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Opposition Politics and the Issue of  
Political Space in Ethiopia Today:  
Issues and Challenges  
By  
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Political analysts agree that opposition is integral to democracy. Ionescu and Madaraiga hold that the presence or absence of institutionalized opposition can become the criterion for the classification of any political society into one of two categories: liberal or dictatorial, democratic or authoritarian, pluralistic-constitutional or monolithic [1972:16]. Along the same lines, Lawson asserts that constitutional political opposition is the sine qua non of contemporary democracy in mass polities and that its institutionalization in some form or another is required before a regime can be called “democratic” with any real meaning [1993:192]. Further, most commentators stress the role of political parties and legislative oppositions. Lip set defines democracy as a system of institutionalized opposition in which the people choose among alternative contenders for public office [1967: 40]. Dahl is even clearer, stating that... one is inclined to regard the existence of an opposition party as very nearly the most distinctive characteristic of democracy itself, and we may take the absence of an opposition party as evidence, if not always conclusive proof, for the absence of democracy [1966a:xviii].

This article is provoked by the current outcry of the major legally registered opposition parties (UEDF, UDJ, OFDM, etc.) over the ever-narrowing political space allegedly imposed by the ruling party and government, and that they are unable to pursue their peaceful activities especially in the rural areas of the country because of harassment by cadres of the incumbent party cadres and supporters. If these allegations hold water, I am afraid, the ruling party and its supporters are making a big, big mistake. Why would they control and constrain peaceful activities of legal opposition? Why would they undermine their own brainchild, multiparty politics? Why would they tarnish their own self-image when they have performed extremely well in a number of key socio-economic and political areas over the last eighteen years or so? Where does the need arise for harassing the already weak and fragmented opposition when they enjoy the full privileges of incumbency and their monopoly over public resources of the country? It is in this regard that I wanted to render my humble advice, even if it may not be heeded to, to the ruling party as well as to all opposition parties in the nation’s political marketplace before the onset of the election season in 2010.

As we all know, legalized opposition politics is a relatively new phenomenon in Ethiopia. For the first time in the long and chequered history of Ethiopia, a multi-party system of governance (multi-party democracy) was declared and opposition parties were legally allowed to operate in the country in the wake of the demise of the military junta ("Derg") and the subsequent assumption of political power by the victorious Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991 (though most of their activities especially outside Addis Ababa were seriously curtailed during the early years of the transition period). Nevertheless, opposition politics was legalized by the Transitional Period Charter of 1991 and subsequently by the Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1994/5.

Consequently, a legal regime (Political Parties Registration Proclamation No. 46/1993 As Amended by Proclamation. No. 82/1994) was set in place requiring all political parties to get registered by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), which was established as its primary function to conduct periodic and regular elections in the country. Accordingly, numerous political parties mushroomed at the local, regional and national levels in the newly established federal state, even though many of them were very weak parties and existed only in name.

Since the legalization of opposition parties in Ethiopia, two national elections were held in 1995 and 2000. The first national election was boycotted by the majority of opposition parties alleging numerous impediments in the way of opposition parties, both before and during the election period, created by the ruling party (EPRDF) and its affiliated regional and ethnic-based local parties. Anyway, at the first national elections, the EPRDF won 483 parliamentary seats (89.4%) out of the total number of 537 seats while the other political parties mostly affiliated to the ruling party, secured 46 seats. Independent candidates won the remaining 8 seats.

The second national elections were held in the year 2000 under a more stable and relatively peaceful atmosphere than the previous one, and was contested by all opposition parties and was also "certified" to be free and fair by the local and international observers that observed the 2000 elections, though there were some irregularities in the Southern Region which were subsequently rectified by the NEB. In these elections, the EPRDF won 481 parliamentary seats (87.93%) while the opposition parties, due to lack of funds and often weak organization, contested only 20 percent of the seats to the federal parliament and secured 53 seats, and independent candidates won the remaining 13 seats. The total number of parliamentary seats had increased to 547 by this time to accommodate the representation of some ten or so minority ethnic groups that were not represented during the first national elections because each group's population numbered less than 100,000 and was not sufficient enough to constitute even one single constituency for representation as required by the electoral law. Opposition parties also held 10 percent of the seats in the Southern State's regional assembly and approximately 25 percent of seats in the Addis Ababa City Council (until the Prime Minister dissolved the entire city council in October, with no dates set for new elections).

