Ethiopia: Beleaguered Opposition under a Dominant Party System

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Background

Notwithstanding the drawbacks and deficits associated with the political developments that transpired following the 1991 regime change in Ethiopia, the culture of using elections as a means of obtaining popular mandate and legitimacy is gradually taking shape in the country. This is not to imply that elections in post-1991 Ethiopia are completely flawless and credible instruments of gauging the fulfillment of legitimate aspirations of society in the sense of providing opportunities for making choice from among diverse and competing political policies and programs. Constitutional principles and political rhetoric aside, an important factor that sheds light on the nature of electoral politics in post-1991 Ethiopia relates to the taking shape of a dominant party system expressed in the omnipotence of the ruling political front, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), in a multiparty political framework. Regarding the emergence of the EPRDF as a dominant party, there are two contending views some arguing that the establishment of a federal political system along ethnic lines was intended to consolidate EPRDF's hegemonic position (Ottaway 1995) while others are of the view that the prominent role that the EPRDF is made to play is a logical outcome of the federalization of Ethiopia along ethnic lines (Andreas in Basta-Fleiner, 2000). Regardless of the validity of each of these propositions, the fact that EPRDF ostensibly controls almost all of the constituent regions of the Ethiopian federal system through the agency of its member organizations is beyond contention. As a political force that succeeded in wresting the reins of power from the military dictatorship after waging a protracted and successful armed insurgency, EPRDF continues to control the security apparatus, the army and the civilian bureaucracy all of which proved crucial for maintaining and perpetuating its dominance. On the other hand, the embryonic stage of development and miniscule role of opposition parties in the political arena provided EPRDF with a comparative advantage in its bid to entrench itself as a relatively stronger political organization. This paper is an attempt aimed at examining the predicaments of Ethiopian opposition parties that are partly caused by the taking shape and consolidation of EPRDF as a dominant actor in Ethiopian politics.

Overview of Post-1991 Political Developments

Ethiopia experienced two regime changes since the mid-1970s. The *ancien regime* (imperial rule) was toppled by the 1974 revolutionary upsurge culminating in the coming to power of the military, which reigned until 1991. The incumbent regime, which is spearheaded by a coalition of ethnic-based organizations, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF),[1] seized power in May 1991 following its ouster of the military regime. The 1991 regime change caused shifts with regard to the underlying ideology of the Ethiopian State by ushering in a system of decentralization of power

[1] The formation of EPRDF was spearheaded in 1989 by the Tigray Liberation Front (TPLF), which is based in the northern part of the country. This move of forming a broader alliance was aimed at lending a multinational image to the TPLF and facilitate the organization's national role following the then anticipated collapse of military rule. Initially, the EPDRF was composed of the TPLF and the Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement (EPDM), which was later, renamed "Amhara National Democratic Movement" (ANDM). The Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Front (SEPDF) joined the EPRDF at a later stage. It is widely alleged that several prisoners of war under the custody of the TPLF were instrumental in the formation of some of the member organizations of the EPRDF (see John Young 1997).

under a federal arrangement. The historical roots of the present Ethiopian political system could be traced to the emergence of a vibrant **o**pposition to imperial rule since the 1960s pioneered by the Ethiopian Student Movement, which advocated radical changes in the political landscape and state-society relations. As a result, monarchic rule encountered series of multifaceted challenges and diverse claims and demands of different sections of society ranging from the quest for liberal reforms in the form of instituting a constitutional monarchy[2] to mobilization and politicization aimed at revolutionary transformation. It is to be recalled that a number of Ethiopian opposition movements that influenced subsequent socio-economic and political developments in the country had their roots, in one way or another, to the Ethiopian Student Movement. Thriving opposition groups that surfaced during the aftermath of the fall of imperial rule, however, differed in their orientation, tactics and strategies. Whereas some of these were organized as multinational entities like the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopian Socialist Movement (*meisone*), others such as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and the Ogaden National Liberation Movement (ONLF), among others, espoused ethno-nationalist aspirations that were centrifugal in nature. On the ideological front, some advocated application of the basic tenets of liberal democracy while others subscribed to the different variants of Marxism-Leninism centered either on pan-Ethiopian nationalism or the quest for realizing the right of ethnic groups to self-determination.

