

“Once the 2010 election passes without any meaningful change, the real contest among rival political and ethnic forces will work itself out in the theater of armed rebellion.”

## Ethiopia Is Headed for Chaos

BERHANU NEGA

When in 1996 I visited the twelfth-century rock-hewn churches of Lalibela for the first time, I experienced conflicting emotions. The ability of my countrymen's forefathers almost a millennium ago to create such an astonishing architectural achievement left me exhilarated and hopeful. Yet the abject poverty and squalor that I confronted right outside these churches left me in despair. How is it that a society that had the capacity to build such beauty so many centuries ago fails to feed itself today?

This conundrum gnawed at me as I returned from Lalibela to the capital, Addis Ababa. There, I posed my question to students in my economic development class at the university. Most of them responded by saying that the churches were the creation of God and saints, who did most of the work under the cover of darkness, while ordinary mortals toiled by day, naively believing that the creations were their own handiwork. In other words, this was the work not of the Ethiopians, but of a superior power.

So too is their miserable fate, most Ethiopians believe. From the now seemingly permanent drought and famine that ravage the land to the absence of basic freedoms in their political life, Ethiopians assume that their fate reflects the “work of God,” which they can do very little to change. The best that an individual can do is just survive.

Whether this fatalism is a product of the major religions that dominate the country, or of other deeply rooted sociocultural phenomena, is a ques-

tion that better-qualified academics can pursue. But one thing is clear to me from the nation's recent history: A combination of enduring poverty and relentless tyranny has robbed Ethiopians of a belief in their ability to determine their own destiny.

The hopelessness that permeates Ethiopian society has, if anything, intensified over time. The country's governance under successive regimes has gone from bad to worse, albeit with different blunders and abuses characterizing the various governments. Sheer backwardness and an inability to adapt to change characterized Emperor Haile Selassie's long rule, which began in 1930 and did not end until 1974. This was followed by 17 years of a socialist military regime, the so-called “Derg,” which mixed futile radical ideology with brutal repression. After that came the cunning but narrow-minded ethnocentric rule of Meles Zenawi, who took the helm from the Derg in 1991 and has remained in power since.

### MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Whatever their individual weaknesses, the authoritarian regimes' combined effect over the past half century has been increasing misery among the population and, even more worrisome, deep societal fissures, making Ethiopia the most unstable and potentially explosive place in an already destabilized region of the world. This, however, was not destined to happen. Ethiopia's recent history could have taken a completely different turn had the country's rulers not squandered a number of opportunities to alter the nation's trajectory.

In 1955, the aging emperor faced an opportunity to transform the country gradually into a variant of constitutional monarchy that could have satisfied the restive, modernizing elite. Even after a failed coup attempt in 1960, the emperor refused

---

BERHANU NEGA, an associate professor of economics at Bucknell University, is a former member of the executive committee of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, an opposition party in Ethiopia. In 2005 he was elected mayor of Addis Ababa but was imprisoned, on treason charges, until international pressure prompted his release in July 2007. In December 2009 an Ethiopian court sentenced him, in absentia, to death.

to reform the country's moribund institutions and accept somewhat constrained power. Instead, his insistence on ruling as he grew senile radicalized the youth and the educated sector of Ethiopia's population, leading to the extremist and violent revolution of 1974.

The military junta in turn squandered an opportunity to address the country's political tensions, including a low-intensity conflict in the Eritrean province, through meaningful political dialogue. A return to a federal arrangement for Eritrea, and perhaps similar arrangements for other restive regions, might also have assuaged these tensions. Instead, the killing of General Aman Andom, the Eritrean leader of the new military junta, by his former supporters, Mengistu Haile Mariam and his henchmen—quickly followed by the massacre of former officials of the Selassie government and thousands of the military regime's opponents—inaugurated a new and brutal phase in Ethiopian politics, which lasted 17 years.

