president of the regional state for almost ten years. Thus, though this was the only time it faced a contender that came close to be regarded as a worthy opponent, the TPLF had no difficulty in winning the multiparty election in Tigray by a landslide. The remaining parties in the Medrek starting lineup i.e., the EDUM and the SDFC, are too small to discuss in any length. That is why their withdrawal from Medrek shortly after its founding hardly caused a stir; much less cost the coalition a political price. Perhaps to the extent that it deprived it of a Somali token, SDFC’s exit may have had adverse symbolic impact on Medrek’s image. In real terms, nonetheless, the fallout had scarcely any ramification on the coalition’s election performance. In fact, despite the two parties’ decision to drop out of Medrek’s ticket, the coalition leaders entered the election bubbling with confidence in their ability to score big at the polls.

Indeed, as far as Medrek was concerned, there was some ground to be upbeat about as the election date approached. For starters, its leaders felt that, given their ethnic diversity, they could freely blast the EPRDF as an unpatriotic government without any fear of being rebuked in retaliation as a backward-looking inveterate chauvinist. A charge, as it will be recalled, which effectively alienated the CUD from the overwhelming majority of the voting population in the historically mistreated regional states. Moreover, unlike the CUD, Medrek did not promise to dismantle the federation of nations and nationalities. Rather, its leaders claimed to honor its basic principles with no less commitment than the EPDRF. Nor did its candidates champion individual liberty to the determinant of group rights as their CUD counterparts did during the last election with nauseating repetition. All in all, in a sharply contrasting vain, Medrek appeared on the political stage with the trappings of a democratic opposition. Determined, so it seemed, as all opposition parties are in democracies, to challenge the government without being disloyal to the state.

**Grandstanding**

However, no sooner the campaign started than Medrek resorted to grandstanding, which conjured up memories of the CUD’s 2005 reckless behavior. Indeed Medrek’ initial swagger, caused some level of apprehension and fear that its candidacy might cause another round of election-related public disorder. First, out of all the parties that lined up for the 4th general
election bout, Medrek alone failed to endorse the 2010 election Code of Conduct. This was a shocker, because the provisions of the Code of Conduct are a compilation of best practices consensually adopted to avoid a repeat of the 2005 crisis. Nonetheless, with an air of a boastful undefeated heavyweight champion, the Medrek leadership insisted that, since it is the only true opposition, it deserved especial treatment. It declined to engage in any election-related multilateral talks until and unless its unexpressed issues were first resolved by an exclusive one-to-one interface with the ruling party. Thus, Medrek had the unenviable distinction of being the sole exception to enter the race without any commitment to a more peaceful, a more credible and a more democratic election. Apparently, by refusing to abide by any pre-election agreement aimed at improving the quality of the electoral process, Medrek hoped to fulfill a twofold objective. One on one level, it reckoned it could sell itself as the only political force that has the courage to turn down any overtures of negotiation from the EPRDF except under its own terms. And, as the only party daring enough to leave its options open, free from any restrictive pre-election-agreement that commits it to a clearly delineated latitudes of electoral behavior. Secondly by such posturing Medrek thought it could placate those who, as in the days of the CUD, still confuse grandstanding with real political clout.

But, the frivolousness of its rational for not signing the all-party agreement on a code of conduct only raised suspicious doubt about its leaders' real motive. In fact, public suspicion of their true intentions mounted when the bigwigs inundated the media by inauspicious statements regarding the possible challenges that might follow in the heels of the electoral faceoff. Mostly, reminiscent of the CUD, these statements harped on the same kind of grime forecast pertaining to the grave consequences that would follow if Medrek were to be dissatisfied with the election process or the outcome. As some may recall, the CUD leaders repeatedly foretold of bad tidings to come, if their outlandish preconditions were unmet. A self-fulfilling prophesy, if there was ever one, which they themselves were all along planning to set in motion behind the screen. We have cited such like utterances accredited notably to Merera, Beyene, and Siye in our previous posting. Hence, there is no point in repeating it here. Perhaps, reciting Siye's contribution in this regard might be illustrative. For his not only most jarringly reechoes the ominous forecasts that CUD wished had come true, but had a globalist ring to it. In a lengthy article which we extensively quoted verbatim elsewhere, Siye outdid everyone by pleading with Obama to carefully monitor the Ethiopian election. Lest, he opined, the Whitehouse is caught unprepared by the region-wide spillover effect of the clash that, in his view, was bound to occur in the course of the Ethiopian elections. Alas, it has to be asked, how less foreboding is this than the bloodcurdling statement Hailu Shawel was supposed to have made at his 2005 Press Club appearance in Washington DC. To the shock of his audience, he is reported to have estimated that 15,000 people would have had to die before the 2005 political impasse could have been resolved. Luckily, there is
another statement which we cite below that shows the less frightening, but not less reckless, side of Sieye's fearsome imaginative scope.

