Voting, violence and violations: peasant voices on the flawed elections in Hadiya, Southern Ethiopia

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In memory of the five people who were killed in Hadiya during Election Day

Abstract

This article presents peasant grievances on the flawed 2000 elections in Hadiya zone, southern Ethiopia. For the first time in Ethiopia’s electoral history, an opposition party managed to win the majority of the votes in one administrative zone. In the run-up to the elections, government cadres and officials intimidated and harassed candidates and members from the opposition Hadiya National Democratic Organisation (HNDO). Several candidates and members were arrested and political campaigning was restricted. On election day, widespread attempts at rigging the election took place, and violence was exerted in several places by government cadres and the police. Despite the government’s attempt to curtail and control the elections in Hadiya, the opposition party mobilised the people in a popular protest to challenge the government party’s political hegemony – and won. If this is an indication of a permanent shift of power relations in Hadiya, it is however, too early to say.

Preface

We know that we have the right to chose in a democracy and that no force should be applied on us. We appreciate the EPRDF bringing us democratic practice, but before we get a chance to practice the democratic agenda, they are also introducing force and suppress us. As the beginning was best, so must the end be too. They cannot let us only smell democracy, now they have to allow us to eat it too! Election is personal and personally one must vote as one desires.

This is the voice of two Hadiya elders in Jajura village of Soro district in Hadiya, an ethnic zone in southern Ethiopia, two days before

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Election Day (14 May 2000). We were sitting in a small bunnabet (coffee shop), discussing in a muted voice the events that were unfolding in Hadiya. Personally, I was a bit nervous, since we knew that the police had seen us enter the bunnabet and I was expecting them to follow us shortly. But the two shimagile (elders) were undisturbed. They wanted to convey their hardships and the problems with the election process to an outsider; no matter the consequences. Soon thereafter, however, an EPRDF cadre entered the coffee shop and sat down at the table next to us, and all discussion ceased.

**Introduction**

During the first few months of the new millennium, Ethiopian domestic politics were focused on the upcoming national election on 14 May 2000. The political scene in the country had for the previous nine years been totally dominated by the coalition movement Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), which took power after the Derg government collapsed in May 1991. Now, for the first time, there was a hope among broad segments of the population that an election might be truly competitive and present some reliable alternatives in a peaceful atmosphere without intimidation and violence; and not serve only as a ritual plebiscite confirming the EPRDF’s grip on power in Ethiopia. However, in certain areas, the aspirations of the voters were not fulfilled.

This article focuses on the flawed electoral process in Hadiya administrative zone in Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR). The article is restricted to the political process in Hadiya, as this was perceived by local peasants and urban dwellers. Their voices will be put in context and presented as directly as possible. Attention is also given to how people resisted the EPRDF orders, leading to the eventual defeat of the EPRDF monopoly of political power in Hadiya.

**Background to the Elections**

After the EPRDF take-over of power in 1991, the leading member of the coalition, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), promised to democratise the Ethiopian State and to defend and respect human rights. During their period in power, elections were conducted in 1992 (local and district), 1994 (Constituent Assembly), 1995 (regional and parliamentary), and 1996 (local). All previous elections,
however, have been boycotted by the major opposition parties, due to the authoritarian and undemocratic practices of the EPRDF, restricting free political activities by the opposition parties (see NIHR 1992; Pausewang 1994; Tronvoll & Aadland 1995; Lyons 1996; Abbink 2000). This led to a total monopolisation of political power by the EPRDF and EPRDF-affiliated parties in the House of People’s Representatives (the Federal Parliament) and the regional assemblies.

After the non-competitive federal and regional 1995 elections, opposition groupings in Ethiopia, both legally registered and exile based, pursued different avenues to try to negotiate a more all-embracing political participation in the country. One such avenue was called the Paris initiative, bringing together eight opposition movements into the Coalition of Ethiopian Opposition Political Organisations (CEOPO) with an overall objective of creating a dialogue for a broad-based national reconciliation in Ethiopia.\(^2\) CEOPO also issued a ‘recipe’ as to how to establish a process that would ensure a ‘free and fair’ election, and invited the EPRDF government for talks on the issue.\(^3\) The initiative failed, however, since the EPRDF did not respond to it.