The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which is among the latter, was the key organization that spearheaded the formation of EPRDF in the late-1980s. TPLF was established in 1975 in the midst of heightened political activism of the post-revolution years and played the decisive role in waging a protracted armed struggle against the military dictatorship that culminated in the May 1991 regime change. Like several other opposition groups, the TPLF was also one of the offshoots of the Ethiopian Student Movement and subscribed to the Marxist-Leninist ideology with a vision of promoting goals relating to socio-economic and political transformation. Following the 1991 regime change that was accompanied by a transitional arrangement, it was legally determined that assumption of public office in the leading bodies of the Ethiopian political system at national, regional, and local levels shall be mediated by the outcomes of periodic multiparty competitive elections. Accordingly, several elections like the June 1992 Regional and Local Elections, the June 1994 Elections to the Constituent Assembly, and the May 1995, May 2000, May 2005, and May 2010 National and Regional Elections were held. Hence multiparty competitive elections were used as important instruments of representative politics under the new dispensation. At the official and formal-legal level, this was viewed as the first positive development of its kind for a country whose history was bedeviled by paucity of competitive multiparty electoral politics. Despite the fact that the legitimacy of the post-1991 electoral process in terms of being free and fair still remains to be a highly contested issue, one could argue that introducing multiparty competitive elections as an arena for the coming into interplay of legitimate and competing interests of members of society is commendable.

Official policies and rhetoric of decentralized governance and federalism aside, EPRDF controls not only all branches of government at the national level but also the entire constituent regions and local and grassroots administrative units of government. This is expedited through the strong presence of ethnic-

[2] This was one of the major policy pronouncements of the leaders of the foiled coup of December 1960 staged by the Imperial Guard.

based regional parties affiliated to EPRDF[3]. Besides, the placing of the two autonomous chartered cities of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa under the Federal Government means that they are in effect put under EPRDF control thereby making the circle of the ruling party's total dominance in all institutions of the political system complete. It has now become a reality that in all regional and local elections conducted since 1991, EPRDF's member and affiliated organizations have prevailed. In instances where opposition parties have claimed electoral victory, as was the case during the May 2005 Elections, second-rounds were held on the orders of the National Election Board as a response to complaints alleging foul play and irregularities on the part of both the ruling and opposition parties. Credible evidence abounds that the outcomes thereof have resulted in the victory of EPRDF and its affiliates. Attempts made to challenge processes and outcomes of electoral exercises in the courts of law at the federal and sub-national levels on the part of the disaffected opposition groups proved futile due to the alleged partisanship, lack of independence and integrity of the electoral body and the judicial system. The outcomes of the May 2010 Elections in which EPRDF and its allies won over 99% of the seats in the federal and regional legislative assemblies (NEB 2010) are indicative of the absolute preponderance of the ruling party leading to the uncontested entrenchment of a dominant party system. Given that policy and other major decisions with far-reaching socio-economic and political implications are approved by the lower house of parliament after initial scrutiny in the EPRDF-dominated Council of Ministers, the formidable leverage that the ruling party commands to the detriment of other political groups in this regard is too clear to beg for further elaboration.

In the light of the aforementioned, the possibility for the opposition to pose serious challenges against EPRDF's dominance in all branches and levels of government is thus rendered marginal at best as the latter continued to control the overwhelming majority of seats in the lower house of parliament (HPR), which is constitutionally designated as the highest organ of state power. In contrast to the preceding and recent exercises, the May 2005 Elections were markedly distinct in the sense that public debates and electoral campaigns were marked by a highly visible mobilization of constituencies. As admitted by the ruling party, the opposition won over a hundred seats in the federal legislature in May 2005, which was a dramatic improvement with regard to the performance of the opposition when compared to all other previous election outcomes. Improved access to public media for all participants was considerable and the process went smoothly until Election Day after which the opposition claimed to have won more seats than those officially acknowledged. This claim was rejected by EPRDF following which controversies ensued culminating in riots and bloodletting.

Distinctive Features of the Political System

The different provisions of the constitution emphasized that popular sovereignty and representation in the leading bodies of government at various levels shall be exercised by inducing citizens to make direct participation in socio-economic and political processes through periodic multiparty competitive elections. Accordingly, local, regional and national elections were conducted at varying times following the 1991 regime change. This is notwithstanding the persistent controversies between the ruling party and opposition groups on the nature of electoral processes and outcomes. It is also worth noting that the new dispensation ushered in a favorable environment for the proliferation of political parties and civil society organizations.

[3] The political organizations that formed the EPRDF have continuously controlled the four major constituent regions and the two autonomous city governments of the Ethiopian federation since 1991. The same applies to the remaining five regional states where ethnic parties that are closely associated with EPRDF and designated as "friendly" organizations.

