

# ***Powers – mengist – and peasants in rural Ethiopia: the May 2005 elections***

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## ABSTRACT

Observation of the 2005 Ethiopian elections in two rural communities in south-east Amhara State reveals a picture very different from that presented in national-level analyses derived largely from urban areas. Deeply entrenched attitudes to power and government in the study area make the idea of peaceful electoral competition inconceivable. Peasants are first and foremost concerned to vote for the winning side, since to do otherwise carries intense risks to their welfare and even survival. The freedom with which the main opposition party was able to campaign until a few weeks before the election convinced many peasants that the government had abdicated, and that they should vote for the opposition as the likely winners. Belated mobilisation of the ruling party and state apparatus challenged this perception and created great uncertainty. This peasantry's political, economic and cultural alienation, allied to authoritarian rule and a lack of voter information placed genuinely 'free and fair' elections out of reach.

## INTRODUCTION

Although international observers, media and researchers have given divergent appraisals of the events following the Ethiopian general elections of 15 May 2005 (honesty of counting, fair settlement of electoral disputes, validity of re-elections), their judgement of the election campaign and the voting process is globally positive. These observers maintain that in spite of some shortfalls and irregularities, the majority of Ethiopians were able for the first time to express a democratic choice. Namely they were able to demonstrate their personal choice in a manner that was free, informed, and consequently meaningful between candidates with different

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and well-known positions.<sup>1</sup> Sensitive to this unprecedented opportunity, the electors went out to vote en masse.<sup>2</sup> During this campaign and the casting of the ballot, Ethiopia thus experienced a noteworthy democratic move forward.<sup>3</sup>

Such assessments rest on observations made ‘from above’, collected by observing along the roads of Ethiopia which means almost always restricted to the main urban centres. However, 85 % of Ethiopians live in rural areas, with more than half of the population living over 10 kilometres from the nearest road (Dessalegn 2005). This overwhelmingly rural population remained almost entirely outside the scope of these assessments. Taking into account the relationship between the powers and the peasants, how did these rural communities perceive and experience this ‘democratic opening’, and on what basis or according to what criteria did they choose between the ruling party and the opposition?

This article is based on two successive field studies in two adjacent rural communities. These investigations show that a democratic parliamentary election, as commonly understood, is an incomprehensible concept for the large majority of the inhabitants in these communities, because the absolute nature of power is in their eyes immanent and intangible. Furthermore, essential conditions required for holding democratic elections were not in place. Voters came under heavy pressure from the party–state.<sup>4</sup> Most were also convinced that the voting would not really be secret. They were not familiar with the candidates’ programmes. In reality, their choice could thus neither be free nor informed in the political sense of the term.

Caught between an opposition breakthrough, perceived as a foretaste of its victory, and the party–state’s counter-attack that made the outcome of the ballot uncertain, most voters saw the choice before them for the first time not as an opportunity, but rather as a heavy burden fraught with dangers. Their primary objective was to survive. To this end, their chief concern was to safeguard access both to the mechanisms of traditional solidarity and to the means and factors of production. The politico-administrative power had a quasi-monopoly on the latter. Whoever the winner or regardless of the outcome, the majority of voters anticipated that the victor would deprive those whom it considered disloyal by voting against them from access to these means of production. Both the individual and the community approach were above all driven by the aim of avoiding this major risk. This entailed not going against the majority and, instead, voting in unison as a community, and in the same way as the rest of the country. From that point on, most voters expressed themselves in accordance with one quasi-exclusive criterion: to vote for the future

winner. Their major preoccupation, therefore, became that of guessing who would win – the ruling power or the opposition?

#### THE CONTEXT OF THE SURVEYS

##### *Physical and human data*

Both communities are located in North Shoa, the most southerly zone of the Amhara Regional State. The first is a sub-*kebele*<sup>5</sup> whose inhabitants, a little fewer than 2,000, live one to two hours walk from a small town which has a market, a school, a clinic, a veterinary clinic, a public phone booth (but not a post office) and the *kebele* office. This town is located on the main Addis Ababa–Wollo–Tigray road. The second community, adjacent to the first, is a *kebele* of around 5,000 inhabitants who live 2–4 hours walk from the town of Debre Sina, the administrative centre of the *woreda*, which has just over 100,000 inhabitants. The first of these two communities is slightly less isolated than the average Ethiopian rural community, the second a little more.

The two areas are 2,000 to 2,800 metres above sea level, located on the Mafud escarpment separating the Abyssinian plateau from the western edge of the Afar lowlands. Almost all the inhabitants are farmers dispersed in small hamlets of a few families each. The average farm holding is about 0.8 hectare per household. The principal crops grown are *teff*, sorghum, barley, wheat, and lentils. The cultivation of vegetables and fruits for the market has spread in the last few years. They also have the usual large and small livestock.

No NGO is active in these two communities. There is no food-for-work or cash-for-work programme, in contrast to the period of the *Derg*.<sup>6</sup> The inhabitants say that there has been no ‘famine’ since that of 1984/85, which provoked the death of ‘tens’ of people, and during which they received their last food aid. Unquestionably, the standard of living here is higher than that of the average rural community.