Ethiopian President Dr Negasso Gidada symbolically reached out to the opposition and asked them to register for the election in a statement of 5 November 1999. Although the EPRDF did not respond to the initiative to enter into talks with the opposition, Negasso Gidada reaffirmed that ‘our government still continues to encourage all those political organisations which, after dissociating themselves from the peaceful struggle, are operating illegally at home and abroad, to mend their ways and begin operating lawfully on the basis of the constitution’.\(^4\) However, none of the unregistered opposition movements acknowledged the call from the president. Simultaneously, pressure was put upon the legally registered opposition movements within the country, since the Ethiopian election law states that if a party chooses not to participate in two consecutive national elections it will lose its party licence and be dissolved. Consequently, registered opposition parties which had previously boycotted the elections felt that they had no realistic alternative this time around; either they participated or they would cease to exist as legal political groupings.

In the months prior to election day, the frustration among the opposition parties increased since their candidates and members faced harassment and difficulties in conducting a political campaign in the rural areas. Dr Beyene Petros, a professor of biology at Addis Ababa University, is the foremost spokesperson for the political opposition in
Ethiopia. He has been active in politics since the fall of the Derg, and is party leader of the Hadiya National Democratic Organisation (HNDO) and chairman of the coalition movement, the Southern Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Coalition (SEPDC), which unites fourteen different ethnic opposition parties from the Southern region (SNNPR). Three months before the election, Beyene Petros vented his frustration and explained:

This just shows that the EPRDF is not willing to take us seriously. While we have been in meetings with the National Electoral Board (NEB) to discuss the situation, they have continued to arrest peasants, several hundreds so far, in addition to several of our candidates. They have totally curtailed our movements as a political party, since our candidates and members risk facing charges on inciting violence against the state if they continue with ordinary political campaigning. So we were forced to discontinue our campaign activities and tell our candidates to stay at home. We are in a catch-22 situation; we cannot withdraw from the election, then we will lose our party registration. But if we continue with the campaign we will end up with all our candidates in detention. We are thinking of legal action but we do not have resources to hire lawyers. We are powerless to follow this up through the legal system. It is a very frustrating and depressing situation we are put in.

Beyene Petros has been instrumental in trying to broaden the curtailed democratisation process in the country since the EPRDF came to power. During the years of the transitional period (1991–95), he initially served as vice-minister of education in the national coalition government. But his party was expelled from the coalition parliament and himself from the cabinet by the EPRDF in 1993 due to criticism of EPRDF’s general policies and undemocratic practices in handling opposition parties. Since then, together with a number of other opposition politicians, he has championed peaceful democratic development in Ethiopia, criticising the control and restrictions imposed by the EPRDF on the political environment in the country.

A POLITICAL CONTEXT OF CONTROL AND MANIPULATION

Politics in Ethiopia takes many different forms and expressions, but generally has a negative connotation. The country has a recent past of a quasi-feudal monarchy under Emperor Haile Selassie, and a Marxist military dictatorship under Mengistu Hailemariam, with political ‘cleansing’ and several decades of civil and interstate war. The ‘Red Terror’ campaign during the Mengistu era, when tens of thousands of political activists were killed in the urban centres of the country, is still
vividly remembered among the population. The legacy of politics in Ethiopia is thus draped in memories of violence and suffering. Even today, political participation is often stigmatised and shunned by ordinary people. An often-heard Amharic expression is ‘(keep) politics and electricity at a distance’ (poletikana korenti béruku).

In Ethiopia today, several means are used by political power holders at different levels to create an obedient and quiescent electorate (see, for instance, Tronvoll & Aadland 1995; Young 1998; Tronvoll 2000). The local administrative structure of governance (kebelle) is perhaps the most important tool for the state to control the peasantry. Moreover, various expressions of state coercion imbue fear and apprehension among the people, which consequently create disinterest, or apathy, as a survival strategy in order not to be ‘eaten by politics’. If people publicly show resistance towards governmental dictates and orders, they face the risk of being exposed to direct intimidation and harassment, jeopardising their own personal safety.

Kebelle: the administration of suppression

The administrative and political structures in Ethiopia overlap and intervene in such a way that the local administrative units (kebelle, woreda and zone levels) are not neutral and independent bodies, but work hand in hand with the ruling party. This administrative structure was developed during the Derg regime, with the primary objective of implementing the land reform throughout the country in the mid-1970s. Later, however, the objective was broadened, and administrative, political and defence tasks were added to the authority of what has commonly been called the kebelle structure. For the authoritarian Derg government, the kebelle structure soon developed the important two-fold capacity of, on the one hand, working as the extended arm of the central government in communicating the Marxist ideology and political orders of the day; and on the other, operating as a tool of intelligence, since the local administrators worked as informers and spies, keeping the grassroots under surveillance and reporting any ‘anti-revolutionary’ and ‘anti-government’ activities back to the party and intelligence services. In this manner, the kebelle structure became an effective and efficient means for the state to keep a tight control of their citizens and to clamp down on any opposition activities.