The third and the first ever free, fair and peaceful general elections that were hailed by all international and local observers as such was held on May 15, 2007. More than 90% of registered voters cast their votes on that historic day, braving very long queues and painful hours of standing at the venues. However, as 'what counts at the end is not the voters but those who count the votes', the disagreement that abruptly flared amongst the ruling party and the major opposition parties regarding the outcome of the elections, that is, the number of votes secured by each one of them in the polls, degenerated into deadly civil disturbances and chaos, resulting in immense destruction of human life and property. Nevertheless, opposition parties were able to secure more votes than ever before in this election, though the major opposition party, the CUD, decided not to join the legislature and also declined to take control of the Addis Ababa city council where it had a sweeping victory--winning 137 votes out of the total of 138. The full account of this general election has been already recorded by many observers and

institutions and I do not intend to dwell upon it any further at this juncture.

While we reflect on the urgent need for strengthening the practice of democracy and opening up the political space further for opposition parties, I strongly believe that a serious rethinking and reassessment on the responsibility and attitude of the ruling party, and the opposition parties in the Ethiopian political marketplace is timely and necessary, as we are preparing for the fourth national elections in May, 2010.

As we all know by now, one of the most difficult concepts for political parties in Ethiopia, both the incumbent as well as the opposition, to comprehend is that of the "loyal opposition" or legal opposition, as it actually means. This concept is a vital one, however. It means, in essence, that all sides in a democracy share a common commitment to its basic values, rules and procedures. Political competitors don't necessarily have to like each other, but they must tolerate one another and acknowledge that each has a legitimate and important role to play. Moreover, the ground rules of the society must encourage tolerance and civility in public debate.

In any healthy society there must be both a search for consensus and a tolerance for dissent. These requirements hold for both a government and its political opposition. Since differences of opinion are natural in any society, the never-ending search for consensus must not be one in which "unanimity" is imposed by a state. Nor can the search for consensus be stymied from the start by unwillingness to compromise, perhaps by a well-meaning government that has taken offence at being verbally demonized by its opposition, or by an opposition with a preference for getting none other than only half of its demands met. [Bricker et al. 1994]

Tolerance for dissent means, ultimately, the willingness of officials [at all tiers of government] to permit non-violent activities, even when they are designed to bring about a peaceful transition of power to replace the government. It also means forbearance in the face of disagreeable expression of opinion, a type of forbearance absent in laws that make criticism of the regime and its institutions criminal libel. As well, such tolerance means the willingness of an opposition to permit others to freely reject its line and choose another, either in support of the government or in favor of a third way. In short, it is clear that a society in which there is a search for true consensus and tolerance for dissent is one in which fundamental human rights are respected by all. [ibid]

Such a political culture of tolerance and forbearance should prevail in society both before and after periodic elections. When the elections are over, the losers accept the judgment of the voters. If the incumbent party loses, it turns over power peacefully. No matter who wins, both sides agree to cooperate in solving the common problems of the society. The losers, now in the political opposition, whether it consists of one party or many, can continue to participate in public life with the knowledge that their role is essential in any democracy worthy of the name. They are loyal not to the specific policies of the incumbent party and government, but to the fundamental legitimacy of the state and to the democratic process itself.

As the next elections come around, opposition parties will again have the opportunity to compete for power. In addition, a pluralistic society, one in which the reach of government is limited, tends to offer election losers alternatives for public service outside the government. Those defeated at the polls may choose to continue as a formal opposition party, but they may also decide to participate in the wider political process and debate through writing, teaching, or joining one of many private organizations concerned with public policy issues.

Yes, the concept of the loyal or legal opposition is central to any functioning democracy. It means that all sides in 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 right to organize and speak out. In time, their party will have a chance to campaign again for its ideas, and the votes of the people.