Almost all inhabitants are Orthodox Christian Amhara. This ‘nation’, to use the official classification, comprises about 25% of the whole Ethiopian population. The Amhara gave rise to the first local dynasties in the thirteenth century, which played a key role in the gradual building of the Ethiopian polity. Initially based in the northern part of the Abyssinian plateau, they expanded their ‘feudal’ control southward through a gradual ‘Amharisation’, marked by trade and conquest. Most Ethiopian kings and emperors, down to the late Haile Selassie overthrown in 1974, were of Amhara origin. This expansion enabled the modernisation of the Ethiopian state in the second half of the nineteenth and the twentieth

centuries, and the containment of the colonial powers. It brought together the other 'nations' or 'nationalities' of Ethiopia, but at the same time provoked resentment among people or groups which contested this Amhara 'supremacy', which declined when the *Derg* took power in 1974, and ended with its overthrow in 1991.

Despite the recent structuring of Ethiopia along ethnic lines, the Amhara generally continue to identify themselves first and foremost as Ethiopians or as members of old Amhara politico-geographical local entities. Their culture includes belief in the omnipotence of God, who dictates their existence and governs their environment, and the importance of a hierarchical order derived from Him. Therefore, individuals are not equal and must obey orders from above. Social status, age, and gender are crucial criteria that establish the position of individuals in this social hierarchy. The Amhara are often reputed for their strong sense of individualism and self-reliance, the Other always being suspected of aggressiveness and disloyalty, as reflected by a propensity for secrecy and a language characterised by double-meaning. They regard themselves as superior to all other peoples. The most resolute opponents of the ethnic federalism instituted since 1991 are found among them (see *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica* 2003: 230–2).

These cultural traits have evidently carried weight in the electoral behaviour observed in the field studies. Their specificity prevents the observations made and conclusions reached from being generalised to all of rural Ethiopia. On the other hand, the main features of the relationship between the politico-administrative structures and the world of the peasant are not specific to the area under investigation. Equally, the conduct of the party-state during the electoral campaign, and consequently its influence on the outcome of the ballot, appears to have been more or less the same in the different rural areas of the country.

### *The surveys*

The first study was carried out at the end of 2004 in the first of the two communities. On the one hand, it focused on the relationship between the peasants and the powers at large, the *mengist*, a term which designates the government, the party, the state, and all their agents (local officials, *kebele* leaders, development agents, the executives of the ruling party, etc.). On the other, it also dealt with the impact of this relationship in the implementation of the rural development strategy. The field of investigation therefore included peasants' perception of political life and their position in it, notably within the perspective of the May 2005 elections

(see Lefort 2005). The second survey, conducted on the eve of the 15 May 2005 ballot and the following days in the two communities, focused on the development of the electoral campaign, voters' perceptions of it, and how they positioned themselves in an unprecedented political situation.

Data are drawn from about 50 interviews, each 1–3 hours long. Peasants were interviewed in their homes, and officials (*kebele* leaders, militants of both the ruling party and the opposition, development agents, teachers, etc.) in their homes and offices. In addition, there were casual discussions with the interviewees who offered meals or accommodation for the night. The peasants interviewed do not constitute a representative sample of the two communities in the statistical sense. However, to take into account their diversity, they were selected on the basis of income ('poor', 'middle' and 'rich' peasants, according to the official classification) and gender. The quotations below are typical sentences that recurred in most of the interviews, often word for word.

#### SUBJECTS VERSUS CITIZENS

##### *Electoral practices and determinisms*

Although most of the interviewees had voted in May 2000 during the previous general elections (for the Federal Parliament in Addis Ababa, the House of Peoples' Representatives, and for the Parliament of the Amhara State, the Amhara State Council), they did so in order to bow to what they generally perceived as a profane ritual, imposed on them for mysterious reasons, and consequently superfluous. Its sole purpose in their eyes was to mark their individual and collective allegiance to the powers that be, which for them goes without saying.

'They called us for meetings' and 'they told us that we must vote', under the threat of punishment. The conveners showed the voters the symbols representing the candidates (a bee, a horse, an electric torch...), all from the government side, and 'told us which symbols to choose'. The opposition was totally absent. 'I voted the way those around me said they would vote', since it is out of the question 'to dissociate from the people' and to disobey the authorities. Therefore each voter conspicuously showed the ballot paper he/she was going to slip into the ballot box (see EHRCO 2000, 2002; Pausewang 2001; Pausewang & Aalen 2001; Pausewang *et al.* 2002).

Mutatis mutandis, the same pattern prevailed in the local elections, i.e. the election of the leaders of the peasant associations, who have a considerable hold on the daily life of inhabitants in every *kebele*. According to the unanimous account of the farmers interviewed, the leaders are selected beforehand by the higher politico-administrative level and then confirmed

by a general assembly of the Association, where *woreda* representatives conclude after a short debate and without proceeding to any vote that the leaders they selected have been 'elected'. This *woreda* leadership likewise summarily dismisses the 'elected' when it so wishes.

*The representation of power and its practices*

The outcome of the study in this respect is presented briefly below, solely to illustrate with insights from field work more general analyses that already exist on this topic (see Aspen 2002; Levine 1972; Poluha 2002; Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003). The majority of farmers interviewed found nothing worth saying about this 'electoral' practice. It is in line with their conception of power and the relationship they must have with it, and with immemorial political practices, deeply rooted in the feudal system, under which they have lived for centuries. The absence of opposition is considered logical. According to the great majority of interviewees, power cannot be contested, because it is divine by essence. According to the imperial myth, the late emperor was officially referred to as 'Elect of God', 'Power of the Trinity'. His successors, the *Derg* and subsequently the EPRDF, no longer claim this divine authority, but their mandate is still perceived as coming from heaven. Most of the interviewees state that 'God and the mengist are the same.' Others queried this by stating that the former (i.e. God) surpasses the latter solely in that He has the additional power of giving life (birth) and putting an end to it (death), or the power of 'life and death through giving rain and good weather'.