Major Governance Structures

The three major branches of government and associated organs are instituted at the national and sub-national levels on the basis of a formally designed arrangement of governance. The constitution provided the legal basis for exercising devolved powers and functions by nine regional states and two autonomous city administrations the totality of which constitutes the Ethiopian federal system. As a first step towards entrenching decentralized governance by way of devolution, the constitution formally sanctioned the establishment of two levels of government at federal and regional levels, which was later extended to the local (district) administrations by enacting the District-Level Decentralization Program (DLDP) since 2001/02. In line with this, governance structures ranging from the federal to the grassroots levels were laid in descending order of hierarchy. Accordingly, regional states are made to enjoy residual powers with the exception of engaging in foreign relations, economic and fiscal policy, and national defense that are preserved to fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government. In summary, the proper understanding of the major features of the current Ethiopian political system calls for taking a number of underlying basic factors into account. These include: 1) the federal arrangement is based on ethno-linguistic considerations in terms of putting in place sub-national governance structures in line with the principle of self-rule under a rubric of a formal parliamentary system; 2) establishment of a bicameral federal legislature, unicameral regional councils and local and grassroots assemblies with varying powers that are operational at the federal, regional and sub-regional levels respectively; 3) existence of different hierarchies of executive and judicial branches of government with corresponding powers and functions at all levels; 4) assumption of office in the leading organs of government based on outcomes of pluralist multiparty parliamentary elections that are determined on first-pass-the-post competition in single-member constituencies (majoritarianism); and 5) fusion of legislative and executive powers to be held by a party that wins the majority of seats in all the legislative bodies of the Ethiopian federal system.

The federal legislature is bi-cameral that are designated as the House of Peoples' Representatives and the House of Federation as the lower and upper chambers respectively. Members to both houses are elected for a five-year term without limitation on their tenure in so long as they are reelected. The lower chamber of the federal le**g**islature is the highest organ of state power with wide-ranging prerogatives: confirming the nomination of the top federal officials, approving proposed bills as laws, endorsing the national budget, ratifying bilateral and international treaties, discharging oversight functions with regard to the behaviors and practices of the executive branch, and declaring a state of emergency and/or war. The upper house serves as a constitutional court and deals with disputes that arise between the federal and regional governments and between the regional states, determines the bases and sources of revenue of federal and regional governments, and issues of the right to self-determination whenever the need arises. The upper house poses as a council of nationalities where at least one member of each ethnic group represents his/her constituency. Membership to the upper house is acquired either as a result of election by state legislatures or through the direct participation of eligible voters of the regional states. Both regional and sub-regional legislatures undertake functions that are more or less similar to the ones carried out by the federal lower house particularly with regard to approving the appointment of officials in the respective leading bodies of governance, oversight, approval of plans and budgets, etc. In the overwhelming majority of the regional states, intermediate tiers of administration known as zones are limited to liaising between regional and local governments by carrying out routine coordinating and administrative functions and providing technical support to local governments. In the Southern Peoples'

Region where about 56 ethnic groups coexist under a single regional state, all major organs of zonal governments are elected.

The executive branch at all levels of the Ethiopian governance structure is organized in a manner that is characteristic of most parliamentary systems. Accordingly, a party or coalition of parties controlling the majority of seats in the federal lower house and the legislative councils at national and sub-national levels are entitled to form the executive organs of government. The federal executive at the national level is organized under the leadership of a prime minister nominated by the party or coalition of parties that win the majority of seats in the lower house. The constitution also provides for the election of a non-executive president who serves as a titular head of state following his/her nomination by the lower house and elected by a two-thirds majority in the joint session of both chambers of the federal parliament. The term of office of the prime minister is unlimited whereas that of the president is for six years per term but limited to a maximum of two terms. While the prime minister is allowed to retain his parliamentary seat along with his position as head of government, a member of parliament elected as president (head of state) is required to vacate his/her parliamentary seat. In a similar vein, the judicial system is organized at federal, regional, zonal, local and grassroots levels.

Democracy and Elections as Building Blocks

Following the 1991 regime change, several local and four national and regional parliamentary elections (May 1995, May 2000, May 2005, and May 2010) took place. The May 1991 regime change ushered in significant changes in the body politic of Ethiopia as enshrined in the 1991 Transitional Charter (TGE 1991) and the incumbent constitution (FDRE 1995) both of which recognized the inviolability of human rights, the rights of Ethiopia's ethnic groups to self-determination, and citizens' unabridged freedom of speech, association and assembly. Different legislations enacted after EPRDF's seizure of power (TGE, 1992**,** FDRE 2002) ensured decentralization of power from the political center to the ethnically-constituted regions and subsequently to local and grassroots units as the cornerstones of the federal system. Hence following the ousting of the military dictatorship, Ethiopia adopted a multiparty and parliamentary political system anchored in ethnic federalism.