At a Medrek press conference held a few weeks before the actual election day, Siye roared, “If I lose in Temben, it means that the election has been rigged,” This is obviously the same kind self-serving logic that the CUD relied on, as we painfully learned, to furnish the ground for the reckless street riots that it incited when the election result proved unpalatable to its top leaders. Fortunately, in this year's election the situation greatly improved after the Code of Conduct was written into law, binding on all competing parties regardless of their initial stance on the matter. In consequence, Medrek’s leaders somewhat tempered their scary rhetoric. The hawkish elements in its hierarchy also refrained from signaling covert nod of approval to the provocative activities of their impressionable youngish recruits. Incidentally, these prosecutable offences were not unnoticed. But mindful of those ready to tarnish the election process on the slightest excuse, the government chose not to pursue the matter beyond cautioning the culprits. Such moderation on the part of the government is one of the reasons why a permissive atmosphere prevailed at least in terms of leniency in interpreting election-related misdeeds.

**Debating Performance**

As the pre-voting climate was by all measures unintimidating, Medrek's performance during the televised election debates was, nevertheless, rather cagey. For the most part its debating team appeared subdued and passive. This was a letdown for those who expected Medrek, as the biggest coalition running for office, would make an impassioned plea for its cause. Sadly it was overshadowed by Ledetu Ayalew of the EDP. He alone struck the audience as the feistiest and the most prepared among the opposition figures that arose to do battle with the incumbent in public. It is a pity that Medrek passed up the only chance it had to clearly explicate and rearticulate its political manifesto to millions of eager media audiences. This was an unfortunate slipup indeed considering that Medrek had never circulated its program in print for the wider reading public. Instead, the leaders had thought it wise to disseminate the document through the internet. Granted, this is the cheapest and fastest way of disseminating a bulky print-material to a large audience. The problem, however, is that most voters in Ethiopia have no internet access. They obviously rely on other sources to make informed decisions to determine which of the competing parties was fit to govern. At any rate, throughout the debate, what all Medrek could do at best was, cast doubt on the government’s record of development which sadly did not play well with voters. But, when the going got tough, Medrek tried to score points by reiterating relevant chapters from its Manifesto that few had a chance to read.
Manifsto / Privatization

As those that might have accessed it would agree, Medrek’s sixty-five page interim manifesto is a virtual compendium of part unrealizable promises and part normative declaratives. Overlooking that the devil is in the detail, page after page the text reiterates how Medrek stands for more democracy, more justice, more unity, more prosperity etc, etc. Worse even, when it comes to what Medrek opposes, except one tepidly inserted suggestion that calls for two official languages, the document has nothing new to offer. It merely rehashes the same old objections against the “usual suspects”, as it were. These are, of course, public ownership of land, the right to secession and the country’s landlocked status. In an election year, it is commonplace for parties to flag up a long wish-list as if all the enumerated items can be delivered. But the public knows that, though a cliché, politics is the art of the possible. In other words, voters are aware that it is one thing to dish out declaration of intent. The point, however, is to show the ways and means by which a party intends to realize its political objective within the constraints and limits of the objective situation. Viewed from this perspective, like most opposition parties, Medrek’s Manifesto belabors the same issues without any new insight.