As it ultimately proceeds from God, power cannot emanate from men or be accountable to them. A common reflection stemming from this assumption is: 'It doesn't matter who I vote for, since it's God who decides who will be elected'. There is thus a general conviction regarding the fundamental inequality between 'it' (the government, the administration, the ruling party), 'them' (all of their agents) and 'us' (the peasants or *gebäre*, literally 'those who are subjected to the drudgery of labour/statute labour' (by their lord)). To submit to the absolutism of the *mengist* is simply to respect divine will.

For the overwhelming majority, this absolutism is essential to accomplish the authority's prime mission: to assure civil peace and maintain law and order, which means above all to ensure the security of persons and the judicial settlement of land conflicts. Drawing on Ethiopia's past and recent history, the majority of interviewees consider that the weakening of this absolutism, or the emergence of a rival force or a counter power that could

weaken or erode it, would inevitably lead to armed confrontation. The peasants would be the first to suffer. It would last until one of the two antagonists crushed the other to impose, in turn, its own absolute rule. *Mengist* cannot be shared. It is gained or lost only by arms.<sup>7</sup>

In return for maintaining order and security, beneficiaries consider it fair to pay a substantial tribute to the ruling politico-administrative apparatus, starting with the basic tax – the land tax. Nevertheless, the EPRDF like its predecessor has added numerous contributions for purposes of rural ‘development’ (building of schools, clinics, roads, soil conservation, water resources management, etc.). These contributions in cash or labour, presented as ‘voluntary’, are in fact compulsory. Failing to contribute is punished. The principle as well as the amount of the first type of contribution is unanimously accepted. This is not the case for the second type: while its principle is largely accepted, the amount and purpose of these contributions are massively rejected. Although they are equivalent to more than one fourth of the direct and indirect labour of the peasant and have reached the same level as in the *Derg’s* time,<sup>8</sup> the interviewees argue that these impositions do not bring about the development they expect.

‘We can no longer afford that they take so much of our money and labour without any return.’ In the end, ‘We are becoming poorer and poorer!’ Data confirm that rural per capita income has not recovered the average level it had reached in the last years of Haile Selassie’s reign (see EEA 2000, 2001; Dessalegn 2005). After a respite between the fall of the *Derg* and the EPRDF takeover in 1991, the peasants resumed their role as ‘suppliers of the fruits of their toil to an all encompassing and insatiable state’ (Aspen 2002: 61).

But they cannot escape from it. ‘We are people to be ordered, what can we do?’ ‘We have no right to refuse’. In any case, disobedience or even a too vigorous critique are punished by fines, imprisonment and sometimes worse. Moreover, the state owns the land, giving farmers only temporary usufruct rights. A number of precedents, including the large-scale land redistribution of 1997 in the Amhara State, prove that farmers can lose these rights without any appeal (see Ege 1997). The government has a quasi-total monopoly on credit and inputs (fertilisers, select seeds, etc.). Anyone who refuses orders or, worse, challenges them exposes himself to punishment by losing his means of production. The rules are so vague and applied in such an erratic manner that it is hard for the farmer to foresee the consequences of his actions. As a result, to protect himself, it is better to delegate decision-making to the authorities than to take any initiative. ‘You do what they tell you to do if you want to survive.’<sup>9</sup> This takes us full

circle. Absolutism is culturally rooted, practically a necessity, and inevitably has to be endured in order to survive.

Most of the interviewees believed that the forthcoming elections would be no different from the previous ones. This was because they remained subdued in the economic and political sphere, and had never imagined themselves to be citizens or ever had the corresponding prerogatives. The opposition would be absent again since 'here, the government runs everything'. In any case, 'We are led by this government. How can we vote against it?' Moreover, 'It is illegal to vote for the opposition, because one must follow the majority of people.' And finally, 'I have seen many elections and they have not changed anything'. Since voting for the opposition would be inconceivable, pointless and dangerous, the EPRDF was marching straight toward a plebiscite.

### *The sworn opponents*

The political representations and conduct summarised above encompass the majority of the population. We can estimate – but only estimate – given the type of study, that this majority comprises two-thirds to three-fourths of the inhabitants of the two communities. At the opposite end of the spectrum, there is a minority, probably around 10% of the population, whose political position is markedly different.

People referred to as the *birokrasi*, a distortion of the word 'bureaucracy', mainly comprise this group. After the EPRDF took power in 1991, anyone who held positions, be they minor, subordinate, or of short duration at any time in the *Derg* period, was included in this category. Most belong to the traditional local elite, elected for the first time in 1975–76 in order to implement the agrarian reform,<sup>10</sup> and regularly re-elected and/or their positions reconfirmed by the *Derg* without opposition from the population which deemed them the best possible intermediaries between the dictatorial regime and their community. After 1991, these people, and even their widows and descendants, were ostracised. They were forbidden to assume any official function. They were replaced as leaders of peasant associations by a new generation of leaders, in general poorer, younger and totally submitted to the Party-State, greatly diminishing their legitimacy in the eyes of the population. The *birokrasi* were also largely and arbitrarily dispossessed of their land by the redistribution of 1997 (see Ege 1997). Yet, they retain a great social ascendancy, notably because they personify the virtues of the model farmer, are often at the head of the traditional structures of mutual aid, and have rapidly rebuilt their economic assets.