Official policies and rhetoric aside, EPRDF controls not only all branches of government at the federal level but also the entire constituent regions and local and grassroots administrative units of government. This is expedited through the strong presence of ethnic-based regional parties affiliated to it in one way or another[4]. Besides, the placing of the two autonomous chartered cities under the Federal Government means that they are in effect put under EPRDF control thereby making the circle of the ruling party's total dominance in all institutions of the political system complete. It is now widely known that in all regional and local elections conducted in the country to date, EPRDF's member and satellite organizations have prevailed as a result of which the ruling political Front controlled the reins of power across the board. In instances where opposition parties have claimed electoral victory, as was the case during the May 2005 Elections, second-rounds were held on the orders of the National Election Board following complaints alleging foul play and irregularities by both the ruling and opposition parties. Credible evidence abounds that outcomes thereof have resulted in the victory of EPRDF and its affiliates. Attempts made to challenge processes and outcomes of electoral exercises in the courts of law at the federal and sub-national levels on the part of the

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disaffected opposition groups proved futile due to the alleged partisanship, lack of independence and integrity, and subservience of the electoral body and the judicial system. The results of the May 2010 Elections are indicative of the absolute preponderance of the ruling party in which EPRDF and its allies won 99.6% of the seats (NEB 2010) in the federal lower house of parliament thereby inaugurating the uncontested entrenchment of a dominant party system under a multiparty setting.

Political Parties: Legal Regime, Internal Governance, and Social Composition

One of the most important developments in post-1991 Ethiopian politics is the emergence of legally recognized political parties. Since the commencement of arrangements that underpin the transitional period in 1991, several political parties with varying orientations and programs came into being. As government structures are established on the basis of identity**,** ethnic-based parties proliferated throughout the country in due course. Generally, political parties that legally operate in the country during the period in question could be classified into three broad categories: ethnic-based parties under the umbrella of EPRDF; regional ethnic-based parties cooperating with the EPRDF[5]; and multinational and ethnic-based opposition parties.

Regulatory Framework

The legal basis for the establishment and engagement in political party activities is provided for by a series of legal acts. These include the Transitional Charter (TGE, 1991), Proclamations No. 46/93[6] and 64/93[7], and the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Proclamation 46/93 stipulated the legal foundations governing registration of political parties and electoral matters respectively (TGE, 1993a). Proclamation No. 46/1993[8] also deals with a wide range of issues covering such areas as legal personality (definition, formation, prohibited acts, memorandum of association, by-laws, programs, emblem and designation); registration, finance and property matters; and dissolution and suspension of political parties. Accordingly, Ethiopians above the age of 18 can form a political party upon drawing up internal regulations and issuing a political program (*ibid.* Art. 4/1). The Proclamation also puts a number of requirements on political parties to register as nation-wide and regional organizations. In order to qualify as a national political party, the subscriber organization has to submit a list of at least 1,500 founding members out of which residents of a single region shall not exceed 40% of the total while the remaining should be residents of at least four of the regional states and account for about 15% of the total number of founders in each region. On the other hand, in order to qualify as a regional party an organization should have at least 750 members of which at least 40% of the total must be residents of the concerned region (ibid.)[9]. This Proclamation also puts conditions on the basis of which political parties are denied registration (Art. 5). These include, groups fomenting conflict, animosity and hatred among social, ethnic and religious groups, promoting objectives through force of arms, and enlisting foreign nationals as members. Professional associations, trade unions, and

[5] Regional parties, which govern the regional states of Gambella, Somali, Benishangul-Gumuz and Harari regions are affiliated to the EPRDF without posing as members of the Front. They do not, however, enjoy operational freedom unless they secure EPRDF's blessing. See John Young, 'Regionalism and democracy in Ethiopia', *Third World Quarterly*, (1998, 19).
[6] As amended by Proclamation No. 82/94.
[7] Amended as Proclamation No. 111/95.
[8] As amended by Proclamation No. 82/94.
[9] See Articles 4.2 and 4.3 of Proclamation No. 43/1993 as amended by Proclamation No. 82/94.

organizations formed to advance commercial, industrial, welfare, mutual self-help, and religious activities cannot register as political parties (Art. 6). Moreover, submission of basic documents like memorandum of association, bylaws, and party programs is laid down as criteria for registration (Arts. 8, 9 and 10). It is also mandatory for political parties to get official registration without which it becomes illegal to commence operations (Art. 22). In instances when the Office of Registration fails to register organizations that have fulfilled the eligibility criteria, the affected organization can appeal to the Federal High Court for legal redress (Art. 25).

