

On the Upcoming National Elections [2010] and Beyond: *Challenges and Opportunities for Building Democracy and Good Governance in Ethiopia.* (By Tesfaye Habisso)

“The key element in the exercise of democracy is the holding of free and fair elections at regular intervals enabling the people’s will to be expressed.” [Universal Declaration on Democracy, IPU Members in 1997]

Ethiopia’s brief experiment in democracy and its attempt at installing good/ democratic governance in a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual society of ours since the last 18 years or so, I am afraid, has not yet been as successful when compared to its noteworthy achievements in the areas of infrastructural development, economic growth (GDP), and the provision of social services (condos for the urban poor; potable water, health clinics, schools, roads, etc for the rural peasants). Based on vast available literature on the subject of democracy, one can discover that the domination of the political system by one party [EPRDF since 1991], the multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious makeup of the society, the prevalence of ethnically dominated party system, abject poverty, and the difficulty of adopting democratic values, rules and procedures as well as a culture of tolerance among political elites that have inherited a legacy of political power changing hands through the barrel of the gun and not via peaceful, competitive and free elections, etc. are some of the major factors that can be mentioned as major impediments to our democratization efforts and struggles yesterday, today and in the years to come. Owing to these factors, the pace and progress of the democratization process and the successful transition to and consolidation of democracy in our country has so far been full of fits and starts, the periodic elections often marred by violence and public disorder resulting in accusations and counter accusations of vote rigging and fraud by the losers in the periodic elections targeting the ruling party and government. Thus, the quality of democracy surrounding the conduct of regular free, fair and credible elections, the respect for political rights, such as the right to vote, to form political parties and to compete in elections, the respect for civil liberties, such as the freedom of expression and association, and the extent to which the government is accountable, transparent and respectful of the rule of law still leaves a lot to be desired.

Many scholars forcefully argue that the ongoing democratization process cannot succeed and a democratic political system cannot become consolidated unless the principal political elites in the society agree upon the rules of the game of that system and are willing to abide by those rules. The basic rules of a democratic system are to allow for full and unhindered contestation and participation. Elite support for democracy is often the product of agreements between all or some key political parties and leaders. A comprehensive elite settlement takes place if all the paramount political groups in the society participate in the agreement. A comprehensive settlement will most likely provide for full political contestation since the principal political groups will be able to contest power in the resultant political regime. Such

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elite agreements have two important consequences: they create patterns of open but peaceful competition among all major elite factions and they transform unstable political regimes into stable regimes, in which forcible power seizing no longer occur and are not widely expected. In essence, an elite settlement transforms disunified elites into “consensually unified elites”. Consensually unified elites “operate stable, politically representative regimes,” where “government positions pass peacefully among different persons and factions”, usually through “periodic, competitive, and binding elections”. [Burton and Higley, “Elite Settlements”, *American Sociological Review* 52, June 1987, p. 297]. A regime transition that results in a long lasting democracy is likely to be the product of an elite settlement, while a regime transition that leads to a failed democracy is likely to be devoid of a settlement.

Be this as it may, the process of becoming a democracy is most often fraught with more problems and challenges than is usually acknowledged. In poor multiethnic or plural/heterogeneous societies, for instance, transitions to democracy have proved to be mostly rocky and violent, and this often gives rise to warlike nationalism and violent ethnic conflicts. In such societies a peaceful transition to democracy is exceptional, and the certainty that democracy will prevail is in question. Democratic movement in the first place was born out of a unique set of conditions prevalent in the Western world. Some of the ingredients necessary for the evolutionary birth of a democratic order are believed to be: (1) industrialization; (2) rise in literacy levels; (3) abundance of resources; (4) isolation from negative outside influences and (5) political theoreticians whose vision spans the past, present and future and who have a grasp of the physical disciplines required in that particular age [http://www.hujra.com/democracy_not_work.hym]

For many scholars, democracy is a delicate flower that requires a host of social and institutional prerequisites. One scholar suggests that democracy requires a populace endowed with nine psychological traits, among which are tolerance, realism, flexibility, and objectivity, and further, that the country must have economic well-being, economic equality and an educated citizenry [Carl Cohen, *Democracy*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971]. Another political scientist names seven conditions necessary for democracy, including a “strong concern for the mass of people” and “high social mobility” [Alfred De Grazia, *The Elements of Political Science*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1952, pp. 546-547]. Robert Dahl describes three essential conditions for a multiparty democracy to function; these are: (1) extensive competition by contestants including individuals, groups or parties for government; (2) political participation that provides the choice for the electorate to select candidates in free and fair elections; and (3) civil and political liberties that enable citizens to express themselves without fear of punishment [Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 221]. In his evaluation of the “third wave of democratization” of the seventies and eighties, the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington concludes that states become particularly susceptible to democratization when they have reached a certain minimal level of social and economic development [Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, 1991, p. 59ff].