This minority never accepted its dispossession from traditional leadership and seeing its land holdings penalised. It was eager to seek revenge. Besides, being generally better educated, the members of this group did not stop at criticisms coming from the population but went beyond to articulate basic democratic claims. Less vulnerable because of its relative wealth and social aura, the *birokrasi* was better placed than others to use the right to express itself, which the regime claimed to have instituted, and to act as a democratic bedrock.<sup>11</sup> It did not rest content with using this new right of expression in the face of authority as an end in itself, but called on the *mengist* to take into account the *vox populi*. Thus, while joining everyone in acknowledging the legitimacy of the party-state's hold over day-to-day life, it claimed the right to demand an end to the excesses of this stranglehold, and to the disconnect between the authorities' requests and the needs and capacities of the population. This attitude, transposed to the institutional level, led the most vigorous members of this *birokrasi* to demand a truly representative system, in which the deputies would promote the aspirations of their electors and be accountable to them.

A few members of the *birokrasi* also belong to a very small fringe of 'rich' farmers, including some who spontaneously describe themselves as 'businessmen'. Their priority is not to have the party-state respond to the needs of the people, but rather to limit itself to the exercise of its basic law-and-order functions. Their motto is: 'Leave us alone!' without contributions and other compulsory work, which prevent them from dedicating all their energies and means to developing their own land.

It was from within these two groups that are generally richer, more educated and more politically mature, as well as from former soldiers of the *Derg's* army, totally demobilised after 1991, that the beginning of a secularisation of the political culture, legitimising the first democratic demands, emerged. They were the only ones to assert that they would take the risk of voting for the opposition no matter what the cost, if given the chance. The democratic opening accepted by the regime for the May 2005 elections was to give them this opportunity for the first time.

#### THE 2005 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

##### *The regime's 'democratic opening'*

Unlike the general elections of 1995 and 2000, in which the opposition was absent or marginal, the governing EPRDF decided after huge debates that the general elections of 25 May 2005 would be truly competitive, or 'free and fair'.<sup>12</sup> The party considered that this opening would offer it considerable advantages, without presenting major risks.

Despite a generally positive assessment of the ruling party's actions since 1991, the international community considered that the persistence of human rights abuses, including the absence of electoral competition, was the main obstacle blocking an increase in its already significant assistance.<sup>13</sup> A fair election victory would remove it. The EPRDF, as well as the quasi-totality of experts, even predicted a landslide, given the support it could expect in the countryside. In any case, the farmers are 'legitimist'. The party had given priority to the rural population in its development programmes. It exercised a strong hold on rural areas through its dominant position and a control apparatus that it could resort to if necessary.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the EPRDF regarded the opposition forces as unorganised, inexperienced, divided and small, and thus, in its eyes, an adversary not to be taken seriously.<sup>15</sup> It dramatically underestimated its own unpopularity, which was not only caused by the heavy burden borne by the peasantry. Despite being the power in place the party never gained true popular support, in part because it was perceived as anchored in the peripheral Tigrayan minority. Tigray, the northernmost state, comprises about 7% of the population. In brief, the TPLF was perceived as having taken power only by force and exerting it ruthlessly.

### *The youth revolt*

The voters in the two communities considered the elections to be merely an additional chore, and the local authorities therefore had to pressure them to register as voters. Nevertheless, and to almost everyone's surprise, a large number of youths decided to manifest their rejection of the regime by categorically refusing to register. These numbered about 300 in a *kebele* of 5,000 inhabitants, and about a 100 in a sub-*kebele* of about 2,000, according to leaders of the youth organisations. They justified their boycott by saying, 'If the State doesn't take care of us, we will not take care of the State.'

These youths had become adults, but could not really assume this role. They saw themselves as 'suspended in the air'. They had no land to cultivate, since there was no new land to clear, and at best they would inherit from their parents only a fraction of a plot, in most cases already too small to feed a family.<sup>16</sup> These material conditions made it difficult for them to marry. Since they lacked land, they did not pay the land tax, which in turn deprived them of the right to belong to the peasant association that structures all of rural community life. Their chance of obtaining employment in the city was slim. They therefore considered themselves as second-class citizens, and condemned to remain so. They wanted to

advertise their grievances with a shocking gesture, and a boycott of the elections was the only option available to them. This confirms that at this early stage, they and others could not envisage that a protest vote was conceivable or possible.

This may provide one explanation for the difference between the anticipated and final number of registered voters. In 2005, Ethiopia had a population of 77.4 million, whose median age was 17.2 years (UNFPA 2005). The potential number of voters was therefore estimated to be at least 36 million. The authorities expected 38 million to register (IRIN 27.9.2004). For the election of 15 May 2005, according to IRIN, the number of potential voters lay between 34.5 and 35.7 million, excluding the Somali Regional State whose population was 6% of the total. The official figures eventually reached a total of 25.6 million registered voters, which even on the best hypothesis amounted to only 71% of the potential electorate. One could therefore ask on what basis the European Election Observer Mission (EU 2005), like all other information sources on the topic, could affirm that the voting was marked by 'an enormously high voter turnout ... at no less that 85% of all the eligible population'. This percentage would never be called into question afterwards.

*The emergence of the opposition and the 'resignation' of the EPRDF:  
the switch of allegiance*

For the first time, early in 2005, opposition militants dared to start to speak openly, first in the marketplaces of urban centres, then by travelling across rural areas where they attempted, often without success, to hold election meetings. They belonged to the All Ethiopian Unity Party, the former All Amhara People's Organisation, one of the four parties constituting the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), the main opposition at the national level. It could be succinctly described as 'liberal' and 'unitarian', versus 'interventionist' and 'federalist' for the EPRDF.