Governance

By and large, the principles and legal provisions governing political party establishment and registration appear to have been accepted as fair, credible, and standard. The contentious issue, however, is whether these are translated into practice. In several instances, opposition parties complain that the Office of Registration arbitrarily delays issuing certificates of registration within the specified time limit as provided for by pertinent legislations. They also lament that appeals to the Federal High Court for redress mostly remain unaddressed as a result of the several inadequacies that characterize the performance of the judicial system. This is allegedly driven by the quest for delaying official activities of parties that are presumed to be adversaries to the ruling front and the regime in power. Opposition parties question the credibility of the National Election Board, which is a regulatory body for election matters, in implementing the Party Law alleging that the ruling party itself violates the provisions of the Proclamation that prohibit engagement in industrial and commercial activities. They cite instances of EPRDF's running of industrial and commercial activities with a total capital amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars whereas it is alleged that no single party outside the EPRDF owns even a small commercial enterprise that could enable it finance its activities. Nor did the EPRDF deny the existence of commercial and industrial activities that are undertaken by conglomerates that are associated with it in one way or another and designated as endowment trusts running charitable activities.

The internal governance of political parties, to a major degree, follows patterns and arrangements characteristic of standard practices. Almost all have congresses, central committees, executive committees, and specialized units (organization, public relations, propaganda, fund raising, audit, etc). Bylaws of political parties cover issues regarding their internal governance highlighting rights and duties, governance structures, schedule of meetings, mode and manner of selecting and fielding candidates for election, and decision making procedures. All parties also claim to adhere to democratic principles as the cornerstone of internal party life. In reality, however, instances of several accusations by disaffected party members against their leaderships citing the prevalence of undemocratic practices and violations of internal rules abound. Several party members have filed complaints at the NEB and the Federal High Court alleging violation of party bylaws. Problems relating to internal party governance surfaced, for example, in the Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia (CAFPDE) on the question of who is eligible to lead the organization. The decision of the All Amhara People Organization (AAPO) to change its nomenclature and its program was also disputed by some of its members on the ground that they were not consulted. The same was true with regard to the ruling party, EPRDF, when a split occurred in its top leadership on the issue of dealing with the Eritrean aggression in 2000 leading to the purging of some leading members accused of violating party rules.

It is also worthy to note that the internal politics of political parties in Ethiopia is dominated by personalities that amassed overwhelming powers to the detriment of participation and democratic

leadership. In other words, the influence and role of founder-leaders is paramount, which is attributed to the influence of the persisting influence of Ethiopian political culture engrained in hierarchical authority that seems to be very much at work as regards several political parties including the ruling Front. The autocratic mentality bequeathed by past rigid political culture (Tarekegn 1996), and tendencies that uphold politics of command (Tronvoll and Aadland 1995) are very much alive today as they were during the imperial and revolutionary times. Lack of democratic governance within parties has considerable implication for the democratization process in Ethiopia. Efforts towards forging coalitions among opposition parties, for instance, often failed because of internal squabbles and clash of personalities[10].

Meaningful participation of opposition political parties in the political process has been largely inadequate, which is a phenomenon that greatly undermined the process of the Ethiopian democratization drive. The shortfall with regard to the performance of opposition parties is compounded by intimidation of government officials and EPRDF functionaries operating at local levels. Besides, the operation of many opposition parties is limited in the capital city and few major urban centers due to pressures and threats from local government officials. Though opposition political parties endeavor to capture as many supporters as possible through actively inducing people in the areas where they claim to command the allegiance of constituencies, they are handicapped in various ways to attain their goals. Such factors as insecurity, lack of resources, and the bellicose stance of EPRDF-affiliated regional governments are often reported as having arrested their progress in penetrating areas where there is a potential for enlisting massive support. In the light of this, it is hardly possible to conclude that they actively engage with their claimed constituencies to advance goals enshrined in their organizational programs. Nevertheless, the degree and extent of their attracting sympathy varies. While some[11] have managed to sporadically mobilize people who make assertive claims and demands upon the political system by displaying valor and militancy, others are limited to pleas and appeals for fair treatment within the existing legal milieu. So far, no meaningful and effective dialogue has taken place between the government and opposition parties regarding the issue of broadening the political space in spite of the fact that leading government officials have reiterated EPRDF's willingness to travel extra miles to make the political process all-inclusive on several occasions. The sincerity of the government regarding its commitment towards widening up of the political space for opposition parties could be questionable when one looks at the way the ruling party reacted to the electoral campaigns of the Southern opposition coalition during the May 2000 elections and its response marked by state repression to the assertive stances of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy Party in the aftermath of the May 2005 Elections.