The toppling of the Mengistu regime by the joint forces of Eritrean and Tigrayan rebels, with the quiet acquiescence of the larger population, could have provided another opportunity for reorganizing the Ethiopian state into a more moderate, inclusive, and democratic system. Instead, Eritrea seceded and a dangerous ethnic-centered politics took hold in the rest of Ethiopia starting in 1991.

Given the nature of the rebel movements and the ideology that informed them (the secessionist pro-Soviet nationalism of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and the narrow ethnic Tigrayan nationalism, combined with Albanian-brand communism, of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front), it might have been unrealistic to expect any meaningful, nationwide, democratic dispensation at the time. But communism was fading quickly as an alternative. And Meles and his now somewhat broadened Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) rather shrewdly appropriated free market capitalism and developed a close alliance with the West. So there was some hope for moderation and democratization in Ethiopia.

The adoption in 1994 of a somewhat liberal constitution (save for the primacy it gives ethnic identity over citizenship, and the inclusion

of a right to secession) added to hopes that the country might be turning a page in its history. But these hopes also quickly faded, as Prime Minister Meles and the EPRDF started to manifest their intolerance of criticism, including any emergence of political or civic organizations that they could not fully control.

Beginning in the mid-1990s—with the firing of some 40 university professors because of their presumed political views, the dismantling of the country's trade unions, and the brutal repression of the regime's independent coalition partner, the Oromo Liberation Front—Meles and his ruling EPRDF signaled that the only power they understand is complete and unconstrained power.

## THE 2005 SURPRISE

Ethiopia's most recent, and perhaps most tragic, missed opportunity is one I experienced firsthand as a result of my involvement in opposition politics. The national election of May 2005 constituted a unique experiment, marking the first time in the country's history that democracy dominated political discourse

and enjoyed clear support from the great majority of the population.

A number of interrelated factors helped force the ruling party to take a calculated risk and open

the political process a little bit in the 2005 election (previous elections had been for show, and nobody took them seriously). One such factor was a crack in the unity of the leadership of the principal faction within the EPRDF, the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF)—a crack that was generated in part by the Ethio-Eritrean conflict of 1998–2000.

The EPRDF is a coalition of four ethnic-based regional parties including, in addition to the TPLF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization, and the South Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement. But the TPLF is the senior partner in the coalition, and it controls most of the government, especially the security apparatus. Meles is the chairman of both the TPLF and the EPRDF.

In 2001, other members of the TPLF's executive committee opposed the prime minister's willingness to sign an agreement with Eritrea instead of continuing the armed conflict, and they tried to oust Meles from the leadership. He

---

*Ethiopia's descent into all-out conflict is certain to make an already unstable region even more dangerously chaotic.*

---

in turn mobilized support from non-Tigrayan junior partners in the ruling coalition. Meles cannily blamed his past undemocratic rule on his former TPLF colleagues, whom he purged from the party for being narrowly nationalist “Tigrayan hard-liners,” and he declared that he would institute meaningful democratic reform in the next election. Meles also promised somewhat broadened ethnic participation in the key decision making positions of the government. This provided an entry point for the prime minister’s Western supporters to push for a more open parliamentary election in 2005.

Another factor contributing to the apparent democratic opening was the ruling party’s erroneous analysis of its own strength and the opposition’s weakness. The EPRDF used the four years after its internal crisis to apply its formidable financial resources, including state funds, to build its organizational structure, to weaken its already weak and divided opposition, and to buy off or threaten various portions of the electorate. It also instituted minor reforms, including personnel changes in Addis Ababa and other key regions of the country, to win the support of the population.

With these measures, the ruling party felt comfortable that it had covered all its bases. EPRDF leaders calculated that they would win all rural constituencies, as well as garner a significant portion of the votes from the uneducated urban poor. The opposition was thought too weak and too hopelessly divided to mount a credible challenge. Victory thus assured, the ruling party expected the election to be certified by international observers, giving the regime a democratic legitimacy both at home and abroad. The West would continue to pour in money to shore up the regime, now without guilt.

