



## Ethiopia in the run-up to May 2010 elections

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The 2005 federal and regional elections in Ethiopia produced a major political crisis. Now the electoral wheel has turned and observers are waiting to see whether the May 2010 elections will be less turbulent. Critics accuse the ruling Ethiopian People's Democratic Revolutionary Front of deploying repressive tactics to ensure that there is no effective challenge to its power or legitimacy this time around. For the moment, the political opposition appears weaker than it was in 2005. Meanwhile, the conflict in the Ogaden rumbles. In terms of the region, Ethiopia's occupation of Somalia ended at the beginning of 2009. However, the border dispute with Eritrea remains unresolved.

This note provides a brief historical and social survey of Ethiopia. It then looks at the political situation in Ethiopia since 2005. It concludes with a short update on the state of the Eritrea-Ethiopia border dispute.

If you would like further background on the Horn of Africa more broadly, see Library Research Paper 08/86, *Interlocking crises in the Horn of Africa* (25 November 2008) and Standard Note SN/IA/5037, *The Horn of Africa: An Update* (2 April 2009). See also SN/IA/5259, *The UN imposes sanctions on Eritrea* (30 December 2009).

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### **1 Background and history<sup>1</sup>**

Ethiopia has a long tradition of statehood. The first large-scale polity was the kingdom of Axum between the second and eighth centuries AD, whose heartland lay in what is today the regional state of Tigray but whose territory stretched far beyond. Ethiopian statehood has always had a strongly 'imperial' character. The country is home to many ethnic groups but the state has usually been dominated by one of them, rather than necessarily being representative of all. Ethiopia has an equally long tradition of agrarian crises and vulnerability to drought. Ethiopia has an estimated population of 82.5 million people. Although there are no reliable official figures, the population is estimated to be split about 50-50 between Ethiopian Orthodox Christians and Muslims. The largest ethnic groups are the Oromo (at an estimated 32 per cent) and Amhara (30 per cent), followed by the Tigrinya and Somalis (both at around 6 per cent).

The era of modern Ethiopian statehood began in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, when Menelik took the imperial throne. It coincided with the arrival of competing European colonial powers on the African continent. Menelik succeeded not only in reuniting under his control parts of the country where real power had shifted towards the provincial nobility but also in defeating the efforts of Italy to establish Ethiopia as a colony at the battle of Adua in 1896. However, Italy did succeed in establishing a colony, Eritrea, in the north of the country.

Menelik was an Amhara. The new Ethiopian state he created was dominated by the Amhara, a trend which deepened under his son, Haile Selassie, who succeeded Menelik on his death in 1913. Haile Selassie established an increasingly centralised autocratic state, although this process was temporarily disrupted by the Italian invasion and occupation between 1935 and 1941. In 1952, with UN backing, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia. His authoritarian rule was not well received there and the withdrawal of Eritrea's federal status in 1962 set off a long struggle for independence. Other non-Amhara ethnic groups also periodically engaged in protests against Haile Selassie's rule.

Meanwhile, Haile Selassie's reputation abroad rose. He was one of the architects of the Organisation of African Unity, which based itself in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital. Staunchly anti-communist, Ethiopia under Haile Selassie became the US's biggest and most reliable ally in the Horn of Africa.

By the beginning of the 1970s various weaknesses in Selassie's regime were coming to the fore. It was positively 'anti-developmental' in its outlook, leaving the vast majority of its

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the paper draws upon the chapter on Ethiopia in the *Europa Regional Survey for Africa South of the Sahara* (London, 2006).

people impoverished. Between 1972 and 1974, there was a famine in Wollo province. Protests led by students, workers and army officers mounted, leading ultimately to the deposition of Haile Selassie in September 1974. He was replaced by a left-inclined military government known as the Derg (Committee). However, infighting rapidly grew and by 1975 dozens of high-ranking civilian and military officials had been summarily executed. In the same year, Haile Selassie was murdered. Ethiopia became the site of internecine conflict between several Marxist-Leninist groupings with different visions of how the revolution should be conducted and what the role of the military should be in it. In February 1977, a military faction around Lt-Col Mengistu Haile Mariam, seized power. Over the following year, known as the 'red terror', he systematically eliminated the non-military Marxist-Leninist left while implementing many of its policies.