For instance, it does not show us how privatization of land would increase productivity, or serve as collateral to access credit, or better ensure transferability of land entitlements than the present public ownership regime. Today the optimal output is around 80 quintals per hectare. Under the GTP, the planned objective is to reach an average of 35 quintals per hectare across the country. According to the planners’ calculations, this means that agriculture would play its envisioned role in doubling the Ethiopian economy within the time span of the current five-year plan. If our pre-Derg memory of agricultural productivity serves us right, it is difficult to see how commercialization of smallholdings could scale the average output already achieved in this country in advance of the commencement of the GTP. This is not only peculiar to our country. The experience of China, the world’s newest economic miracle, reinforces our contention that remarkable development is possible under a system of public ownership of land provided the requisite development infrastructures are in place. On this score, even Medrek cannot deny the achievements made in the area of essential rural development networks under the stewardship of the EPRDF.

When we turn our gaze to the issue of using private plots as collateral, again we find Medrek’s argument unpersuasive. For we cannot imagine how the Commercial Bank of Ethiopia or the growing private variety could avail greater access to a widely dispersed agrarian clientele than the regional microfinance institutions whose performance is attracting headlines. Besides, doesn’t the reigning investment policy include a credit-incentive package to any bona-fide prospective private investor in the commercial agricultural
sector? The answer is, indeed it does. The same objection can be raised against Medrek’s issue of transferability in which it argues that privatization has greater advantage over what exists at present. However, given the widespread coverage of the land entitlement certifications and the moratorium on redistribution, this presumed advantage is clearly nullified by the current practice where the holder has the right to enter a land-lease contract with any interested party or bequeath his/her usufructuary rights to any beneficiary. To recap, as we have pointed out earlier, a party can say whatever it thinks might please voters. The challenge, however, is to clearly layout the means by which it intends to deliver what it propagates. Thus, Medrek can promise to privatize land or repeal the secession clause or challenge the country’s language policy. But the politically literate segment of the population, whose opinion weighs on ordinary voters, knows that this is easier said than done. Indeed most voters know that such change can only be achieved by constitutional amendment. So Medrek would have had to win the election in all the federal regions to initiate an amendment process. To its chagrin, however, such motion could easily be stopped in its tracks by even a small regional state as Harrari.

**Secession**

We find the same thoughtlessness when we refocuse our attentions on Medrek’s second and unoriginal objection against the secessionist clause in the Ethiopian constitution. To begin with, to think that attacking Article 39 would pay political dividend 20 years after its promulgation, is not very realistic. Granted, during the early 1990s, marked as the years were by understandable uncertainties and fear of possible implosion, calling for a repeal of Article 39 may have had political advantages. Since then, however, as a rallying cry, this emotive agenda has virtually become a moot issue. This is because Ethiopia has not only evolved into a peaceful and tranquil country characterized by a solid political stability. Thanks to its federal arrangement that freed it from the legacy of incessant internecine conflict that for decades compounded its abject poverty, Ethiopia has also become one of the world’s fastest growing nations. Today, in fact, its leadership is determined to end the country’s dependency on foreign aid, and is equally resolved, to galvanize the entire people to catch up with the world’s middle-income countries in 10 to 15 years time span\(^2\). Logically, this could not have been imagined without the empowerment and commitment of the multitude of nationalities that constitute the federation. No doubt in the absence of a freely given consent in exchange for a constitutionally guaranteed recognition of the rights to self-rule, up to and including political separation, enduring peace, much less, the level of development we are witnessing at present could not have been possible. Under such positively altered political and economic environment, it is almost

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\(^2\) The Economist 2010
impossible for any opposition to derive any political mileage out of what turned out to be a misplaced concern where Article 39 was concerned.

To allay any doubt about the validity of this claim, one only has to consider the flipside of the scenario. Assume, if you will, that in this day-in-age there is no federalism in Ethiopia capable of accommodating the legitimate demands and claims of the numerous nationalities that makeup the country. Let us say, even one among of the sizable regional states gradually succeeds in mobilizing the region to rise up against the inequities of living under a polity unwilling to recognize legitimate claim to national equality. Surely, in this case, no legal provision that outlaws secession could prevent the aggrieved party from eventually raising the specter of separation that would inevitably lock the country in another round of destructive civil war. We need not search far for a painful reminder of the validity of this prognostic. We simply have to recall how Eritrea, against overwhelming military odds, managed to achieve its secessionist agenda. It did so, no less, against a country whose regime often equated Eritrea’s separation with decapitation of the head. Hence, at the very least, it should be clear by now that the mere inclusion of Article 39 neither causes nor encourages the political desire to secede. What it does, as our experience plainly shows, is mitigate the circumstances under which it arises.