But this rosy scenario underestimated the hostility that most Ethiopians feel toward the government. Party functionaries, worried that telling the truth about the regime’s unpopularity would reflect badly on them, told their bosses that the opposition had no chance in their respective regions, particularly in rural areas. Such appraisals were taken so seriously that the EPRDF did not even believe it needed to organize election rallies in any part of the country. Only after panic set in a week before the election was a mass rally held in Addis Ababa.

At the same time, Meles and his inner circle had such a low opinion of the opposition that they could not imagine losing an election to this group. They believed that voters, even if the ruling party had disappointed them, surely would not support its critics—even in a free and fair election. Incumbency combined with the aura of power, they believed, would carry them to victory in a traditional society that fears and respects authority. The ruling party’s assessment did not include the possibility of new people joining the opposition camp, or of the opposition overcoming its fractures to forge a workable, if temporary, alliance for the election. But that is what happened.

As the campaign started to heat up, the government’s vulnerabilities began to show. The opposition’s ability to campaign furiously in almost all parts of the country caught the ruling party cadres unprepared. The large public meetings that the opposition organized in urban areas were not entirely unexpected; what worried government agents more was the turnout for opposition rallies in rural districts. In some areas the opposition was

drawing tens of thousands of people to its meetings and the public was genuinely fired up.

Moreover, the poor showing of top government officials in live debates made the regime look weak. The

debates were highly popular; most of the nation remained glued to television and radio for hours to follow the broadcasts. This gave the opposition a national audience it could not otherwise have reached, given its limited resources.

Even more important, probably for the first time in the country’s history, Ethiopians felt that real, peaceful, democratic change was possible. For the opposition, the election campaign magically transformed the despair that had long pervaded Ethiopian society into hope and a genuine sense of empowerment. Many Ethiopians felt, as they never had before, the true spirit of freedom.

## THE REGIME REACTS

On election day, I was sitting in the headquarters of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, waiting to hear the results from our election observers. We in the opposition were very excited by what we had seen the whole day, and we felt the huge turnout was a good sign. At eight o’clock, when we turned on the television to watch the news,

---

*Defenders of the regime argue that democracy is not to be expected in poor countries like Ethiopia.*

---

we were flabbergasted by what we saw. Prime Minister Meles was on TV announcing a “state of emergency” for the capital for one month. He stated that he had taken over command of the military and all security forces for the duration of the emergency.

There was in fact no emergency in the country, and no one could explain what prompted this drastic measure. It was clear that something was seriously wrong and the ruling party had decided not to honor the results of the election. The question was whether it could overturn the results discreetly, so that international observers would certify the election as free and fair, or whether the party’s lack of preparation for rigging the vote would make the fraud too obvious for any observer to sanction.

As it happened, the ruling party was ill prepared to fix the election properly—in many places the armed forces staged daylight robberies of ballot boxes—and this made the outcome simply unacceptable to the public and the opposition parties. The government made a mess of it, and the day after the election it was clear to any observer what was going on. To make sure there was no misunderstanding of how the end game would play out, and with the arrogance that can only come from a force that is willing, able, and determined to do whatever is necessary to maintain its power, the ruling party made an official, unilateral announcement that it had won the election. Never mind that exit-polling methodologies used by international observers confirmed the opposition’s victory.

Meles and his party had an opportunity to make history and change Ethiopia’s political direction. By accepting the results of the election, they could have heralded the start of a new, more stable, and genuinely democratic politics in Ethiopia. In doing so, they would have erased their own negative image, and then could have regrouped to become a credible, legitimate political force. They would also have established a process of healing and forgiveness through national reconciliation, which could have absolved them of various crimes they were accused of committing since they came to power. Unfortunately, they lacked the wisdom to seize the moment.

Once it became clear that the ruling party would not accept defeat, we in the opposition had to make a decision about how to move forward. It was clear to us that the government and the ruling party would try to intimidate the opposition into

submission. Two days after the election, security forces openly started to follow and harass key opposition leaders. They informed the leaders that they would be the targets of government measures if they refused to accept the results that the regime had declared.