Resources

Articles 27 and 28 of Proclamation No. 46/1993 deal with affairs related to source of income and properties of political parties. Accordingly, the Proclamation stipulates that political parties are prohibited from engaging in commercial and industrial activities. They can, however, raise funds from such events as bazaars on a non-permanent manner. Parties can also draw funds from membership dues, subsidies and grants from the government, and donations from supportive domestic sources. Prohibited

[10] There was a bitter struggle among the leaders of the Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia. The case of determining the legitimate leader of the Council was taken to the court of law for arbitration. The same applies to what transpired in the ranks of the leadership of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, which made significant gains during the 2005 National and Regional Elections.

[11] The case of the Southern Ethiopian peoples' Democratic Coalition (SEPDC) mobilizing the people of Wolaita and Hadiya to engage the regime for the fulfillment of their demands could be cited.

donations include: grants from foreign nationals, foreign governments and political parties, external welfare and religious organizations, and convicted prisoners. Regarding financial management, the Proclamation requires that political parties should establish generally acceptable accounting procedures. Moreover, parties are required to prove to the concerned government agency that they have used their finances for advancing their declared objectives (Art.32/4). The intention of including this provision in the legislation seems to have been driven by the urge to facilitate government control over the parties. On the other hand, other provisions of the Proclamation (Art.32/3 and Art. 33) require parties to prepare and officially issue annual financial reports and give access to their members to inspect their books of account so as to entrench transparency in their financial administration. The existing Electoral Law states that political organizations will have 'equal' access to state-owned mass media, including radio, television, and the print media during electoral campaign seasons. Accordingly, opposition parties and independent candidates got limited access to state owned media during the previous elections to publicize their election platforms. No equal coverage was, however, given to the opposition in a manner that is on a par with the access enjoyed by the ruling party.

Social Composition

In terms of their political programs and geographic distribution, political parties in Ethiopia broadly include the various sections of society given that both multi-ethnic and ethnic-based political parties have commenced operations. Regarding political ideology, some of the political parties tend to espouse orientations tilted towards various persuasions ranging from liberal democracy to revolutionary democracy. The socio-economic background of leaders/founders of the political parties is, however, more or less similar across the board. Like several other things that are ushered in by the 'modernization' drive in transitional societies like Ethiopia, party politics is also a recent phenomenon. It goes without saying that the coming to the fore of the leadership of political parties is conditioned by some kind of exposure to the various elements of modernity (formal schooling, urban life, etc.). Most of the political parties in Ethiopia that emerged after the fall of the military regime were not rooted in society, particularly during their formative years. Urban-based and formally educated academics, ex-civil servants, businessmen, and others who seized the opportune moment of the liberalized political atmosphere of the early 1990s pioneered the formation of many of the political parties and it was only after the preliminaries of forming their parties that they attempted to penetrate society at large. The reality on the ground shows that the leadership of Ethiopian political parties is exclusively composed of the cosmopolitan and urban elite with considerable degree of exposure to various aspects of modernity. Despite odds, however, some of the parties have managed to enlist ordinary people in the urban and rural areas as their members. Issues pertaining to women's plights and the need for addressing problems in this regard are highlighted in the programs of many of the political parties. Some have even declared that women and youth are organized under the auspices of their parties. However, when probing into the reality on the ground, there is almost nothing to this effect that is worth mentioning. In contrast to the newly established political parties in the post-1991 years, the EPRDF fared better in encouraging the participation of women in party activities. Among other things, this could be attributed to the pivotal role women played in the heydays of the EPRDF's insurgency against the *Dergue*. During EPRDF's insurgency, a good score of their female members were deployed as commanders, combatants, and organizers. The political mobilization strategies of EPRDF during its armed struggle against the military regime also targeted women as potential constituencies.