This appearance aroused terror and amazement, with first witness accounts all converging on the same salient facts. One of the opponents would brandish the former Ethiopian flag, without the yellow star in the middle, enclosed in a blue circle. This was added by the EPRDF to symbolise the federal system, which put an end to a century of centralisation. Another militant would take the megaphone. Above all, 'the militants of the opposition party dare to criticise the *menigist* even in front of the offices of the administration!' Some qualified these statements as 'insults'. Those who witnessed these scenes quickly came to the conclusion that such audacity would be strongly punished and that distancing oneself

from the militants was the safest option. Of the 5,000 inhabitants in one community, only a dozen attended the first meeting called by a local opposition militant, and then dispersed in order not to be identified as soon as the chairman of the peasant association approached.

The opposition's audacity would quickly lead to an armed confrontation, since the co-existence of two powers is impossible. 'In our history, it isn't possible to have two *mengist* at the same time.' War thus appeared imminent. Some of those who witnessed this new player on the political stage rushed home to hide their meagre possessions in safe places. But everybody forecast that there would be a quick return to order after a short period of confrontation. There could be no doubt about the outcome for the simple reason that 'The ruling power has arms; the opposition does not.' However, these forecasts were not realised, further increasing the sense of surprise.

At first, the ruling power was considered responsible for inciting an armed confrontation by letting the opposition emerge. Then, on reflection, would the EPRDF not have been rather weakened? A ruling power does not, after all, concede its place to a rival unless forced to do so by a greater power than itself. Which one? It was not clearly identified at this stage, except by a few interviewees, among the most enlightened, who referred to 'outside pressures'. But, for all, the patent proof of weakness was that the ruling party did not react, either by repression, 'even the police doesn't do anything!', in front of the demonstrations, or by a political counter-attack by throwing itself into the election campaign.

When the first opposition activists showed up publicly in the rural *kebele*, the local authorities reacted in their usual manner: by using repression. But the opposition appealed to the higher rung of the *woreda*. Following directives from above, the latter ordered the *kebele* authorities to concede a relative freedom of action to the opposition. Some *kebele* officials were even condemned for hindering the opposition campaign. At first, they interpreted these instructions as meaning that they should let the opponents expose themselves in order to identify who to punish after the election victory. Subsequently, however, the *kebele* leaders, increasingly worried by their people's growing support for the opposition, called on their superiors to ring the alarm and to ask the ruling party to react immediately. They met with a flat refusal. The regime remained totally passive during the main part of the election campaign.

It was hardly more active at the grassroots level in towns, but here an unprecedented political confrontation took place through the media. The impact was decisive.<sup>17</sup> For the first time, the media broadcast about a dozen long debates between top personalities of the regime and the

opposition. These had a tiny impact in rural communities. The few farmers who owned a radio with charged batteries confessed that they didn't follow the debates, because 'they were too complicated for us'. They said they had 'forgotten it all' except for one revelation: 'This government is so weak that it must sit with its enemies.' This defied the implacable hierarchy that had always cut across the whole socio-political structure of Ethiopia. The opponents not only dared criticise the most eminent representatives of the ruling power, but even mocked and ridiculed them. In committing what appeared a sacrilege that went unpunished, they demystified the ruling power at the highest level, exactly as grassroots militants had done by taking to the streets in full daylight.

All this happened as if the ruling party considered the electoral arena to be limited to towns and cities, because the countryside was assumed to be solidly on its side. But the EPRDF did not foresee or realise that its absence in the face of mounting opposition would be interpreted as proof that it had resigned itself to defeat and demise. For a number of interviewees, the fact that it had withdrawn meant that 'God has decided that this *mengist* has had its time' – in short that the *mengist* had also drawn this conclusion. Power found itself desacralised. Heaven had withdrawn its mandate. The judges agreed, since they decided in favour of the opposition in the appeal lodged by the latter against the government's hindrance of the campaign. As a result, the opposition could protect its members other than by force of arms, which it did not possess in any case. The electors were therefore ready to acknowledge the foretold end of the EPRDF by voting for the opposition, so as to manifest their collective and individual allegiance to the future power.

Many facts demonstrate this shift in allegiance. The farmers no longer responded to calls for meetings or compulsory work. Some even refused to pay the land tax, depriving themselves of the receipt that stands as the main proof of their right to the land they farm. 'I am not going to pay twice, first to the present authorities, and then to the new authorities after the elections.' Meanwhile, the ruling party appeared to have resigned. Not only were the violators not punished, but local officials stopped convening meetings or demanding compulsory labour, as though they had abdicated their authority.

#### *The return in force of the EPRDF: the dilemma*

In mid-April, one month before the election, the party-state, on instructions from above, took a 180 degree turn by throwing itself body and soul into the election battle.<sup>18</sup> Not only did the EPRDF political apparatus mobilise

its material and human resources day and night, but the state apparatus, including the security forces, did likewise, openly abandoning any semblance of neutrality. Almost all officials were also members of the EPRDF. Like a steamroller, the EPRDF exerted every direct and indirect pressure on the voters to compel them to vote for the party, short of persuading them to do so.