Among citizens, meanwhile, there was real anger at being blatantly cheated of their votes. The question for the opposition, thus, was what could be salvaged from the election debacle while avoiding the bloodshed that seemed sure to come unless the tension that had been building since the election was somehow diffused. Could the ruling party be persuaded to reform electoral institutions and accept the possibility of a gradual transition to democracy, say, for the next election? Would international actors (particularly the European Union and the United States)—who were bankrolling the regime, who had clearly misread Ethiopian politics, and who remained allied with the Meles government—be willing to apply pressure on the regime to accept such a compromise?

In the months following, the main preoccupation of the moderate opposition was an attempt to get some traction for forging a compromise. In public statements and private communications with government officials and the diplomatic community, the opposition begged the ruling party to accept its own constitution in practice and commit to a real democratic election in five years. I personally communicated this appeal to diplomats within the country and to numerous visitors who came from abroad to help address the crisis, including former US President Jimmy Carter, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana.

The ruling party and Meles’s government simply refused. They were not willing to accept any arrangement that would constrain their power and make the institutions of democracy work. Instead, they opted for total suppression of the democracy movement. They killed at least 193 people after the election, and imprisoned the top leadership of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (myself included), along with tens of thousands of opposition supporters across the country.

## IN SEARCH OF LEGITIMACY

Since the collapse of the 2005 democratic experiment, the Meles regime has tried to justify its rule as appropriate to a “developmentalist state,” and something that should be tolerated even in the absence of democratic legitimacy. To appease its

foreign backers, it has sold itself as the strongest ally in the region against international terrorism.

Borrowing from the pages of modernization theory, domestic and foreign defenders of the regime argue that democracy is not to be expected in poor countries like Ethiopia. According to this view, a constituency for democracy has yet to emerge in such societies. What is important from this perspective is that the government can produce rapid economic growth, reduce poverty, and achieve higher levels of per capita income. Such an economic outcome will lead to the development of a large middle class, forming the necessary constituency for democracy. For Western backers of such regimes, what the government has to do is avoid producing embarrassing news of brutality and corruption, while at the same time supporting efforts against terrorism.

To promote its preferred narrative, the Meles regime, immediately after the brutal suppression of the democracy movement, produced for domestic consumption a barrage of propaganda about double-digit growth. Multilateral financial institutions echoed this growth talk, which was then fed back to the Ethiopian people as independent confirmation of the government's claims. Such growth, it was asserted, would soon elevate the country to the middle-income level in the global hierarchy of nations.

The main driver of this rapid economic expansion was to be the country's agricultural sector, which the government claimed was itself growing by double digits. Fueled by massive state borrowing from the domestic banking sector and over \$2 billion a year in foreign aid, a program of infrastructure investment in urban roads and hydroelectric projects launched in 2006 supposedly heralded the country's economic renaissance.

The regime made city land and cheap credit available to selected cronies, and a short-term building boom made the urban renewal seem real for a while. The government hoped its propaganda offensive, along with glitzy road and building projects in the capital and some serious massaging of macroeconomic data, would turn the urban population in its favor and stifle demands for democratization.

This, of course, did not happen. The economic activity that was fueled by a massive increase in

the money supply led to extremely high inflation (reaching a peak in 2008 of about 65 percent, according to official figures), which made life even more miserable for the urban poor. The agricultural growth that the government touted ended up being an illusion, as shortages of food led to skyrocketing prices for agricultural commodities. Oxford University researchers in a 2009 study openly questioned the government's agricultural growth numbers, since no evidence existed to justify the output figures in terms of increased cultivation or in the use of fertilizers and improved seeds.