Seaport

By way of wrapping up this section of our discussions, let us briefly see if Medrek’s third objection to the status quo could stand scrutiny. Like the CUD before it, Medrek declares that it would spare no effort in its determination to regain a sea outlet to Ethiopia by: A) effective diplomacy, and B) recourse to international law. Nobody in Ethiopia would mind if this country were to have free access to, not just any old harbor, but to a good natural seaport. More so today than at any time ever as the country’s economy continues to grow and increasingly integrates with the global market. There is no question too that being landlocked has an adverse impact on a country’s GDP which economist estimate to hover around 02 percent in Africa. But, at the risk of sounding cynical, one could raise an empirically grounded question whether the Ethiopian economy grew faster with or without its former port of Assab. It is futile to pursue this matter here, because the Ethiopian peculiar situation does not negate the general observation about the positive correlation between owning a port and a country’s GDP. In light of the weight that this matter

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3 2009 World Bank Report

4 Paul Collier, 2008, The Bottom Billion, why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it. Oxford university press (P. 58)
should be given, Medrek and all the other opposition parties deserve credit for pledging to help Ethiopia in this department. Assuming, that is, their intention is grander than attracting votes in the cheap by blaming the EPRDF for Ethiopia’s loss of a seaside real-estate of vital strategic value. If that is not the case, (it is probably not) the opposition is very mistaken. For the public knows that the opposition is really after is not more access to ports in the region per se: But, one under the sovereign jurisdictional control of the Ethiopian state, preferably under a non-EPRDF government.

First, it is not altogether clear if there is any international law that entitles every nation accesses to sea irrespective of its geographical location. If that were true, then, the opposition might for once be justified in casting suspicious doubt on the government’s patriotic credentials. It could doubtless legitimately indict the EPRDF for dereliction of duty or unpardonable negligent failure to invoke the power of international law and bring closure to Ethiopia’s suffocation on account of its needless decent into a landlocked country. Yet, as in so many other famous cases, the opposition’s claim here is again bogus. For if the EPRDF could be accused of being unpatriotic on this sore, so must all the elected and unelected governments of the 47 landlocked countries in the world. Surely, if there was even a slight chance of ending Ethiopia’s landlocked status through international law, given its commitment to development, the EPRDF would not have rested even for a moment before exhausting the possibility. It seems to us that this is just another vote-catching gimmick and read hearing that betrays lack of levelheadedness.

Second, the claim to gain by diplomacy what, as we have shown, cannot be acquired by international law is equally dubious. To begin with, the only country likely to be approached by any diplomatic inducement is Eritrea. Unfortunately, as the whole world knows, the regime in this small country with a port to spear, neither responds to diplomacy nor submits to international law. In fact, as we have said so on another occasion, the impossibility of the idea of acquiring a seaport by means of diplomacy reminds us of a ruling passed in favor the plaintive in the Merchant of Venice. The ruling, nonetheless, placed the poor merchant in an impossible bind where he was granted the right to retrieve from his debtor, “A pound of flesh, but not a drop of blood.” Be that as it may, if this year’s election result is any indicator, Medrek did not, as it had expected, scored much points by playing the seaport card. May be the next time around it might be luckier. But it has to wait for another five more years and hope that by then a new government in Eritrea had assumed office with a leadership favorably inclined to swap one of the country's ports for what, only the Ethiopian opposition knows. We did not go to this length to prove that Medrek lost the election because it made undeliverable promises alone. In fact, since its manifesto was never readily available, few voters, as it would seem could have dissected its contents and base their decision as to which party deserved their vote. The fundamental reason why Medrek was defeated lies elsewhere.
**Dissonance**