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Most often democracy has come to be equated with mere superficial and easily recognizable mechanical processes, the most recognized of which being regular elections. Elections are indeed a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for the completion of a democratic transition. The mere casting of a vote does not make a democracy even when the elections are indeed free and fair [Silindiwe Sibanda, Poverty and Democratic Participation: A Pyramidal Construct of Democratic Needs, The Center for Advanced Studies of African Society, Cape Town, South Africa: <http://www.dpmf.org/poverty-silindiwe.html>]. It is believed that a country has completed the transition to democracy when “the government resulting from election...has the *de jure* as well as the *de facto* power to determine policy in many significant areas.” [Linz and Stepan, “Toward Consolidated Democracies”, pp. 14-33]. Whatever the case, a democratic transition is a long and difficult process that may take many decades to complete. Even if the country has transitioned to a democratic political system, the journey towards stable democracy is not secure and completed.

Then, at what moment does a successfully democratizing state become a mature democracy? When can its democracy be termed consolidated? Some scholars use the “two turnover rule” to define “democratic consolidation”, that is a democracy is considered consolidated when power has changed hands twice as a result of free and fair elections. Others say that democracy is considered consolidated when it is “the only game in town”, that is when no significant political party or group seeks to come to power by means other than winning a free and fair election. Others measure the degree to which the country has achieved the institutional and legal characteristics of a mature democracy, using indicators such as competitive politics, regular elections, broad participation, and constraints on arbitrary use of executive power, free speech, and respect for civil liberties, including minority rights. Once a country has completed a democratic transition, it is left for that democracy to be consolidated, a necessary condition for a lasting democratic regime.

According to Linz and Stepan, a “consolidated” democracy is a “political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase, the only game in town.” Haggard and Kaufman state, “a democratic consolidation is a process through which acceptance of a given set of constitutional rules becomes less directly contingent on immediate rewards and sanctions and increasingly widespread and reutilized. Consolidation is essentially a more important process than transition. A government may be able to transition to democracy, but if it does not consolidate said democracy, it may relapse into authoritarianism or other non-democratic forms of government. Additional factors must be in place if a democracy is to be considered “consolidated”. First, the conditions must exist for the development of a free and lively civil society. Second, there must be a relatively autonomous political society. Third, throughout the territory of the state all major political actors, especially the government and the state apparatus, must be effectively subjected to a rule of law that protects individual freedoms and associational life. Fourth, there must be a state bureaucracy that is usable by the new democratic government. Fifth, there must be an institutionalized economic society [Haggard and Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, p. 15].

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Today, as we talk of the upcoming fourth national elections in 2010, I think the aforementioned challenges should be taken into account when re-examining and assessing our heretofore efforts to realize a functioning and stable democracy in Ethiopia. Furthermore, a few salient points regarding democratic elections must be raised and discussed/debated now in order to avoid the re-occurrence of some of the ugly and dreadful features that we witnessed in the electioneering exercise during the past decade or so in our newly democratizing country, more so in the aftermath of the 2005 national elections. In our case, we can boldly assert that we have not yet moved far enough from the politics of confrontation, acrimony and hostility that has bedeviled the national political arena for a long time, reminiscent of the politics of the Ethiopian students movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It is believed that Ethiopia could build upon its manifest potential and significantly transform its democratization and developmental prospects if its principal political parties were to pursue a more constructive and responsible approach to politics. The prevailing political stalemate, it can be argued, does not derive from any fundamental divergence amongst the major political parties but remains associated with the increasingly confrontational style and language of their politics. The prevailing political divisions, often of an incendiary nature, have their roots in the country's troubled political history and the heterogeneous nature of the nation's ethnic makeup (comprised of over 83 ethnic groups, "nations, nationalities and peoples" as the FDRE Constitution defines them). The divisive potential of such differences should not be underestimated but they do not impinge upon the contemporary debates on development strategy, democracy and improved/democratic governance.