As if to mock the government's claims, massive drought in two consecutive years (2008 and 2009) increased the number of peasants seeking food assistance for survival to 13 million in 2009 from 6 million in 2007. Hard as the regime tried to reduce the numbers, the reality was too grim to hide. Ethiopia's current structural food deficit (the number of people who require food aid to survive even in good weather conditions) is 6 million, the same number recorded at the peak of the

extraordinary famine of 1984–85. A government infatuated with short-term fixes is now offering massive land grants to foreigners as a solution to the country's chronic food shortage, but the

foreigners clearly intend to export their produce to their own countries.

The Ethiopian army's ill-advised invasion of Somalia in 2006, in order to fight Islamist groups that controlled most of that country, was temporarily successful in buying the government strong support from the administration of George W. Bush. But it soon became a serious liability for the West and a disaster for Ethiopia's future stability. The brutality of the invasion and its enormous cost to the civilian population, combined with the long-standing animosity between Ethiopia and Somalia, seriously undermined the nationalist credentials of the Somali Transitional Federal Government (TFG), in whose name the military operations took place. The invasion quickly mobilized otherwise disparate militia groups to work against the foreign invaders and significantly radicalized Somalia's Islamist movement.

The Ethiopian army unceremoniously withdrew from Somalia in January 2009, leaving the transitional government much weakened and

---

*Divisions in Ethiopia's body politic make meaningful democratic dispensation the only possible tool for national stability.*

---

leaving Al Shabab—once an extremist youth militia on the fringe—bolder, stronger, and in control of most of southern Somalia. Sheikh Sharif Ahmed, the head of the Islamist umbrella group the Islamic Courts Union, whose ouster had justified the Ethiopian invasion a few years earlier, is now the Western-supported president of the TFG, and is battling the Islamic Courts Union's former junior allies, Al Shabab, for survival.

In Somalia, allies of the TFG, including Western powers, today see Ethiopia as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. This is typical of the regime's myopic search for quick fixes, in which the government's short-term survival considerations make the country's difficulties significantly harder to manage over the long run.

### THE FLOUNDERING STATE

In Ethiopia itself, the government increasingly fails to manage the country's problems, most of which were created or exacerbated by the ruling party's follies. Ethiopia's party-state has no political or ideological basis for legitimacy. The ethnic-based political and geographic division of the country, purposely pursued by the regime as a mechanism to divide and rule, has significantly heightened ethnic tensions. Larger groups, particularly the Oromos (about 35 percent of the population, according to the most recent census) and Amharas (about 27 percent), feel dominated by a minority Tigrayan elite (6 percent). And broad resentment along ethnic lines has permeated state institutions—including the security apparatus, on the shoulders of which Meles hopes to continue to rule the country.

A 2009 show trial, in which current and former army generals from the Amhara wing of the ruling coalition were prosecuted for plotting a coup, was a significant marker of the turmoil that is brewing within the security apparatus. We are certain to see more of this in the future.

Meanwhile, the unsustainable expansionary monetary policy, which led to high inflation, has given way to credit rationing, and the building bubble has burst in the cities. We now have a bizarre situation in which rental prices for residential and office space are extremely high, yet large amounts of office space are vacant. The economic misery that this creates for the majority of the urban population, the intense corruption that pervades the ruling elite, and the highly skewed income distribution that this generates, along with the new urban elite's crude display of wealth,



# Make an impact.

## Public Diplomacy education at USC:

Two-year Master of Public Diplomacy

One-year Professional Master of Public Diplomacy

Mid-career Summer Institute in Public Diplomacy for professional diplomats

## USC ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR COMMUNICATION & JOURNALISM



- Home of the nation's first master's degree program in public diplomacy
- Combines the strengths of USC's Annenberg School for Communication and School of International Relations
- USC Center on Public Diplomacy recognized by the U.S. State Department as "the world's premier research facility" in the field
- Strong institutional relationships with embassies, government agencies and NGOs around the world
- Energetic and international student body
- Innovative perspective informed by Los Angeles' role as international media capital and key position on Pacific Rim

The graduate education you want.  
The graduate education you need.