Research on post-Derg rural Ethiopia has confirmed that the EPRDF did not abolish the suppressive means of the local
administrative system, but rather, in a remarkably short time period, managed to co-opt it and turn the use of the system in its favour. Dessalegn Rahmato (1994: 8) reported in 1994 that all the indications are that the rural institutions are once again being turned into pliant tools of the state. We should remember that in each region, the local authority and political party are frequently one and the same, so in this regard the new power structure at the local level closely resembles that of the Derg and its party.

The Norwegian observer group to the 1995 elections in Ethiopia also confirmed the usage and control by the kebelle system during the conduct of the election (Tronvoll & Aadland 1995: 29–31). The Ethiopian rural population is exposed to such control daily, a surveillance that increases in times of political turmoil, such as during election periods. As elaborated below, the kebelle structure held the Hadiya constituency in an iron grip during the weeks and days prior to the election. Moreover, the surveillance and control from the centre is applied on all levels and sectors of society in Ethiopia.

John Young (1998), a political scientist specialising on the TPLF, has identified several means of TPLF/EPRDF control or influence over regional affairs. Perhaps the most notable manner of control is applied through the presence of Tigrayan ‘advisors’ at regional and local administrative levels. These ‘advisors’ are never in a formal decision-making position, but ‘advise’ the local ethnic representatives who fill the formal positions. Since the role of the advisors is hardly mentioned on any organisational charts, nor described in official decision-making documents, and not at all acknowledged by the persons concerned if you ask about it, it is difficult to collect solid empirical data on their workings. However, examples of such advisors in Southern region (SNNPR) were Mr Bitew Belay, a central TPLF cadre and current minister of regional affairs in the Prime Minister’s Office, who served as ‘advisor’ to Mr Abate Kisho, the president of the Southern Region (SNNPR) until 1999. Likewise, all informed people in the Hadiya capital Hosaina knew that Mr Tsegai, a teacher by profession, who is frequently seen travelling on his motorbike throughout the zone, is the ‘advisor’ to the zone chairman Mr Tamrat Erifo, and thus believed to be the core local decision-maker.

The role of TPLF cadres in running the political affairs of the country has led to a growing scepticism and fear towards any individual originating from Tigray. Thus, ‘ordinary’ Tigrayan men and women are in danger of being stigmatised, out of fear that they are informers for, and collaborators with, the regime.
Fear and force in Hadiya

Fear is an important instrument to achieve political victories and to sustain political power in Africa. Inspiring fear among the population is a widely used tactic to create a quiescent and manageable mass of so-called ‘supporters’. As President Robert Mugabe spreads fear among black Zimbabweans based on land scarcity, and the RUF does so in Sierra Leone among the rural population based on extreme violence, so in Ethiopia we see similar mechanisms at work. A substantial part of the Norwegian 1995 election report (Tronvoll & Aadland 1995: 41–6) is devoted to describing how the EPRDF used fear as an instrument to mobilise support in the first parliamentary election in Ethiopia. A main concern this time around was to study whether government agencies and representatives still used the same tactic of inspiring fear among the population in order to secure the EPRDF a victory in the election.

Already in the beginning of January, four months prior to the election, measures of control and suppression were applied on both candidates and the electorate in Hadiya, as elsewhere in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO 2000: 3) writes in its first report on the election process that they received complaints and evidence from various parts of the country regarding ‘threats, transfers or dismissals from jobs, confiscation or loss of property, detentions and forced disappearances, gun-shot wounds, extra judicial killings, and other illegal actions to which candidates and voters have been subjected’. The report also mentions the detention on 18 January of eighteen HNDO candidates and the subsequent detention of several dozens of HNDO supporters and members throughout Hadiya zone. The rounds of detention of candidates and supporters of the opposition party culminated with the killings of two HNDO supporters in Soro during a clash between the local people and the police in early February 2000 (ibid.: 5). As referred to by Beyene Petros above, these repressive actions by the authorities led to a state of apprehension throughout Hadiya zone. From the peasants’ point of view, the government had given a clear signal that everybody who was associated with the HNDO and who supported Beyene Petros was in danger of being detained or exposed to other kinds of repercussions. As a consequence of this strategy of fear, the HNDO ceased its public political campaign, in order not to jeopardise its candidates’ and members’ safety.