Primarily it rests on the fact that, like the rest of the opposition, Medrek was faced with an almost unbeatable opponent in the guise of the EPRDF. For it is very rarely that an opposition does well much less come close to unseat an incumbent in an election held in the wake of an unprecedented 11 percent economic growth seven years running\(^5\). Naturally, given the lessons it learned about the politics of electioneering from its previous experience, coupled with its phenomenal economic achievements, the 2010 election was for EPRDF to lose. Those who might fail to notice the nuances of this argument could raise objection by citing the CUD’s impressive score against the EPRDF during the 3\(^{rd}\) general elections. Our rebuttal to this objection is simple. All we have to do is remind readers that accelerated development had barely begun at the time. In 2005, therefore, the country’s upward trajectory could not have been readily felt by the majority of the electorate. By May 2010, however, the impressive development surge could not be denied. Indeed since then ubiquitous signs of development and telling indicators of better times to come abound up and down the country. It can hardly come as a surprise, then, that the EPRDF’s urban-approval rating skyrocketed, presaging as it did a huge victory to its candidates. This massive developmental change obviously cannot tell the whole story why Medrek was trounced at the polls. A compounding second-order explanation has to be ventured. Only then can we fully explain why the individual parties in the Medrek coalition relinquished all their legislative seats and lost their prestige and honor that comes with serving the public as a parliamentary opposition party. From our perspective, this has to do with the dissonance of the ideo-political scaffoldings that held the Medrek coalition together. Let us explain.

Readers might think that we are about to contradict ourselves here because earlier we had argued that Medrek’s strength lay in the representativeness of its coalition that pretty much covers all the major nationalities of the federation. We still hold this to be true. In terms of political reach, Medrek is certainly an improvement over the CUD. For, at least during the 2010 elections, Medrek had hosted diversity and fielded an inclusive array of ethnically diverse candidates. But in terms of ideo-political coherence, the CUD seemed to have had the better of Medrek. As bluntly stated in its founding document, no party could join the CUD coalition before renouncing ethnic politics and by extension its allegiance to the lawful nationality-based federal order. Readers would agree that the CUD and the constitutional system in Ethiopia could not have co-existed for long. Alas, it was one or the other. Polarized as the situation was, the question that confronted the defenders of the constitution was, ’to be or not to be.’ Which side was “not to be” need not detain us here. What needs to be underscored at this point is the contrasting

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\(^5\) See the 2009 IMF report
but equally flawed pattern of coalition-making that Medrek and the CUD followed. For instance, the CUD was right in insisting on some level ideological uniformity among its constituting parties. Where it floundered is in its choice of an anti-federalist ideo-political doctrine which alienated it from the majority of the electorate in almost all the regional states. Whereas Medrek, on the other hand, got burned for ignoring the importance of doctrinal coherence, by focusing exclusively on its otherwise correct observation. Namely, that no general election could be won without an inclusive organizational structure that draws it membership from, and appeal to, voters in regions with large parliamentary seats.

Sound as this appraisal is, Medrek nevertheless entered the election with a self-defeating political coalition. In consequence its constituent parts canceled each other out at the polls. Stated differently, in the eyes of the electorate, the Medrek coalition appeared as a confusingly aberrant alliance fraught with a mutually-incompatible political orientation. There is a lot to recommend this public perception which, much to Medrek’s chagrin, shaped voters’ decision on election-day. Consider, if you will, the CUD’s torchbearer the UDJ, which constitutes the centerfold of the Medrek camp. As the public knows, the former high-ranking CUD leaders who now man the UDJ built their reputation and political following on a virulent campaign against ethnic federalism, Article 39, Eritrean independence, and the country’s primary-school language policy.