[annenberg.usc.edu](http://annenberg.usc.edu)

The University of Southern California admits students of any race, color, and national or ethnic origin.

have made the government even more unpopular than in 2005. The only thing preventing urban tensions from exploding is security presence on every corner.

Also contributing to Ethiopians' despair is the ruling party's obstinate refusal to gradually democratize the country. In fact, it has moved purposefully in the opposite direction since 2005, promulgating numerous laws to stifle peaceful dissent and restrict the operations of media and civil society organizations. In 2008 local elections, the first to take place after 2005, the EPRDF and its allies won all but three of vast numbers of seats contested across the country, making a mockery of democratic institutions and confirming the country's return to the pre-2005 repressive environment.

## REVOLTING PROSPECTS

These developments have led to a shift in the thinking of the mainstream political opposition and the public at large toward support for armed resistance against tyranny. There are now numerous organizations determined to dislodge the ruling party from power by force. Ethiopia is moving toward dangerous instability, and will arrive there soon unless something happens to alter its trajectory.

Parliamentary elections scheduled for May 2010 are not expected to change the situation much. Perhaps the most noticeable change emerging in this round of elections is a concerted move by disgruntled former TPLF stalwarts—such as the former defense minister Siye Abraha and the former regional president of Tigray, Gebru Asrat—to contest the TPLF's dominance in Tigray, the northernmost of Ethiopia's nine ethnic regions.

This contest has already claimed its first casualty, with the killing in March of an opposition candidate, Aregawi Gebre-Yohannes, by ruling party thugs. Although everybody expects the contest in Tigray to end more or less in the same way that the fraudulent voting exercise did in other parts of the country in 2005, it does signal the end of the TPLF's hegemony in the only region that the ruling party considers its solid base. This will not bring about any meaningful change in the country's politics, but it will further reduce the TPLF's dwindling foundation of support and engender another split within the ruling coalition. Meles and his party will be left in an even weaker position to address the country's increasingly complex political and economic problems.

If my diagnosis is roughly right, post-election Ethiopia is going to emerge as a hotbed of instability in the region. Once the 2010 election passes without any meaningful change, the real contest among rival political and ethnic forces will work itself out in the theater of armed rebellion. The outcome will largely depend on the degree to which armed opposition forces are able to mount a unified resistance against the government. Given an unresolved border dispute with Eritrea, the violent anarchy in Somalia, and the instability that is expected in Sudan after a January 2011 referendum on southern Sudan's independence, Ethiopia's slow but seemingly inevitable descent into all-out conflict is certain to make an already unstable region even more dangerously chaotic.

I am a strong believer in the ability of democratic politics to usher in a more stable polity. Like Amartya Sen, I believe freedom is both an end and a means to development. It is true that democracy can be messy even in the best of circumstances, in societies not deeply fractured by all kinds of primordial affiliations. In societies such as Ethiopia, where authoritarian rulers have for decades deliberately fomented and exploited existing ethnic cleavages, establishing a functioning democratic system will not be easy. But, as amply demonstrated by Ethiopia's experience, dictatorships are even messier. Under the facade of stability, they breed hopelessness and despair that eventually explode into anarchy.

The stark divisions in Ethiopia's body politic make meaningful democratic dispensation the only possible tool for national stability. Democracy, in other words, is not a luxury that Ethiopians can enjoy after authoritarian rule has ensured enough economic development. It is a necessity for Ethiopia's survival as a nation.

Ethiopians' desire to achieve this objective through a peaceful process during the 2005 election was dashed by the ruling party's myopic determination to stay in power. And this happened with the quiet acquiescence of Western powers, who were equally driven by short-term strategic interests—specifically, an interest in fighting Somalia's Islamist militias.

As a result, the possibility of a smooth democratic transition while Meles and his party remain in power has been more or less lost. The question now is whether the political forces that will shape post-Meles Ethiopia have learned the lessons of previous lost opportunities and are wise enough not to repeat past leaders' mistakes. ■