

**Letter submitted to the Editor** re: Helen Epstein's "Cruel Ethiopia" (New York Review of Books, May 17, 2010)

I am astonished that Epstein (NYR, May 17, 2010) calls the EPRDF government "one of the most repressive and dictatorial on the continent" at the moment *after* impressive accomplishments in the socio-economic field, and just *before* national elections. As she rightly acknowledges, the Meles Zenawi regime, for the first time in Ethiopia's history has provided primary education to 94% of all children and opened 20 universities (with 9 more in the next five years), as well as having achieved 10 percent GDP growth over six consecutive years. According to *The Economist* (November 2009), Ethiopia is second only to China as the fastest non-oil-producing economy in the world. In the political field, its accomplishments include creating a democratic constitution based on a multicultural federation and establishing the Human Rights, Ethics and Anti-Corruption, and Ombudsman Commissions.

In a continent where clinging to power is the norm, Meles (only 55) persuaded the party (in its September 2009 meeting) to make a complete generational change of leadership, agreeing to the transfer of power to a younger cohort over the next five years. Thus, Meles will serve only one more term as PM, and this will hopefully contribute to ending Ethiopia's authoritarian political culture. (In July 2009, the party's executive committee had voted [28 to 8] against Meles's request not to be a candidate in the elections.) Both in 2005 and this year, the EPRDF met its self-imposed obligation of ensuring that at least 30 percent of its parliamentary candidates were women. It is the only party in Ethiopia to do so.

Today, some 63 parties are competing in the 2010 elections. The top six parties have conducted nine TV and radio debates so far. All parties represented in parliament had a say in the selection of the National Election Board which will oversee the elections. All competing parties have agreed to a standard electoral code of conduct and dispute resolution mechanism.

By all accounts, the 2005 elections were the freest and fairest in Ethiopian history. The major opposition party (CUD) declined to join the parliament, despite winning 109 seats and 99 percent of the seats in the Addis Ababa city council. The CUD insisted upon trying to de-legitimize the democratic constitutional order. It called for street action that ended by costing 193 lives. Six of the fatalities were police officers mobbed to death.

Ethiopians are enjoying the most peaceful two decades since WWII, the tragic Ethio-Eritrean conflict and the ill-advised intervention in Somalia notwithstanding. Coming at a moment between a long list of socioeconomic and political accomplishments and the upcoming elections, Epstein's article might have the unintended effect of adding to the destabilization of the troubled sub-region.

Alem Habtu

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology  
Queens College / CUNY, Flushing, NY 11367