A Dominant Party System and Implications for Policy making and Opposition Politics

Given the aforementioned mode of operation, structuring and institutional arrangements that underlie the Ethiopian political system, shedding light on the implications thereof for agricultural policy making is worthwhile. The point of entry in the effort of unraveling the political economy of agricultural policy making in Ethiopia calls for probing into the organizational and operational principles of the ruling political Front, the EPRDF, which firmly controls not only all branches of government at the federal level but dominates all the constituent regions including local and grassroots administrative units of the Ethiopian federation since 1991. This is expedited through the strong presence of its ethnic-based regional parties, which control the four major regions and the so-called "friendly" political organizations that are closely allied to it in the remaining self-governing "emerging" regions[12] and the two autonomous city governments. At this juncture, it is worthy to note that these form the bedrock of the Ethiopian federal system. As repeatedly stated, the EPRDF is a coalition of four ethnic-based regional organizations that successfully waged a protracted armed insurgency against the military dictatorship by spearheading the enterprise of recasting and restructuring the Ethiopian political landscape.

EPRDF played pivotal roles in ushering in series of socio-economic and political reforms and grooming the formation of other ethnic-based parties that were subsequently allied to it. Once it entrenched its dominance in the aforementioned manner, EPRDF succeeded in dovetailing the major elements of its party programs with the important provisions of both the Transitional Charter and the 1995 Constitution. These impacted on the mode and manner of framing the major institutions of governance of the federal system at all levels. It should also be recalled that that EPRDF's cardinal principles anchored in its Marxist-Leninist background espousing the vanguard role of the party remained intact, albeit with some modifications that are commensurate with changes that took place in the international system after the end of the Cold War. This is evidenced by its adherence to democratic centralism characteristic of similar other revolutionary movements as expressed in its organizational document (EPRDF 2006) that emphasize the party's crucial role in spearheading both development and democracy under the rubric of a developmental state. In this connection, Aalen (2002) argued that EPRDF's centralized party structure runs counter to the intents and spirits of the federal and regional constitutions due to the fact that upward accountability to the higher party organs to the detriment of downward accountability is promoted. As a result, the constitutional rights of the self-governing ethnic regions in formulating and implementing plans and policies that fall under their legitimate jurisdictions are subordinated to the decisions and programmatic positions of the vanguard party, which inevitably leads to a centralized division of state power. The aggressively overarching EPRDF control is also expressed by its firm grip on federal and sub-national administrations and key economic processes and activities that are vigilantly guarded by closely-knit party structures that facilitated EPRDF's quest for prevailing in the periodic national, regional and local elections held since the early 1990s. As a result, EPRDF members controlled all the important political and administrative positions in the major organs of government and the various policy making echelons including the commanding heights of the economy.

In view of the foregoing, state of affairs in the realm of public policy making and attendant practice in present-day Ethiopia amply demonstrates that the political system is favorably disposed towards the pursuit of top-down approaches as regards governance, socio-economic development endeavors, and regional and

[12] Whereas the four major regions (Tigray, Amhara, Oromiya and SNNPR) are governed by EPRDF member organizations (TPLF, ANDM, OPDO and SERDF, respectively), power rests in the hands of other ethnic-based regional organizations that are too close to the ruling Front in the remaining regions of Afar, Benishangul-Gumuz, Gambella, Somali, and Harari.

local administration. This takes place amidst EPRDF's official pledges and solemn declarations favoring popular initiatives and participation in decision making, representation, the primacy of "free" market principles and practices, and active participation of citizens with regard to issues and concerns that affect them in one way or another. Dessalegn (2008: 147) opined that there is a lot to be desired regarding the policy formulation process due to the fact that the prevailing situation tends to forfeit the advantages accruing from broad-based consultation. This is due to the entrenchment of top-down approaches, which are indiscriminately employed across the board. Besides, the omnipotence of the ruling party that firmly controls the different aspects of public power and policy making arena through the façade of its uninterrupted victories in all the electoral exercises conducted in the post-1991 years.

This assertion pertaining to the dominant role of EPRDF in the Ethiopian political arena warrants some pertinent illustrations. Article 51 (1) of the constitution provides that the federal government in general and the council of ministers in particular have unbridled powers in formulating and implementing the country's policies, strategies and plans pertaining to overall socio-economic development matters in general (Article 77, sub-art. 6). Concurrently, the House of Peoples' Representatives that is overwhelmingly and ever-dominated by the deputies of the ruling party is provided with the power of legislation in all matters falling under the jurisdiction of the federal government (Article 55, sub-article 2a). Hence and despite the existence of constitutional principles that provide for institutional checks and balances and oversight for restraining the sectarian tendencies of the EPRDF-dominated executive branch remains highly limited in reality. This is mainly due to the overwhelming presence of EPRDF members in both houses of parliament who accord primacy to party lines and discipline by conforming to the biddings of the ruling party. Subservience of legislators to the ruling party's whims and wills and preferences take effect to the detriment of the responsibility of legislators to the electorate as elected representatives. So far, the preoccupation of parliament under EPRDF rule is confined to rubberstamping the decisions and proposals of the executive branch signified by its track record of initiating bills and causing investigations on the excesses and abuses of the executive remaining abysmally low. EPRDF's dominance in parliament and its party discipline, which requires members to steadfastly support proposed bills without adequate scrutiny and debate, has been ever-present (Kassahun 2005).