An American diplomat and myself were the only two foreigners in Hadiya to study the elections. Every day, in every place I stopped,
Hadiya peasants approached me to tell their story of personal sufferings. People looked upon us as international witnesses to the political manipulation and mismanagement that took place in the region. The voices of the many people I talked to, their stories of fear and force, made a strong impression. I talked with people in hiding inside their huts, others in the open in their fields or along the road. I wanted to learn about life in Hadiya from a local point of view, including both EPRDF and HNDO sympathisers. After some days of travelling in the area, however, I discovered that to find an EPRDF sympathiser among the peasantry was almost impossible. In order to fill in the EPRDF perspective, on the other hand, I tried several times to get kebelle officials to tell their side of the story, but in vain. All attempts to get a statement from EPRDF local officials were denied, and I was directed to the higher representatives, either the woreda chairman or to the central party offices in Hosaina. All the central cadres gave a standardised response, that the election process was proceeding according to the law and that everybody was free to campaign in accordance with the election law. They all also expected that the EPRDF would win the election. Thus, the peasants who were willing to talk to me and tell their story were overwhelmingly in favour of the HNDO.

I sat with Dajemo, a peasant farmer in his early forties, inside his traditional hut in Soro district. He was nervously telling me about his fear of the EPRDF. He states:

First, let me tell you that I am a supporter of Beyene's party. We live now in misery, since the EPRDF is looking down on us as slaves. They have openly stated that ‘we came to power by 17 years of struggle. Now when we bring you democracy, you want to bring our regime to an end. If a hand does not vote for the EPRDF, he can get two things: a bullet or torture to death. Please don’t select the worst. If you don’t chose that, we will give you grain and money, and help you to live a comfortable life. It is your choice!’

Dajemo is not alone in telling such stories. The same day I talked to him I also ran into another peasant farmer along the road. We stopped him for a chat and he willingly shared his experiences with us. The EPRDF called us here to listen to their party programme. We were gathered from all villages in the area and they told us their political programme. But when we were asking questions for elaboration, the armed security pointed their guns at us. All the hundreds of people gathered screamed ‘God, look at us and the soil we live on! Look at us. Please God, discover the truth!’ After this an old man from the crowd called out ‘I’m an old man, please hear me out, I have something to say. We don’t want people
to rule us by the gun, by torture, by humiliation. But we want men of pen [educated] and those who believe in peaceful discussions. Please leave us alone!’ Then the old man turned to us and said: ‘Please, all of you turn your prayers to God. We will only get a solution from him’. After the meeting, we heard that the EPRDF cadres were saying: ‘EPRDF will win, it is sure that we will win. Those who are the supporters of Beyene will be under our feet and we will trample on them. We have the guns, you have only knives. Your force cannot be compared to us. So don’t even dream of getting to power.’

The stick and the carrot: buying of votes

Simultaneously with acts of intimidation and harassment of the electorate carried out by EPRDF cadres, strategies of bribing and buying of votes were also implemented. A 40-year-old peasant from Lemu gave the following example:

I know about the situation and I’m not ignorant. I’m Muslim and I don’t belong to any party. I know what the ruling party men are doing to us. The grain from above [relief aid] is sent by the world for famine areas. The party called us to receive grain. But when we got there, they turned the gift from abroad to their own political ends. ‘If you don’t have the card to vote for us, you won’t get the grain’, the EPRDF cadres stated. We told them that we are not political men, we are Muslims and we don’t support or oppose any party. When we said this, the cadres told us: ‘Then you cannot live in this place’. In that forceful action, we took the voter card and said that we would vote for them and begged them not to kill us. We are threatened too much. They said: ‘For 17 years we fought, our brothers and comrades died for this, so we don’t easily give our power away. We will be killed and kill for this!’

The man continues to describe the hardships under the EPRDF, before he returns to the question of buying support.

The ruling party man has many roads to follow. That is if a person completes high school he is promised many things: ‘We give you a position in the kebelle. Why do you simply live in the area while you can get good food and clothing if you vote for us?’ The peasants, on the other hand, are promised fertiliser, enough grains and so on.

As all the peasants I spoke to had stories to tell about harassment and fear, so also had most of them examples of how EPRDF also used ‘the carrot’ too, in order to control the peasantry. In Soro, another farmer I talked to gave the following example:

Although I’m a peasant, I have also skills in building erosion terraces for food for work. But while I was doing this, they [EPRDF cadres] came to me and accused me of being a Beyene supporter. I had worked for 10 days on a terracing project, but they didn’t pay me anything since I was a Beyene supporter. Even yesterday, there was agitation when the EPRDF was gathering people here. They told me that I should continue my terracing and I would be paid if I voted EPRDF.
The attempts at bribery were so widespread that the peasants had coined a phrase describing their strategy of cheating on EPRDF: ‘Take the money and eat it, but on Election Day we will vote Beyene!’.