The EPRDF mobilised the following for the campaign: the entire *kebele* and sub-*kebele* leadership, the *mengistawi Budden* (the political-administrative structure) of six persons who each run a 'hamlet' of 50 to 60 households, of a sub-*kebele* of usually 300 to 500 households, the entire militia (about 40 per *kebele*) and all the *cadres* (generally around 60 in each *kebele*) who took elementary political training given by the EPRDF. They were given various stipends, for instance 100 Birr for the last days of the campaign for a member of the *mengistawi Budden*, and 18 birr per day for a militia member.<sup>19</sup>

At first, the government started as usual by calling people to meetings. Unless they were particularly vulnerable, few people came. Moreover, they turned against their organisers. 'Whatever they said, we do not believe them any more', the farmers insisted. The Front's principal argument was: 'Look at how we have developed the countryside!' But the voters replied that it had failed precisely on this count: 'You take from us our money and our labour for the roads, the schools and the clinics, but you cannot even make them work afterwards! In reality, you do nothing to help us increase our income. We get poorer and poorer, and our children will be even more so.' They went as far as leaving the meetings to show their discontent and ended up not attending them at all any more.

As the methods that authorities traditionally used to sway the population in their favour had failed, they started using coercion, exerting direct pressure on individuals. Two persons, generally one militia member and one *cadre* or a sub-*kebele* official, would walk from door to door to ask people to sign a register committing them to vote for the EPRDF. If not, they would face 'the consequences' after the elections, which could go as far as 'forbidding us to go on living here'. These threats were clear. Those who refused to register ran the risk of being denied access to basic services on which the administration has an almost total monopoly, and even to the usufruct rights of their plots, which would force them to leave their villages. They also knew that these registers would be passed on to the *woreda* administration along with a list of the recalcitrants.<sup>20</sup>

Most signed the register and then felt themselves obliged to vote for the EPRDF. Even in the closed polling booth, they believed that authorities would use mysterious ways to know their choice. As such, their registration committed them unless they went back on their word. The fact that the

heads of the electoral bureaus (three 'election officers' for each bureau) were appointed by the local authorities further reinforced voters' convictions. In principle, these officers are supposed to be appointed by the 'independent' body in charge of the elections and to be accountable only to it. The same goes for the five 'election wardens' for each bureau who were supposed to be elected by the population. All the electoral officials interviewed confirmed this mode of appointment, and specified that they were put there 'to execute the orders' given to them by local authorities.

Finally, the authorities resorted to a show of force. For instance, ten days before the elections, all members of the militias of the entire *woreda* were called to Debre Sina, ostensibly to receive an additional set of bullets, and 10 Birr each under the table. Nothing was done, much to the contrary, to prevent them from parading in town afterwards. On the last market day before the election, local officials, dressed in EPRDF T-shirts and with a Front sticker on their shoulders, barred all the entrances to the market with the support of the federal police. All the farmers were inspected, sometimes searched, and forced to leave their traditional sticks outside before entering the marketplace.

#### *How most voters made their choice*

The counter-attack of the ruling party was shattering, disconcerting and worrying. The first open elections appeared destined only to endorse, through the voting ritual, a peaceful hand-over conducted without and above the population. Afterwards, all would be as it always had been, just as in the proverb: 'The sun that comes up tomorrow will be our sun, the government that rules tomorrow will be our government.' This scenario collapsed. The outcome of the ballot became uncertain. The probability of armed confrontation increased. Confusion resurfaced. One had to choose between two camps, without having the one element required to make an informed choice and with the risk of suffering the winner's wrath. The totally new electoral competition, far from bringing a beneficial political opening, carried a constraint fraught with dangers because there was nothing to gain from voting, but much to be lost.

The overwhelming majority of voters did not even know the major components of the programmes of the two competing parties.<sup>21</sup> From what little they heard, the programmes had little to say in response to their main concerns. Democracy? The concept is unknown or at best very vague for almost all of the interviewees.<sup>22</sup> The privatisation of land proposed by the opposition? The majority did not see what it would change and did not have the means to buy land in any case. Federalism? The authorities

with whom the farmers deal on a daily basis, beginning with the leaders of the Peasant Association, all come from the community or the neighbouring ones. The Tigrayan hold on power, both political and economic? It isn't visible in the villages where they live. The conflict with Eritrea? They knew nothing about the international arbitration, the respective positions of the two ex-belligerents, or even the existence of the contested territories. All they demanded was that the war did not resume because youths from their community had died in the 1998–2000 war.

On the other hand, would taxes decrease? Would compulsory labour continue? Would fertilisers be more abundant and cheaper? Would the educational system be reformed? Parents make big sacrifices to send their children to school, children who end up having no choice but to come back to work on the farm without having learned the necessary skills. Most voters had only partial, vague and contradictory answers to these crucial questions. Nor did they believe the answers given to them. 'I do not believe in the promises of the government or in those of the opposition; I believe only in God.' This statement often recurs. Nor did they have an answer to one of their main preoccupations: would the reforestation project to fight erosion in one *kebele* be launched and thus reduce the pasture area?

Most peasants are in any case convinced that the one-way relation between the *mengist* and the *gebäre* is immutable. If they loathe the ruling power, they don't expect anything better from its successor. 'Nothing has changed, the landlord, the *Derg*, the EPRDF. It is all the same, and it will stay that way.' A government that 'would help' its subjects is 'a dream'. Even the most fervent and informed supporters of the opposition affirmed that a victory would at best give them a few years' respite, as after the fall of the *Derg*. Then all would begin again as always.

Failing to decide on the basis of the programmes, could voters decide on the basis of the personality of the candidates? Nobody knew them. Less than one in ten voters knew the name of a candidate, either for the Federal Parliament or for the Parliament of the Amhara State. Many of them do not live in the district. None of them had campaigned as this was done by the local militants.