As mentioned here above, political competitors do not necessarily have to like each other, but they must tolerate each other's legitimacy. The right of the minority (opposition) does not depend on the good will of the majority (winning 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. The role of opposition is essential and equally important in a democratic state. In fact, it is nowadays widely believed that democracy cannot only function properly without opposition parties, but dies without these parties. "In a democracy, the struggle between political parties is not a fight for survival, but a competition to serve the people." [USIA Document]

The above arguments may seem quite simplistic and even naïve when we observe the history of the evolution of opposition parties throughout the democratic world. Even though many scholars contend that opposition is an essential part of democratic government, it does not evolve automatically. Even in long-established constitutional democracies, governments do not like opposition. Where there is no history of having to tolerate opponents, suddenly having to suffer criticism, face procedural delays, and even see projects fail due to opposition paralysis or blockage must be especially hard to take for the incumbent parties and governments. Evidence from the earliest years of US national government [Lipset 1967: 40-51] shows how easily the world's first constitutional democrats fell into repressing and suppressing political foes. This disposition to minimize or control opposition is also apparent in contemporary transitional democracies. Further, in conditions of material scarcity, controlling the state can be the difference between poverty and prosperity, so it would be a foolish government indeed that would encourage criticism or accept defeat willingly. [David Close 2000].

However, there is no other way than protecting and encouraging opposition parties if we indeed want to implant and build a genuine democracy worthy of the name. We need to make a genuine effort to create a tolerant culture of democracy- a political culture which is fundamentally non-violent and in which no one party or group expects to win or lose all the time. Such a culture is built upon a societal consensus not about policy, but about the process and framework of democratic political life: that the

will of the people is the basis of governmental authority; that all individuals have a right to take part in government; that there shall be periodic and genuine elections; that power changes hand through popular suffrage rather than intimidation or force; that political opposition and minorities have a right to express their views; and that there can be 'loyal' and legal opposition to the government in power. Furthermore, support for democratization must be coupled with support for development in order that socio-economic as well as civil and political rights are respected.

The last decade or so of our experience in Ethiopia has proven that the opposition's Achilles heel lies in its constant rivalries and fragmentation. Thus opposition unity has so far remained a farfetched vocabulary. The fact of the matter is that not one opposition party in the current composition of Ethiopian Parliament can have an impact on decision-making or influence proposed legislation tabled in parliament. The irony is that even when all opposition parties, which have won some seats in the 2005 elections, combine their manpower, experience and support it will still be but a mere fraction of the overwhelming and massive support enjoyed by the EPRDF party and the latter's consequential representation in parliament. To ignore and defy this reality by entertaining and pursuing a confrontational style and language as well as approach of opposition, as advocated by a few die-hards at home and in the Diaspora, is to defy and ignore the realities, with dire consequences for the fragile democratization process in the country as a whole and for the opposition in particular.

The smooth governance of any country depends on the opposition being responsible, and a responsible opposition does not scream and shout, and use bad language or emotional and unreasonable arguments (demagoguery), merely for the sake of opposition and newspaper or television coverage but shows great responsibility and an earnest attempt in trying to influence policy and decision making. It means that private discussions with government Ministers and ruling party leaders can take place, influencing and advising on policy issues where and whenever necessary, cooperating in parliament where it is for the benefit of the country and its people and to make available to parliamentary committees all the necessary experience and knowledge of its members. Whereas open, peaceful clash of ideas, debate, and objective criticism is necessary for building a democratic culture, unprincipled political belligerence and confrontational style of politics has a smack of selfish ambition for nothing but power, not altruism; power as an end and not as a means to serve the Ethiopian people. This must be avoided by all means and by all mature politicians, both in the ruling party and the opposition bloc in general.

On the other hand, the ruling party and government should open up the political space further for the opposition parties to operate freely and without any hindrances and impediments to their peaceful activities, such as opening offices, meeting and interacting with members and supporters, fundraising, holding political rallies and meetings campaigning during elections, etc; seek the advice and opinion of opposition leaders on major policy issues; show utmost magnanimity and tolerance towards the opposition in general and reciprocate in sincere and positive gestures towards the latter so that opposition parties would eventually evolve into a constructive and responsible bloc becoming genuine partners in the process of nation building.