Therefore, the urgent task for the incumbent government and party is to create conducive conditions to promote mutual trust and confidence between groups and organizations which are committed to peace and democracy, and interested to be parties to the political process. This can be done when all of us show in words as well as in deeds that we are committed to respect the verdict of the people and that we are not in any way entitled to impose our will by force or pressure on the people. Belief in and commitment to the principle that the people are the ultimate arbiters of policy matters is fundamental in building trust and confidence. Where all political groups and organizations accept to be bound by the results of the ballot box, it is only natural to recognize their rights to articulate and propagate their programs their own way. And where this right is fully recognized and respected, there is no legal or material/moral justification for any group to resort to armed conflict or any confrontation. Democracy has, of course, its own rules. It can survive and flourish in our country only when all of us commit ourselves to play by the rules of the game: contestation and participation. It so happens that those who play by the rules of the game are those who not only understand its true meaning and substance but are also confident of themselves and their political objectives, and the political goal which gives one confidence is that which addresses itself to the true needs of the peoples of Ethiopia for democracy, peace and prosperity. After all, elections are peaceful competitions to serve the people and be ready to shoulder the immense challenges of extricating our peoples from the quagmire of abject poverty and under-development, helplessness and hopelessness, and surely not a struggle for self-enrichment and other selfish ends.

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Yes, the 2010 national elections are fast approaching and the election season will soon overwhelm us. If we are not careful, soon legions of eager politicians representing different political parties, independent office seekers and their acolytes will be scurrying here and there engaging in all manners of conduct and for some of them, all manners of misconduct, in their energetic pursuit of office. People will soon be claiming that their opponent, whom heretofore we all thought was a relatively honorable person, now sits at the left hand of the Devil.

But the real issue is, for what purpose is the party candidate running or being fielded and the independent candidate taking part in the election drama? Being in politics for the sake of politics is pitiably selfish. One should only engage in politics if she/he believes that she/he has the necessary education and capability and seeks to move to a more elevated and productive plane—that of democratic governance. And democratic governance implies dedicated, efficient and quality public service free from corruption and discrimination. A politician who is not capable of good/democratic governance is like getting into a new car that has no engine. While it looks good, it gets you nowhere. Thus, we should ask all potential politicians—party candidates as well as independent office seekers—, “Are you a politician because you have something to contribute or are you involved because you are looking for a secure employment or for something to take away for your own selfish ends and interests? Are you there because you like the sound of the title “Honorable MP” and because the sound of sirens has become an intoxicant to your ears? Or are you seeking office so that you can help our elderly folks get the necessary old-age care, help the adults and the youth find work to feed their families their daily bread and because you feel unequalled exhilaration when you see healthy, well fed children smile as they walk, books in hand, on their way to school?” Now that the election season is soon to overwhelm us, we all have a choice to make. Will our politics be small and selfish or will it be visionary, and will it be beneficial to those whom we purport to serve?

These are some of the vexing questions before us all, political parties and independent candidates. These questions are freighted with great importance. Thus, may we answer them with all the wisdom we can summon? Because Ethiopia is a recently minted democracy, our responsibility to hold fair, free and credible elections acceptable to all contestants in the nation’s political arena peacefully and bring good, democratic governance to our people is indeed acute. We may not face any greater collective responsibility for the remainder of our lives. In an older, well-established democracy, the relevant institutions and political culture have had time to root themselves in the social fabric of these societies. In such a situation, where the people err by electing bad leadership, the nation or community can endure because democracy has become a way of life. The dividends that have previously bestowed have built a reservoir of goodwill to see the people and this noble concept through the lean years.

When a democracy is young, as in our country, however substandard, flawed elections or a period of poor governance can give a mortal blow and wreak havoc to the democratic experiment. The ugly aftermath of the May 2005 national and regional parliamentary elections is a glaring example in this regard. The process of democratization is not much different than the growth of a human being. Hardship an adult can endure may be fatal to an infant. We, as leaders of our State and communities, are the appointed guardians of a precious infant,

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Ethiopia's democracy. Like any decent parent, we must place the survival and well being of that child above our own narrow interests. No decent parent feeds himself/herself until he/she can eat no more but let his/her child starve.

We as elected officials, we as government officials, we as community leaders and stalwarts, are among Ethiopian democracy's founding fathers and mothers. Let us be as good parents to democracy as to the children of our own flesh, fiber and blood. Let us not let democracy be orphaned. When democracy is new, that is precisely when it must prove itself to the people, to the poor masses. If it does not produce noticeable fruits in the form of bread and butter—basic necessities of life such as shelter, clothing, food, healthcare, education, etc.-- and a modicum of safety, security, employment and freedom, the population, because it does not have a deep grounding in this form of government, may well decide the tree is barren and turn to something else that appears to have a more immediate yield. Cynicism, demagoguery, mistrust and selfishness creep in where faith and hope should reside. In such an atmosphere, democracy may be in jeopardy.