In the end, one is left with rumours. 'It's said that' if the opposition wins, it will reverse the land redistribution carried out by the EPRDF, and even the *Derg*. This will allow landlords of the imperial time to regain their land. Of course, this is a concern to those who received land to cultivate during the redistributions of 1975–76 and 1997. 'It's said that' if the EPRDF is defeated, it will resort to war. 'It's said that' if the opposition wins, it will ban compulsory work and 'voluntary' contributions, and



reduce the land tax. These rumours circulating in trusted family circles carry a weight that official declarations lack, wherever they come from. Yet, they don't have enough credibility to help make enlightened choices. They only add to the general climate of confusion, uncertainty and fear. Most of the interviewees concluded that an enlightened political choice was vain, superfluous and in any case out of reach.

'Even if we could effectively choose between a "good" and a "bad" *mengist* we are not educated enough to be able to do so.' Therefore, people would cast their ballot in a manner contrary to the rationality on which democratic voting is supposed to be founded, but that is entirely rational in their own context. The question they ask themselves is: 'with which candidate do I stand the least risk of reducing my chances of survival?' The answer is obvious: the one who will win at the national level, or, at least, in my own community.

The winner dispenses, as he wishes and to whom he wishes, the vital services and goods. A recurrent remark made by voters was: 'I should not dissociate myself from the people', all the more so as 'it is easy to punish a few persons, but much more difficult to punish the majority of people.' On the eve of the elections, their obsession was thus to guess who the majority in the country or the community would vote for.

Sounding out the neighbours prematurely carries the risk of disclosing one's own indecision, for which one could later be reproached. A number of interviewees said they would wait until Saturday night, if not until the ballot day, i.e. the following Sunday, to join a group of voters going to the voting bureau in order to ask them about their voting intention, or even to look out for the first voters heading home to find out their choice. Some went as far as to hope that the ballot would not be secret so that they could see how those ahead of them in the line voted. In the days leading up to the vote, interviewees went as far as imploring the author of this study to tell them who the winner would be, since they were sure his education and experience gave him the keys to know this.

In the area under investigation, the opposition garnered between 63% and 84% of the votes that were cast and valid, according to the ballot bureaus. The rejection of the regime and the dynamics of the opposition certainly played a part, but less so than the swaying power of the towns. The links with Debre Sina, even if only to go from time to time to the market, are close. The *woreda* capital, with its teachers, students and merchant class, was clearly on the side of the opposition. Further, most extended families have a member living in a big town able to occasionally pass on news about what is happening there. Therefore, they heard echoes of the switch of allegiance to the opposition, and notably the mammoth

demonstration of 8 May 2005.<sup>23</sup> The *birokrasi* did not hesitate to amplify these, insisting that the opposition had succeeded in rallying ‘at least four million people’, and that this proved, if there is still any need to do so, that the cities which are the epicentres of power were going to reject the EPRDF.

Nevertheless, many voters refused until the end to make a choice for fear that it might be too risky. The sum of abstentions, void or invalid ballots amounted to 39% of those registered in one polling station. Many of those who abstained preferred to take the risk of being ‘punished’ for not voting rather than pay the consequences of a ‘bad’ choice. Even more numerous were those who knowingly spoiled their ballots in order not to be reproached, whoever the winner might be.<sup>24</sup>

#### THE FUTURE

As mentioned above, the Carter Centre (2005b) stated: ‘The election process demonstrated significant advances in Ethiopia’s democratization process.’ Christopher Clapham (2005) wrote that in turning out to vote massively, the voters demonstrated, like elsewhere in Africa, that they were capable of ‘understanding the issues at stake’. They did so not to respond to the demand of whoever it may be, but ‘in order to express what they themselves want’. These elections, he adds, ‘have taken on the characteristics of “founding elections” such as those of 1994 in South Africa, or of the 1950s or early 1960s in most of the rest of the continent’. Taking into account the harm to its reputation that the government suffered after the fraud at the ballot box and the repression against protesters, the author concludes: ‘It is almost impossible to imagine the EPRDF government winning any remotely fair election against any reasonably plausible and effective opposition.’

Information gathered indirectly from the study area in 2006 makes it difficult to predict the attitude of voters if new elections were to be held that fulfilled the above criteria. But it is obvious that most of those who voted for the opposition on 15 May 2005 in this area regret it. They believe they gained nothing, but lost much. They consider that the opposition did not even succeed in establishing a local counter-power that could reduce the EPRDFs hegemony which, they said, remained intact. The Front took repressive measures against those whom it considered its most significant adversaries, both individually and collectively. Thus, 2,000 people whose homes and farms were destroyed by a natural catastrophe in the region had not received any assistance as late as five months later, because, according to the victims, they had voted for the opposition. More

importantly, the final outcome of the elections could provide proof that the hypothesis of a peaceful transfer of political power through the ballot box is false or illusory. A ruling power continues to rule. The regime remains in power, regardless of the choice of voters. In conclusion, the great majority of those who were in favour of the opposition affirm that if they had known it, they would have voted for the EPRDF. They affirm this is what they would do if elections were to happen all over again.

## NOTES

1. Carter Center 2005b states, for example: 'In contrast with previous national elections, the 2005 elections were sharply contested and offered Ethiopian citizens a democratic choice for the first time in their long history ... The overwhelming majority of Ethiopians had the opportunity to make a meaningful choice.' EU 2005 mentions 'The most genuinely competitive elections the country has experienced' in spite of the fact that 'the overall political environment in which the election took place contained a number of elements which limited the full exercise of suffrage and the free expression of the will the people'. Clapham 2005 wrote: 'They (the 15.5.2005 elections) marked the first occasion in the country's history when the mass of the electorate felt that they had the opportunity to express their own views on their country's future, and were able to exercise it ... In most areas of the country, parties were able to present candidates and campaign, and people were able to vote, with a degree of freedom hitherto unknown ... Generally, these were real elections'.