Obviously this hidebound political thinking and platform had a huge appeal in conservative urban centers. Including among the victims of the Derg’s propaganda and the not yet disabused segments of the former dominant-nationality. Even in this year’s May elections, the UDJ leaders felt that they need not offer anything new. They sought to cash in on the resiliency of this platform and its identification with their leadership. They expected to win as many, if not, a lot more votes than the CUD amassed in 2005. Somewhat surprisingly, their projection was not exactly wishful thinking as they did not come out of the election empty-handed. Out of the 40% aggregate vote cast to the opposition in Addis Ababa, 80% of it was credited to the UDJ. Thanks to the UDJ, this is, of course, Medrek’s biggest win anywhere in the country. Our hunch is that, the UDJ would probably have done better in this city had it run on its own. Without, that is, the liabilities of the other parties and personalities in the Medrek coalition whose politics is unpalatable to the kind of urban voters that the UDJ could have attracted.

The UDJ, therefore, may have sold itself short when it struck a deal with ethnic-based parties who, despite their well-known frequent vacillation, by and large claim to speak for single ethnic constituencies. Worse even, potential UDJ voters might have been turned off by the big Medrek personalities i.e., Siye, Negasso, Gebru, and Beyene. For, to varying degrees, these men were directly involved in the ratification of the

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6 See the 4th national election result “www.electionethiopia.org”
constitution that, among other things, recognizes not only group rights but also accommodates legitimate claims to secession. It is not farfetched, then, to conclude that the UDJ may have inadvertently undermined itself, by entering an alliance deemed unholy in the eyes of the very people it pinned its hopes on to win the race for Addis Ababa’s 23 parliamentary seats.  

Consequences

Albeit to a lesser extent, the same logic, but in an inverted order, can explain why Arena-Medrek’s candidates, not least Gebru Asrat and Aragash Adane, including the UDJ’s Siye Abraha, did less than expected in the Tigray elections. Here too, those who, might have otherwise voted for these candidates out of respect, recoiled at the very thought of casting ballot to an alliance in which the UDJ is prominent. At several campaign rallies, voters in Tigray were not shy to openly express their utter disappointment at the candidates’ choice of alliance. For many, the inclusion of these former TPLF leaders on a Medrek slate struck them as a total repudiation of their own legacy and an affront to the people of Tigray. Such perception is understandable, considering that the UDJ is Medrek’s centerfold party. A party which in its former CUD incarnation, as it were, slighted Tigrians as a people who cannot think for themselves, and audaciously campaigned to reverse their hard-won self-rule. A small surprise, then, that out of the entire ballot cast in the region, Arena’s candidates and Siye collectively received only 1.5 per cent of votes. Perhaps, considering that it holds no parliamentary seats and that this was its first election, Arena-Medrek may be excused for its puny result. But by no means can the same apply to parties led by Merera Gudina, Beyene Petros and Bulcha Demekssa. Never mind wining new seats, these parties were humiliated by being forced to handover to EPRDF’s electors the legislative seats which, some among them, had held for several terms.

There is no doubt that as leaders of ethnic-based parties, these men could not have been the high-profile political figures they are without the federal system. Yet, both in and out of parliament they have repeatedly tried to play both sides of the country’s major political fault line. In a cleverish, but ultimately self-defeating exercise, they repeatedly crisscrossed the demarcation that divides the forces that defend the Federal Republic and its domestic and Diaspora opponents alike. At long last, in this election these parties were caught out by their own constituencies and were made to pay dearly for their political acrobatics. Like their counterparts in Tigray, those who sent Beyene, Merara and Bulcha to parliament must have been appalled that the Medrek coalition hinged on the UDJ. For the simple reason that this party is known for its anti-self-determination political campaigns. For citizens in Oromia and the Southern region, therefore, voting for Medrek was tantamount to forfeiting

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7 ibid “www.electionethiopia.org”
their own rights enshrined in the constitution. As the vote tally shows, these voters preferred to throw their lot with the EPRDF, leaving Merera et al, in the lurch. Proof that the same dynamics that spelled Medrek’s demise in Tigray was at work in Oromia and the South, is the slimmest of the vote that these parties received. Collectively, the Medrek candidacy led by Merera and Bulcha only registered 4 per cent of the vote. Whereas Beyene, as it turned out, did slightly better. He at least was not defeated by as a huge margin as his comrades-in-arms.