Here I will say something that at first seems to contradict what I have said before and that is, Ethiopia's history indicates that it can survive for some time without democracy. In fact, democracy is the sole guarantee for Ethiopia to survive as one nation of many nations—a multi-nation federal state. However, history—and the large gulf that separates Ethiopia's reality from its potential—is conclusive proof that a country cannot flourish in the long term without embracing political democracy and the economic empowerment of the individual and the group/community that democracy implies. This thing called democracy is a complex, and at times, an ungainly animal. From afar, it looks like an inefficient form of governance; but up close, it is the most practical one.

Under a dictatorship, it is easier to render and implement decisions. One person—a dictator/leader—and his cabal say yes or no, do or don't. Matters are settled by a decree with lightning speed. Arbitrariness is the backbone of such an arrangement. No need to engage a legislature or the populace at large or worry about the courts and the legality of what is proposed. The minute a despot speaks, the matter is over. The grave danger of this type of governance/government is that, over time, it leads to total oppression, widespread malfeasance and worst of all, the misdirection of our country's future. Above all, a developmental state such as ours, or any other state for that matter, cannot function without an efficient, effective and ethical bureaucracy; it cannot deliver the necessary goods and services to the general public in time. With government of such a capricious and closed nature, you reap that which you sow

On the other hand, constitutional democracy and its associated checks and balances are the best form of government because they recognize the flaws in the human character. If we were all saints, government would be unnecessary, as social theorists contend. No, democracy does not work because we are angels and saints. It is necessary because it is the form of government that best restrains the demon in us all. That demon goes by many names—ambition, greed, self-interest, patronage, cronyism, ethnocentrism, corruption, are just a few names.

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Just having the democratic forms and institutions are inadequate in themselves. The people with whom these institutions are entrusted must contain the values of democracy in their hearts and minds. A constitution is but a piece of paper and a piece of paper, no matter how special the words inscribed therein, is easily shred. The real constitution that begets good, democratic governance is not found in the piece of paper, it is found in the spirit and thoughts and philosophy that gave rise to what was written. What I am saying is that, for the constitution to be real and genuine it must be written in your mind, your heart, and your behavior.

Moreover, seeking the welfare of the masses must be the primary step, the motivating force to any meaningful structure or conduct of government. For good/democratic governance and democracy to take hold, the answers to two questions, “Why do you run for office” and “Why will the people elect you” must be the same. Dissatisfaction and trouble reign wherever and whenever the answers are different. If you run for office because you wanted to enrich yourself but the people elected you because they thought you would bring them better social services, surely, some sections of the population/community will be disappointed. Something has to yield in this situation because you cannot serve two masters—you must either serve them or yourself. Either you will have to change your ways or they will have to accept your self-aggrandizement but both cannot get what they want. Where there is such a fundamental discord between the elected official(s) and the electorate, contention will be your pardon. Conversely, where there is general harmony of interests, you have established the essential foundation for good governance.

You as political leaders of the State can and must be the primary example of good governance to the people. The people may not always be in contact with national officials, but, if you do your work properly, you must be in close contact with your community. By doing your jobs, you not only become the best exemplar of grassroots democracy you become democracy’s protector.

In order to serve this vital function, you must have a vision for your State, your Zone, your Woreda, your village community. If you do not have a vision or a capability as well as sufficient time and energy and vigor for improving or serving your community, you should seriously think about pursuing another vocation. This one may not be for you. Of course, state and local government cannot do everything but you must work with and for the people to bring them the vital services within your mandate to deliver.

What the people need from you is not shrouded in mystery. It is easy to discern their needs and concerns provided you care enough about those who elected you. They are looking for improvement in health care for their families, education for their children, better infrastructure, economic growth and employment; safety and security. They want to enjoy their hard-won constitutional rights, freedoms and liberties.

As I said before, you cannot do all of these yourself. But you do have some funds and manpower to address some of their concerns. To the extent you control assets, set your budgets to meet the social service priorities of your community. Move around your State, your

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Community; take time to express your vision for improving it to your people; let them express their ideas and concerns to you. Listen to their cries, discern their concerns and needs. Some of their ideas will be good; don't tarry in accepting these ideas. Embrace their good ideas to refine and improve your thinking and your programs. Accepting someone else's ideas is not weakness. It is wisdom. If you do follow this tack, your supporters will continue to give you support. Those who once opposed you will begin to think better about you. Those who hated you will begin to respect you. Just by listening with an open ear and honest heart, you have taken an important step toward good governance that uplifts the spirit and well-being of the entire community.