2. EU 2005 notes an 'increasing voter registration estimated at no less than 85% of all eligible population'. It adds: 'The Ethiopian public demonstrated their commitment to democracy through their active and enthusiastic participation in the May 15 poll', which is proved by an 'enormously high voter turnout on election day'.

3. For example, Carter Center 2005a states: 'The May 2005 elections ... showed great promise in the deepening of Ethiopian democracy.' Clapham 2005 writes: 'The May 2005 elections in Ethiopia have taken on the characteristics of 'founding elections' such as those of 1994 in South Africa, or of the 1950 or early 1960 in most of the rest of the continent.'

4. The integration of the state and the ruling party, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), is so clear that Ethiopia is *de facto* ruled by a 'party-state'. Meles Zenawi, the prime minister, is also the leader both of the EPRDF and of its dominant constituent, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

5. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia is structured into two urban administrations and nine regional states (*kilil*), which are sub-divided into zones, then districts (*woreda*) with on average a little more than 100,000 inhabitants, and then *kebele*, which may have several sub-*kebele*. A *kebele* or sub-*kebele*, the lowest level of territorial administration, usually contains about 500 households. The two communities examined in this study are in the extreme south-west of this state, bordering the Afar regional state.

6. The 'socialist' military junta led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, which overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974, and was in turn overthrown in 1991 by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), at the head of a coalition of ethno-political movements, the EPRDF. *Derg* means 'committee'.

7. To take only recent history, the *Derg* overthrew Haile Selassie by force and eliminated his supporters, while the EPRDF did the same to the *Derg* after a long war, and then carried out a massive purge.

8. In the two communities, taxes and 'voluntary' contributions amounted to about the equivalent of 12 working days in the fields. 'Voluntary' work is required, according to interviewees, for four to six days a month. Taking account of religious holidays, there are a little fewer than 20 working days a month.

9. Poluha 2004: 10; on relations with local officials, see Vaughan & Tronvoll 2003: 18: 'Their relations with them will mediate the access they enjoy to all of the resources and services the state has to offer – jobs, health services, land rights, water, relief food, credit, rented houses, and so on.'

10. The agrarian reform of 4 March 1975 made land 'the collective property of the Ethiopian people', which should be distributed 'as equally as possible' to 'every person who wishes to cultivate it

in person'. It thus expropriated all 'feudal' landowners, completely and without compensation. The distribution was entrusted to newly created peasants' associations with an elected leadership.

11. To the question: 'What is democracy?' a large third of the farmers interviewed replied: 'it is the right to speak during meetings', but added: 'that is what the authorities tell us'.

12. The voters voted simultaneously twice, to elect one deputy to the federal House of Peoples' Representatives, and two deputies to the State Council of the Amhara state.

13. According to the Ethiopian Ministry of Finance, during the last ten years, some \$8 billion in aid and loans have poured into Ethiopia from international organisations and the donor community (IRIN, 7.7.2005). Ethiopian GDP amounted to \$11 billion in 2005.

14. Ethiopia has probably the only government in Africa to seek the mobilisation of the mass of the peasantry as the driver of national development. According to foreign experts, no African government has made as much effort in this direction as Ethiopia.

15. For example, during his official visit to France one month before the elections, Meles Zenawi confided to his French interlocutors that the forthcoming elections would be 'a formality'.

16. The average cultivable plot size of about 0.8 ha. must sustain a household averaging five persons, but produces annually only about 8 quintals of grain, the minimum needed to sustain only four persons.

17. EU 2005 emphasises 'the creation of a public space ... allowing a genuine exchange of views on issues of public concern' between the majority and the opposition.

18. This date appears to be uniform across the whole country, as though a national order has been given at that moment from Addis Ababa. Shortly afterwards, on 28 April, Meles Zenawi, interviewed by a journalist astonished by the absence of an EPRDF campaign, replied: 'We decided that until a few weeks ... we would focus on carrying out development work. We never thought that starting the campaign later would create such problems.' He himself, however, never descended into the electoral arena.

19. \$1US = c.8 birr; the agricultural daily wage is 5 or 6 birr.

20. I personally saw these registers, and gained confirmation of this information from local officials responsible for filling them.

21. The election manifestoes of the three main political forces, EPRDF, CUD and UEDF (United Ethiopian Democratic Forces), were late and difficult to obtain even in the large towns. Besides, their presentation made them incomprehensible to a peasant reader, even supposing him to be literate.

22. To the question, 'What does democracy mean to you?' at least a third of the farmers interviewed replied: 'these are the people whose land has been taken', thus confusing democracy and *birokrasi*, which sound similar. Another third replied: 'democracy is the right to speak, at least that is what we have been told'. The rest provided an often-confused mixture of 'rights', 'freedom', 'equality', 'being respected', etc.

23. According to observers, this was the largest demonstration ever seen in Addis Ababa, with numbers much greater than that organised a week before by the ruling party.

24. One old woman, who had always shown great perspicacity in previous interviews, told us: 'To avoid trouble, I marked the bee on one ballot paper (say on the vote for the Federal Parliament), and the V on the other' – the symbols respectively of the EPRDF and the opposition. If the observers of the European Union emphasised the high percentage of 'invalid' votes, '10 per cent in many polling stations observed, in some cases between 20–30 per cent', they attributed these high figures only to the 'restrictiveness' of the officials, or to the lack of training of the voters (EU 2006).

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