In a country that currently suffers from severe problems in the areas of food production and food security, economic development, rule of law, political and economic governance, and health, etc., all the

political parties being responsible and constructive is indeed crucial. A belligerent, confrontational and uncompromising posture and style of politics by those in the ruling party as well as the opposition bloc would be sufficient not merely to paralyse our country but also to cause panic among our domestic and foreign investors and the development partners. Sadly, political struggles in this country so far are primarily driven by the desire to be in power for power's sake and the ultimate desire to cling to it at any cost than any meaningful concern for policy alternatives and the general public good.

As we, in Ethiopia, have embarked upon a process of democratisation for the first time and are thus new converts to democracy and its concept, values, rules and procedures, inevitably, not all organizations respect their declared commitments. And not all understand properly the significance and essence of peaceful and democratic operations and bounds. We are all learners in democracy. In this learning process, some learn fast; some take more time to learn; some simply do not want to learn. This naturally affects, to some degree, the smooth transition of our country and our peoples to fuller and functioning, participatory democracy. In time, however, we are all convinced that all will come to appreciate the fact that democracy is a learned, not an inherited system, and it can evolve as an organic outgrowth of development, and survive only if the duties of living together in one human society, one economic and political community, are given proper consideration and respect, and on our genuine commitment to regular and respectful dialogue with all parties and interest groups at home and abroad. No democratic right is absolute and one major limitation of such a right is respect for the rights of others. Ignorance or neglect of this interconnection between democratic rights and duties endangers the very basis of democracy.

Although it is extremely gratifying to observe today that the ruling party and some of the major opposition parties have now through dialogue agreed and begun a national debate on numerous policy issues and are soon to present their alternative policies or manifestos to the general public before the upcoming national elections in 2010, the dynamics of the Ethiopian political landscape is such that, it might take many more years for any worthwhile or credible opposition to evolve and become a reality in Ethiopia. It should not be overlooked that " given the existence and persistence in power of a single dominant party [EPRDF], which is a broad coalition of ethnic-based parties, and the ethno-territorial nature of politics", as well as the kind of electoral system in place (the single-member-constituency or the first-past-the-post electoral system as opposed to proportional representation), opposition parties, which are already fragmented and organizationally and financially weak, will surely face tremendous difficulties, in their struggle, even if all limitations on their activities were removed completely by the ruling party, to evolve in a short period of time into a meaningful and strong opposition to the EPRDF, which has enjoyed and still enjoys the full advantages of being an incumbent political party that has a monopoly on the nation's public resources since the last 18 years or so, and be able to checkmate the incumbent government or influence decisions in parliament. However, those opposition parties which realize this glaring reality and choose to play a constructive role as 'loyal' or legal oppositions will develop into worthwhile opposition parties in the future. This will surely happen if they diligently and patiently work and invest for the long-term realization of their dreams. It will happen eventually and is needed to counter the current domination of the political landscape by the EPRDF ruling party.

Be this as it may, the present trend which clearly attests to the proliferation of too many weak parties across the country's political arena is not also promising for viable opposition parties to evolve in the near future. Ethiopia at present has about 90 registered political parties among which 10 or more are national parties (some of them claiming multi-ethnic base) and the rest regional as well as ethnic-based local parties, as the National Electoral Board has recently announced to the general public. The truth of the matter is that this proliferation of parties does not augur well for Ethiopia. There is no evidence of parties emerging to address policy issues that have not been taken care of by either the incumbent party and government or the existing opposition. What we see is focus on disagreements; that when people no longer like each other, or seek to emerge as political leaders in their own right, they form their own new parties or factional groupings.