At this juncture, looking at the mode and manner of initiating and approving policies characterizing the modus operandi of the Ethiopian political system is in order. Policies of paramount importance fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government. These are first and foremost initiated by the EPRDF Council in which each member organization of the four major constituent regional parties is represented by 15 elected persons. Following consultations and exchanges in the Council at its regular and extraordinary meetings (as the case may be), decision is reached mostly through consensus. Once the position of the Council on a given policy issue is established in this manner, the same is channeled to the Council of Ministers chaired by the Prime Minister who is also the chairperson of EPRDF. The Council of Ministers, whose members are the leading personalities of the ruling party, approves the same which then becomes a draft bill to be submitted to the lower house of parliament for approval. The lower house, which is dominated by EPRDF members, automatically endorses once a bill is submitted to it by the federal executive for consideration. It is worth noting here that there is no any instance where a draft bill initiated by the executive has failed to get the approval of parliament to date. On the other hand, policy issues that are within the powers of regional state governments are deliberated on and decided at the level of regional cabinets and presented for approval to the regional councils (legislatures) in which EPRDF is heavily represented. Approval of draft bills by the regional and local legislatures (councils) also takes place in a more or less similar manner. In spite of the fact that EPRDF could be credited for

facilitating efforts towards the proliferation of political parties in a manner unprecedented hitherto, it has also significantly contributed to their impotence. This took effect through a mix of maneuverings complemented by the ruling party's comparative advantage of undue control and utilization of state resources and public power on the one hand, and the fragmentation and several other deficits that underpin the underlying fabrics of thriving opposition parties on the other. In brief, EPRDF is in absolute control of the domain of policy making at each and every level of government, which leaves little room at best for the opposition in building its constituency by providing policy choices based on sound debates and exchanges.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, attempt is made to shed light on the processes that culminated in the evolving of EPRDF as a dominant party in a manner that neutralized the effectiveness of organized political opposition. Taking advantage of its experience in mass mobilization, constituency building across the ethnic divide, and cunning manipulation of the divergences among multiethnic and ethnic-based opposition groups, EPRDF succeeded in monopolizing the political space in a manner that ensured in perpetuating itself in power since the last two decades. The ruling party's omnipotence in the political arena is further buttressed by its control of public resources, which are unsparingly deployed for strengthening its position on the one hand and weakening its political adversaries on the other. EPRDF's move to make use of elections as important instruments of representative politics by itself could be considered as a positive development for a country whose past was marked by paucity of electoral politics as a means through which diverse and competing legitimate aspirations of different sections of society could be expressed. Despite the holding of several elections, the legitimacy of the electoral process in Ethiopia is still a hotly contested issue. This is mainly because of the failure of the system to provide a level playing field for all contestants. The problems that undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process are mainly associated with the progressive diminishing of the political space and the hurdles emanating from the parochial legal and institutional arrangements under which the different elections took place since the 1990s.

The emergence of the EPRDF as a sole proprietor of state power and its unswerving quest for consolidating its military victory through the façade of multiparty elections is a major cause for the inability of the thriving opposition parties to pose as viable actors in terms of providing alternative leadership and policy choices. This has obviously made the road to a multiparty parliamentary democracy an uphill stride. The hope for building a system that allows for the coming into the interplay of legitimate diverse interests through a mechanism of free and fair competition is rendered increasingly difficult due to: first, EPRDF's uncompromising thrust aimed at translating its military victory into political consolidation right from the beginning of the transition in a manner that negatively influenced the electoral process; second, the blending of the structures of the ruling party and the government, which increasingly became too hazy to differentiate, continues to eliminate incentives for competitive politics and legitimate electoral process; third, EPRDF's use of public resources such as the news media, the bureaucracy, and the security apparatus to its own advantage without restraint; fourth, EPRDF's strategy of consolidating power through a network of its member organizations and affiliate ethnic parties contributed to the further weakening of the political opposition that hoped to fare better through engagement in multiparty competitive elections; and fifth, the persistence of mutual mistrust between the opposition forces and the EPRDF on the one hand and between opposition parties on the other

undermined prospects for an all-inclusive democratic system under which an environment of a health multi-party competitive politics could have flourished.

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