In this regard, remember not to shun or harass and persecute your political opposition. Do not mistake electoral politics for military warfare. These people are your fellow nationals and your political opposition not your mortal enemies. Only one person can win an election. But if the election is done fairly and credibly, we all stand to gain something from it. However, if we turn elections into a form of warfare, there is no true winner or loser. We all suffer in the end. Even the so-called winner loses. Given the sharpness of the electoral warfare, even the winner cannot quickly divorce himself from the combative spirit that governed during elections. Once a person gains power by any means, he becomes convinced that his opponent will try to steal that power by any means.

This type of victory is no victory at all. This type of psychology is not conducive to good governance and the progress of democracy. In such a situation, a person sleeps with one eye open and one foot on the floor. No matter how high or soft the bed, no one can find comfort in such an arrangement. Thus, it is better to make peace after the elections and the best way to obtain post-election peace is never to engage in pre-election warfare. Better a person erect and live in a modest house in peace than build a large mansion only to destroy half of it.

Remember that your political opponents are human beings with brains and reason. They cannot be wrong on all issues all the time no more than you can be right all the time. Your opponents are entitled to respect and dignity. Listen to them; give them adequate political and economic space as well as proper support, financial and other. Do not starve or humiliate them. Always remember you are not perfect. Even the good decisions you make are not perfect and have their flaws. Often the solutions of today's problems are the parents of tomorrow's challenges. No one has a monopoly on truth and knowledge. Accept in good faith the constructive criticism of your political opponents.

The concept of loyal or legal opposition is central to any functioning democracy. It means that all sides in a political debate, however deep their differences; share the fundamental democratic values of freedom of speech and faith, and equal protection under the law. It means, in essence, that all parties in a democracy should be equally committed to the basic values, rules, and procedures of democracy. Parties that lose elections step into the role of opposition—confident that the political system will continue to protect their rights to organize and speak out. In time, their party will have a chance to campaign again for its ideas and programs, and the votes of the people. Political competitors do not necessarily have to like each other, but they must tolerate each other's legitimacy. The right of the minority (opposition)

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does not depend on the goodwill of the majority (ruling party). The losers in an election must not be, or feel, threatened. On the contrary, they must feel comfortable to continue participating in public life.

Finally, the holding of free, fair and credible elections rests on the shoulders of the National Electoral Board or Commission of Ethiopia. Although the support and cooperation of the whole people and government as well as all political parties and the latter's supporters in the nation's political arena are required, the responsibility of the Electoral Commission for conducting a peaceful, free and fair election should be duly emphasized. In many newly democratizing countries, most complaints that arise during post-elections are attributed to shoddy elections conducted by ineffective, unprofessional and unscrupulous election officials or commissioners and their support staff from the top to bottom, often resulting in unnecessary violence and bloodshed. Many observers and pundits assertively contend that 50% or more of such election-related problems can/will be satisfactorily solved if the National Election Commission is governed by unquestionable professional ethics, independence, impartiality and the highest code of conduct in its responsibility of planning and conducting free, fair and credible elections acceptable to the electorate and all parties involved in the electioneering exercise. Even perceptions that the Commission is not highly independent, professional/ capable or impartial enough to conduct free, fair and credible elections in the country would send shockwaves across the political marketplace, forcing the competitors in the political arena especially the losers in the elections to challenge the election results as unacceptable and to resort to all sorts of violent methods to reverse or change the outcome, besides launching endless accusations and disputes to tarnish the democratic election. Such undesirable outcomes must be avoided as far as possible by rectifying or doing away with all possible weaknesses, shortcomings and deficiencies, real or imagined, of the National Election Commission of the country before the campaign period begins and crafting comprehensive settlements between all or the principal political elites in the nation's political marketplace regarding the rules of the game that will be meticulously observed and respected by all parties during voters' registration and the campaign period as well as before and after the polling day, from voting to observation to vote counting and declaring the election results, etc. As the saying goes, "A stitch in time saves nine." Last but not least, let us all protagonists and their supporters in the power competition insure that our campaigns will be absolutely peaceful and that no single Ethiopian injures his body or loses his/her life in the upcoming national elections whatever the cause or the outcome. This must be our solemn oath to our people who have suffered so much senseless death and destruction in the recent past in the name of democratic and peaceful elections in their modest attempt to elect their leaders who are supposed to bring them peace, security and prosperity and surely not death and destruction. How long do we seek to make our poor citizens sacrificial lambs for our selfish ends? This brutality must end once and for all. As signatory of numerous international, continental and regional declarations and charters on democracy, human rights and democratic elections, let us rise as a nation to meet or fulfill the expectations of the international community, the African Union and above all our peoples by making the 2010 national elections free, fair and credible, and move beyond that objective to build genuine democracy and good governance in Ethiopia. For God and our country! Amen.

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