The atmosphere of mistrust and paranoia was further fuelled by the invasion in July 1977 of the Somali inhabited areas of eastern Ethiopia, known as the Ogaden, by Somalia. The rest of the year saw major military reverses for Ethiopia. However, Mengistu's consolidation of power by early 1978 was accompanied by a successful counter-offensive that, with Soviet and Cuban support, reclaimed all the lost territory. Mengistu also made major inroads in Eritrea, gravely weakening the Eritrean guerrilla movements operating there.

By 1984, when the Derg established the Workers' Party of Ethiopia, Mengistu's rule seemed, at least on the surface, to have stabilised. Ethiopia was recast along orthodox Soviet lines through programmes of nationalisation and collectivisation. Also an Amhara, Mengistu continued the imperial tradition of highly centralised rule from the capital. However, the political, economic and social base of the regime was always fragile. By the early 1980s, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) had launched armed struggles against the regime. Both received support from neighbouring Sudan during the 1980s. In Eritrea, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) began to recover ground during the mid 1980s. All these movements espoused their own versions of Marxism-Leninism.

As had been the case with Haile Selasse, a disastrous famine between 1983 and 1985 exposed the weaknesses of the Mengistu regime, this time not just to Ethiopians but also to the wider world. By the end of the decade, the TPLF and EPLF were working together and the military balance in Ethiopia had shifted decisively against Mengistu. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Eastern European economic support fell away, sending the economy into freefall. Mengistu belatedly abandoned Marxism-Leninism but it was not enough to save him and in late May 1991, the TPLF and its political allies from other ethnic groups, now organised into the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), seized control of Addis Ababa. Mengistu fled to Zimbabwe, where he still lives in exile. In 2006, after a 12-year trial *in absentia*, he was convicted by an Ethiopian judicial panel on charges of genocide and sentenced to death.

The alliance between the TPLF and EPLF was based on the former's acceptance of Eritrea's right to secede from Ethiopia, which went ahead. More broadly, the EPRDF claimed that it would end Ethiopia's centralised state tradition by creating a federal system of regional states based around ethnic identity and by giving the right to secede to all 'nationalities'. The system is known as 'ethnic federalism'. Within what remained of Ethiopia, nine regional states ultimately emerged, along with Addis Ababa municipality and the administrative area of Dire Dawa. Although they are supposed to be largely self-funding, the bulk of revenue in practice continues to come from central government.

Ever since 1991, debate has continued over how far 'ethnic federalism' is a genuine aspiration or how far it is convenient camouflage for Tigrayan domination of the Ethiopian state. The independence of Eritrea in 1993 seemed to confirm that the EPRDF was genuine in its claim to support 'ethnic federalism'; others were less sure, arguing that it was simply a reflection of facts on the ground. In July 1993 the two countries signed an agreement for the joint use of the Eritrean ports of Assab and Massawa. This agreement was a *quid pro quo* for official Ethiopian acceptance of Eritrean independence. The OLF withdrew from the EPRDF after several years and has attempted, with limited success, to return to guerrilla war. There has also been small-scale armed opposition to the Government at points in Afar and Gambela regional states. The most sustained military threat to the Government has come from the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in Somali regional state, although this has never come close to threatening its rule (see below).

Once in power, the EPRDF was quick to shed its adherence to Marxism-Leninism (if not its 'democratic centralist' methods) after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Since 1991 Ethiopian politics has been dominated by the TPLF and Meles Zenawi, who was Chairman of the EPRDF and, since 1995, has been Prime Minister. Prior to the 2005 elections (see below), the biggest challenge to his authority came not from without but from within the ranks of the TPLF. Discontent over domestic policies designed to promote a degree of political and economic liberalisation and a serious food crisis in some parts of the country combined with opposition to the EPRDF leadership's decision to sign the Algiers peace agreements with Eritrea in December 2000 following a two-year border war between the countries (see below), led to a 'vote of no confidence' in Meles within the TPLF Central Committee in March 2001, which he only narrowly won. Many of his critics within the party were subsequently detained or otherwise sidelined. By October 2001, when the composition of a new Government was announced, it was clear that Meles had decisively won the internal power struggle. The policies of gradual political and economic liberalisation remained in place. By the time of the 2005 parliamentary elections, encouraged by the donors, the political playing-field was more open in Ethiopia than it had ever been.

## **2 The 2005 elections and their aftermath**

Ethiopia was plunged into renewed political turmoil following parliamentary elections in May 2005. The outcome was a major reverse for the ruling EPRDF. The opposition won at least one-third of the seats in the House of People's Representatives and controlled many of the towns, including Addis Ababa.