Alas, nothing more can be said here regarding our contention that, among other reasons, Medrek lost the election on account of the incompatibility of its coalescing parties. To this must, however, be quickly added one more stupendous error its leaders committed. If only because this error at once betrayed Medrek’s amateurishness and its lack of clarity of what it would have done had it won the election. Like others before us, we are hinting at here oddity of Medrek’s decision of campaigning on an interim, as opposed to a settled, program. In fact, Medrek openly declared that its program must be read as a provisional guide, subject to change after the election. It did not occur to the leadership that this was the same as saying ‘Vote First; Ask Later.’ But no electorate, no matter how gullible it might be, could be expected to rush to vote for a party that openly warns the public about the indeterminacy of its plan for the future of the country. Or to a party like Medrek, which reserved the right to leave open the option to (if elected) implement a set of policies other than it had run on.

Compounding this manifest idiosyncrasy was Medrek’s public admission of its own uncertainties regarding the future of its coalition. In light of the opposition’s tendency to fragment into meaningless units, this was unfortunate. Potential voters certainly needed assurances of the sturdiness of the ties that bounded Medrek’s various constituent parties. But, much to their disappointment, at least on one occasion, a party official publicly said that he would be lying if he were to say for sure that Medrek would not break apart at any given point. Though strange, the poor man deserves credit for his candor. His response accurately summed up Medrek’s predicament. For it seems that what Medrek’s leaders were asking voters to trust them with the future of the country without providing in return any guarantee of their own future. Shocking as it seems, these Medrek leaders must have taken the electorate for political imbeciles who, unperturbed by concerns of continuity and discontinuity, would unthinkingly damp their voting cards at any opposition ballot box that first caught their eyes. Or, it must have taken them for a hopeless lot who out of desperation would mortgage their political future to a party whose leaders themselves are clueless about their own continuity as a coalition. As there is little that can be added to this irony, it is apt now to end this paper by broaching how Medrek’s leadership responded to the EPRDF’s landslide victory.
Response

As it will be recalled, hardly a few hours after the polls opened than Gizachew Shiferaw, the current Mederek chairman, shocked the whole world by going public with his preposterous vote-fraud accusations of. Alarming as his behavior was, it was not devoid of humor. What was amusing on many levels is that this selfsame man had made the same kind allegations on the early hours of the 2005 voting day in Addis Ababa. Much to his embracement, it turned out that his former party, the CUD, like the EPRDF in this year’s elections, had swept 22 of the 23 seats. For his own sake, the Medrek chairman quickly weighed the legal consequences that would have ensued if had he stood by his unwarranted accusation. Thus, he speedily and publicly retracted every single word before sundown. But, politically embarrassed as the remaining Medrek leadership was by Gizachew’s flip-flop, it was however unprepared to accept the election outcome with grace. Medrek chose to fight it at the rightful legal time and through lawful channels. However, perhaps out of self-doubt about the merit of its grievance, its lawyers built a case around frivolous incidents of irregularities grounded on the preliminary Election Reported issued by the EU-Election Monitoring Team. Unfortunately, the preliminary report is not about the election per se. But, rather it is about the institutional setting under which it was conducted. Medrek, therefore, could not make any headway with its legal battle to reverse the election outcomes. From the lowest to the last court of appeal, the magistrate’s ruling up held the election result.

Defeated though it may be, both at the polls and the legal arena, Mederek, nevertheless, deserves credit for setting one benchmark legal precedent. Granted, given the outcome and the overwhelming public perception of the election process, there was little that Mederek could have done to challenge EPRDF’s landslide victory by extrajudicial activities. At any rate, the fact remains that, in the mediocre annuls of the opposition, it is only Medrek that chose to challenge an election result at every level of the judicial ladder. This admirable obeisance to the legal institutions of the country may auger well for its future. But, not if, for transient political exigency, it remains waded to a coalition of parties with incompatible political outlook and orientations: Especially the kind that includes parties that have serious issues with the constitutional order. For, as the 2010 landslide election clearly suggests, from here on there is no political space in Ethiopia that can accommodate extremist political organizations. This brings us to the conclusion of our subject. What remains to be done to complete the whole cycle is scanning EPRDF’s response to its own landslide election victory along with a survey of the international reaction. To that we shall return in our next posting.