Parties that stand the test of time are those based on solid principles and issues. That is in part what attracts large numbers of followers and financial contributions from those who see their aspirations embedded in the manifesto of a particular party. Ultimately, in politics, the bigger the entity the better its chances of success and survival. And the fewer the parties, the more mature the politicians and the more meaningful the political process. People need alternatives, yes; but they also need political direction, and the emergence of more and more parties only serves to confuse the voters more. And, besides, there are hardly any new ideas that these parties are introducing to our political marketplace. They are simply short of ideas, content to say nothing at all or to repeat what others have said before and we already know and are long bored and tired of hearing. A close look at the leadership marketplace will tell you that there is really no need for new parties. And there is certainly no need for parties to split up. What we need to see now is parties recognizing the obvious; that they are too small and too weak to stand alone and the best way forward for them would be mergers, alliances, cooperation and coalition. If they want to achieve better and more results and sooner, opposition parties should pursue this path and the path of responsible and constructive opposition politics, that is, to play the role of the 'loyal' or legal opposition and to abide by the rules of the game. All other options are destined to fail.

Legal or loyal opposition, however, does not mean that government will not be criticized. It only means that it will be criticized objectively and constructively with the objective of extracting good economic and political governance for the public good. A responsible opposition is not just an opposition party vehemently criticizing the ruling party and government at every occasion and forum simply for the sake of criticizing and discrediting its achievements and magnifying its failures. A responsible opposition will support government where their actions contribute towards the benefit of the people of Ethiopia and will give the necessary credit where due, and will assist the incumbent government in tackling major national problems that the country faces from time to time, but it will also not allow government to act when it believes that the government's actions or decisions will be to the detriment of Ethiopia and her peoples.

Thus, I am at no loss to conclude that the country's well-being will be better served when those who claim to have the welfare of Ethiopia and her peoples at heart fully adopt and abide by the fundamental values, principles, rules and procedures of democracy as well as a strong spirit of reconciliation,

compromise, tolerance and political magnanimity, if not complete unanimity. Opposition parties in Ethiopia must realize that to wrest political power from the ruling party is indeed an uphill task that requires long years of hard work and sweat. After all, no opposition worldwide can expect the incumbent party and government to hand over power on a silver platter. They need to organize and strengthen their structures to struggle and fight peacefully with sound ideas and programs that may secure them the support of the majority of the voters or the electorate. The use of force and violence to wrest power from the ruling party and government is simply self-destructive and suicidal. Violence begets more violence and bloodshed, even civil war, not peace and democracy.

On its part, the ruling party has to show great tolerance and magnanimity towards opposition parties; remove all limitations on opposition parties that circumscribe their activities especially lack of sufficient freedom to operate at the grassroots level, campaigning, holding political rallies and meetings, etc.; accelerate democratic reforms and strengthen democratic institutions as well as conflict resolution mechanisms and also create a conducive environment that does include and not exclude all opposition parties to participate in the political process; allow them to operate peacefully and smoothly throughout the country and to participate in the periodic national elections with utmost freedom and fairness, as required by any genuine democratic election and political system.

Finally, to discuss democracy and democratic elections in Ethiopia today is to talk about the future, about hopes and fears. We are still at the stage of democratization, embarking upon a process which, we hope, will lead us to a more open, participatory, less authoritarian society sooner rather than later. We have not yet reached a stage where we can claim to have realized a stable and sustainable democratic system of government which embodies, in a variety of institutions and mechanisms, the ideal of political power based on the will of the people. Further, little in the present or the past in Ethiopia promises the success of any such thing, yet people want democracy and many believe it is the only possible solution to the twin ills of poverty and misrule.

Lastly, it must be understood by all protagonists in the nation's political arena and the populace at large that elections alone will not produce democracy and do not necessarily bring about democratic culture. Authoritarian traditions take a long time to wash away. Creating a democracy in poverty-stricken and multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural societies such as ours takes a long time and exacts huge costs, and is often accompanied by violence, disorder, and a period of uncertainty, even chaos. After all, democracies do not at a stroke make societies more civil and stable; they require strong civil and democratic institutions, a tolerant political culture, and a long period of time. It is only those who are committed to the values of democracy, the rule of law, civil and political liberties, and human rights and are prepared for the long-haul, and support less than perfect results as long as the efforts are sincere, who will succeed in realizing democracy and development, peace and stability in the end. "No society becomes democratic without pain; no state achieves economic development without struggle." [Dennis Austin: 1995].