For the first time since it came to power, the EPRDF faced a serious political opposition in the shape of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) and the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF). These forces co-operated during the election campaign. State-run television and radio gave fair access to opposition parties for the first time. The EU called the elections a genuine, if imperfect, demonstration of democracy. Nonetheless, there were allegations of counts being brought to a premature close, ballot stuffing and intimidation.

Ethnic differences and mistrust between the various political parties remained high throughout the campaign. The CUD had strong Amhara representation. The CUD not only opposed the EPRDF, but it also questioned the very legitimacy of the constitutional settlement it introduced after coming to power: the system of 'ethnic federalism'. The irony was that, while both government and large parts of the opposition instinctively viewed the subsequent political crisis through this lens, it seems likely that voters defected to opposition

groups as much, if not more, because of dissatisfaction with the government's record on poverty and unemployment.

The EPRDF, by all accounts, was stunned by the result of the election. It seems clear that it had over-estimated the strength of its political support in the country. As the scale of its reversal became clear, it was forced to scramble to regain the initiative. The opposition, by contrast was highly emboldened. When supporters of the opposition took to the streets in Addis in June 2005 to protest against alleged electoral fraud, soldiers and police responded with heavy force, leaving well over one hundred people dead. Thousands more supporters of the opposition were detained and there were credible reports that the authorities used torture against detainees.

Following the June events the clampdown continued. The UEDF and other small parties not affiliated to the EPRDF took their seats in parliament. However, the CUD launched a boycott of parliament. 40 people died in further street protests in towns across Ethiopia on 1-2 November 2005, taking the total of deaths to at least 76. Seven policemen were also killed.<sup>2</sup>

In 2006 despite condemnation from the international community, 129 detained opposition leaders went on trial for treason and attempted genocide. 38 people were eventually found guilty in July 2007 of violating the Constitution and sentenced to life imprisonment. However, behind the scenes, under international pressure, the Government was seeking to negotiate a deal which might at least partially remove the deep shadow that was by now hanging over Ethiopia's 'democratic transition'. Three days after those found guilty had been sentenced, once they had signed a letter accepting responsibility for the riots in November 2005, the Government announced that it would pardon those found guilty and released them.<sup>3</sup>

The EPRDF's past as a revolutionary insurgent movement meant that its conversion to democracy and pluralism was likely to be at best a gradual and uneven process. The 2005 elections suggested to some observers that the party remains unprepared to subject itself to serious challenge from political competitors.<sup>4</sup> It seemed clear that significant sections of the population, particularly amongst Somali-speakers (see below) and the Oromo, continued to withhold their support for the EPRDF.<sup>5</sup>

However, since mid 2007 a fragile political 'normalisation' has been achieved. The EPRDF sought to strengthen its position through its orchestration of celebrations of the new Ethiopian millennium in September 2007. The CUD imploded; it had always been a fragile coalition. Local council elections took place in 2008. This time around, the EPRDF was largely unchallenged and swept the board.

### **3 The 2010 elections approach**

Political and democratic space in Ethiopia often remains circumscribed as the 23 May 2010 elections draw nearer.<sup>6</sup> In January 2009, a new NGO law, the Charities and Societies Proclamation Law, was passed by the Ethiopian Parliament which critics claim could "criminalise the human rights activities of both foreign and domestic NGOs". Ethiopian

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<sup>2</sup> *Africa Confidential*, 18 November 2005

<sup>3</sup> "The millennium deal", *Africa Confidential*, 3 August 2007. 71 people in total were covered by the pardon. It is difficult to view signature of the letter admitting responsibility as taking place under anything other than duress.

<sup>4</sup> S. Vaughan and K. Tronvoll, "Structures and relations of power: Ethiopia", SIDA, 2003, Executive Summary, pp. 15-16. Available at: <http://www.addisvoice.com/resources/Structure-of-power.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Many Oromo remain loyal to the Oromo Liberation Front.

<sup>6</sup> The results will be announced on 21 June 2010.

human rights groups are now forbidden to receive more than 10 per cent of their funding from abroad. In July 2009, Parliament passed what critics regard as a draconian and vaguely worded anti-terrorism legislation.<sup>7</sup>

In December 2008, the leader of the Unity for Democracy and Justice Party (UDJP), Birtukan Mideksa, was taken back into custody and told that her original sentence of life imprisonment would be reinstated. Mideksa was among those who were detained and sentenced following the disputed 2005 elections, but subsequently received presidential pardons. In April 2009, 35 members of an unregistered offshoot of the CUD, known as Ginbot 7, were arrested and accused of planning terrorist acts. 46 party members, including a key leader in exile, Berhanu Nega, were tried (Nega in absentia). Five people, including Nega, were sentenced to death in late December 2009 for planning to assassinate government officials and overthrow the government. 33 others were sentenced to life imprisonment for the same offences.<sup>8</sup>

The UJDP is another party born out of the ashes of the CUD.<sup>9</sup> Opposition forces have been trying to agree a united front against the EPRDF, and in June 2008 created the Forum (*Medrek*) for Democratic Dialogue. However, there are tensions within the FDD between the Amhara-dominated forces and those representing other ethnic groups. It is a fragile coalition and significant opposition parties remain outside it. But the EPRDF also contains tensions within it. Prime Minister Zenawi has on several occasions claimed that he wishes to step down before the elections take place but that his colleagues are vetoing the idea. While the likelihood now is very much that he will stay on, were he to step down there could well be a power struggle for the succession.<sup>10</sup> Aware of the grave damage that it would do to its reputation internationally if there is a repeat of the violence that marred the 2005 post-election period, the EPRDF has joined with a significant number of opposition parties in agreeing an electoral code of conduct that includes a commitment to exclusively peaceful methods.

#### 4 The conflict in the Ogaden

Ethiopian control over the Somali-inhabited lands of eastern Ethiopia known as the Ogaden – named after the Ogadeen clan, which is part of the Darod clan family – has always been contested by Somali nationalists both within the region and in neighbouring Somalia.<sup>11</sup> The Ogaden is now part of a broader Somali regional state.<sup>12</sup> During 1977-8, an invasion by Somalia was bloodily repelled by Ethiopia, with the assistance of the Soviet Union and Cuba. In recent decades, armed resistance to Ethiopian rule has been led by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF).<sup>13</sup> The Ethiopian Government has designated it a terrorist group. It

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<sup>7</sup> For the Ethiopian Government's own assessment of its human rights performance, see its August 2009 report to the Human Rights Council under the universal periodic review mechanism at: [http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session6/ET/A\\_HRC\\_WG6\\_6\\_ETH\\_1\\_E.pdf](http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session6/ET/A_HRC_WG6_6_ETH_1_E.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> International Crisis Group, "Ethnic Federalism and its discontents", Africa Report No. 153, September 2009, p. 13. Available at: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6300&l=1>. See also, "Ethiopia death sentences for plot", *BBC News Online*, 22 December 2009

<sup>9</sup> "Ethiopian Parliament adopts repressive new NGO law", Amnesty International press release, 8 January 2009. See also: <http://www.dagethiopia.org/Public/Publications/Ethiopian%20Partners%20Group.doc>

<sup>10</sup> "Ethiopia: A change is going to come", *Africa Confidential*, 15 May 2009

<sup>11</sup> There is another Somali territory in Ethiopia, known as Dire Dawa, where the Dir clan family predominates.

<sup>12</sup> Somali regional state is also called 'Region 5' by some commentators. However, the term 'Ogaden' is retained here because it remains by far the most familiar term to non-specialists.

<sup>13</sup> Its predecessor was the Ogaden Liberation Front, which was formed in 1963

has received support from Eritrea, which reportedly views the Ogaden as Ethiopia's "achilles heel", and a number of Gulf States.<sup>14</sup>

The ONLF argues that the Somali-speaking areas of Ethiopia remain economically and politically marginalised under the EPRDF. Despite the introduction of 'ethnic federalism', under which Somalis were for the first time officially recognised as one of the country's 'nationalities', there remains some truth in this claim.<sup>15</sup> Formed in 1984, the ONLF joined the political system in 1991 but in 1994 was a split between those who wanted to go slowly on the issue of self-determination and those who did not, the minority favouring an immediate referendum returned to armed struggle. The majority later merged with the main non-Ogaden political party to form the Somali People's Democratic Party.

However, impartial observers claim that the ONLF does not speak for all Somali-speakers. They assert that it cannot even be said that it speaks for all members of the Ogaden clan, given that its support comes mainly from the Rer Abdille and Rer Issaq sub-clans. It has also been pointed out that the current regional President is of Ogaden origin.<sup>16</sup>

For Ethiopia's part, Somali regional state is a strategically important buffer between it and the threat of radical Islam based in Somalia. It also has oil reserves that many hope will eventually produce major revenues. The ONLF has demonstrated an ability to obstruct the development of the oil industry in the Ogaden. In 2006 it forced Petronas, the Malaysian oil company, to abandon plans to operate in the area.

There has been an upsurge in the ONLF's insurgency since the beginning of 2007, when Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia forced it to reduce the number of troops it had operating in Somali regional state. Military clashes between Ethiopian forces and the ONLF have continued periodically during 2009, with both sides claiming victory on most occasions.<sup>17</sup> The ONLF has recently threatened, as it has done in the past, to target foreign oil installations and operatives in the region. There remains concern about the humanitarian situation in the Ogaden. The ICRC has not been allowed to operate there since 2008.

## **5 The Eritrea-Ethiopia border dispute: Recent developments**

The situation remains fundamentally unchanged since mid 2008, when the Security Council terminated the UN mission that had been operating on both sides of the border. There are still hundreds of thousands of troops facing each other in the border area. It is effectively a 'frozen conflict'.. Both parties accuse the other, in pursuit of 'regime change', of providing political and military support to rebel groups operating on their territories.

Eritrea accuses Ethiopia of failing to implement the 2002 decision of a UN-mandated boundary commission. Ethiopia claims that certain issues still remain to be resolved. The UN criticised Eritrean obstruction of the its mission, which Eritrea carried out in retaliation for what it believed was the Security Council's failure to put meaningful pressure on Ethiopia, an important US ally in the 'war on terror', to implement the commission's decision on the

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<sup>14</sup> A. Mohammed, "Ethiopia's strategic dilemma in the Horn of Africa", 20 February 2007, p. 6. Available at: [www.ssrc.org](http://www.ssrc.org)

<sup>15</sup> T. Hagmann, "The political roots of the current crisis in Region 5", 21 September 2007, pp. 3-5. Available at: [www.ssrc.org](http://www.ssrc.org)

<sup>16</sup> "Ethiopia: The Ogaden's trickling sands", *Africa Confidential*, 21 September 2007. See also T. Hagmann, "The political roots of the current crisis in Region 5", 21 September 2007, p. 1. Available at: [www.ssrc.org](http://www.ssrc.org)

<sup>17</sup> "Rebel group rejects Ethiopia's claim of victory", *BBC Monitoring Africa*, 21 March 2009

border. Arguably, Eritrean grievances over the dispute, including a strong sense of betrayal by the US and its allies, continue to animate much of its foreign policy.

In recent months, UN involvement in the border dispute has been limited to the August 2009 final and legally binding ruling of the Eritrea-Ethiopia Claims Commission (EECC), a body established under the 2000 Algiers peace agreement to arbitrate conflicting claims for compensation for violations of international humanitarian law committed by both parties in the course of the war. The Commission blamed Eritrea for starting the war and awarded a slightly larger sum to Ethiopia (the outstanding differential is \$10 million). In a moderately hopeful sign, both parties accepted the ruling of the Commission.<sup>18</sup>

Ethiopia and Eritrea also remain at loggerheads over Somalia, despite an end to Ethiopia's military occupation of Somalia at the start of 2009. Since then, Ethiopian forces have undertaken periodic incursions into Somalia. Eritrea has claimed that Ethiopia's withdrawal is a sham. Ethiopia continues to accuse Eritrea of providing political and military support to the radical Islamist insurgents that seek to overthrow the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia. Its views are endorsed by the bulk of the international community. On 23 December 2009, citing Eritrea's role as a sponsor of terrorism in Somalia, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 1907, imposing an arms embargo on Eritrea, and a travel freeze and asset ban on Eritrean individuals and companies (to be designated by the UN sanctions committee which monitors the arms embargo against Somalia). Eritrea is also accused in the Resolution of failing to respond to Security Council calls to withdraw its troops from Djibouti since its military incursion in 2008. The Ethiopian Government has voiced its support for the resolution.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For further background, including about the final awards, see the EECC's webpage at: [http://www.pca-cpa.org/showpage.asp?pag\\_id=1151](http://www.pca-cpa.org/showpage.asp?pag_id=1151)

<sup>19</sup> "UN sanctions 'persuade' Eritrea to mend its ways", Press Release, Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 December 2009