**Breaking the Silence: Resisting the EPRDF Domination**

Many of the Hadiya informants stressed the importance that their fear and sufferings should be communicated ‘to the world’. If this was done, the personal risk they faced by exposing political harassment and human rights violations by the EPRDF was in a way justified. It seemed that the general attitude of peasant apathy, as a political survival strategy observed elsewhere in Ethiopia and during the 1995 elections (see Tronvoll & Aadland 1995), had passed in Hadiya. No longer would the peasants be quiescent and passive, they came out in the open telling about their situation, even though they lived in a state of apprehension. Such behaviour is also observed in some other comparable contexts of collective violence. Veena Das (1985: 5) writes from her studies of riots and sufferings among the Sikhs of India that ‘they wanted their suffering to become known as if the reality of it could only be reclaimed after it had become part of a public discourse’. Likewise, the Hadiya peasants wanted their voices to be heard internationally about the current situation and about their political sacrifices. It is if as this information was restricted to the Hadiya people only, the political situation would not change and the EPRDF could continue their suppression.

The gradual build up of political resistance in Hadiya was also confirmed by a young civil servant. I met him at a small restaurant, and we shared a meal of *doro wat* (chicken with a spicy sauce) together. When I asked him about the current situation in the area, he explained:

I am not a member of any party. I am originally from Amhara region, but have been living here in Hadiya for five years working for the government. During this time I have observed the situation closely. The EPRDF is publicly suppressing the Hadiya. They have arrested many and killed some. They are not giving the Hadiya their freedom. If people were free to chose, they will surely vote for Beyene’s party. But everybody suspects that the election will be manipulated and that the EPRDF will win. This is because the people feel threatened. The federal government has brought in military troops to the area which have taken positions throughout Hadiya zone. If they start fighting, the Hadiya people will bring their ancient weapons from their huts, swords and spears, and fight back. This is the result of an accumulated effect of many,
many years of suppression. The Hadiya were suppressed during the Haile Selassie and the Derg regimes, and the EPRDF continue the same practice. But now they have got enough and will rise against the suppression. They are a very brave people who do not want war, but I think they have reached a limit now.\textsuperscript{15}

The majority of the Hadiya people felt alienated from political power in their own zone. The impression that the Hadiya area was under ‘siege’ was pointed out and that this election was not only an election for political offices, but for a ‘true’ ethnic autonomy, i.e. that local leaders were elected freely from below and could work without dictates from above. The new federal structure of Ethiopia guarantees all ethnic groups and minorities the right of political and cultural autonomy, and the administrative units should reflect ethnic boundaries.\textsuperscript{16} However, as mentioned above, the presence of Tigrayan advisors and military in key positions makes the Hadiya Peoples Democratic Organisation (the EPRDF affiliated party) look like a puppet party. Local Hadiya people resisted the fact that they are not in control of their own affairs, but are ruled by ‘outsiders’. Negash, a teacher from the area, explained this situation the following way:

From the point of view of the local population, I can say that 95\% will vote for Dr Beyene’s party if they are allowed. But there are so many mechanisms used to suppress the people. Cadres are going from house to house to persuade the people, they give some grain and money, and even threaten them. I am a teacher myself and some of us who are government employees are threatened to be transferred to Gambella if we do not vote ‘right’. Yesterday, about 200 federal troops arrived from Awassa and Addis to assist in suppressing the local people. We know the local police and militia, but these are mostly Tigrayans. They do not know our culture and language. These strange people are placed in every kebelle. We are afraid that the election will be done by force and cheating. ‘If you don’t elect this person, you will not be safe here’, is the order given to many peasants. But we will rather die than to accept this. Our blood will bring us our freedom. This is the last time we will sacrifice our blood for our freedom!\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} It is a big step from ‘everyday forms of resistance’ – which are non-confrontational acts of non-compliance (Scott 1985, 1990) – to a more open, public resistance. So far in Ethiopia, we have generally observed the hidden transcripts of resistance, where the peasantry are draped in political apathy, non-participating in local political affairs and avoiding direct confrontations with power holders. James Scott (1995: 204) writes that ‘many forms of authority can tolerate a remarkably high level of practical nonconformity so long as it does not actually tear the public fabric of hegemony’. However, a public challenge to EPRDF hegemony is exactly what seems to have taken place in
Hadiya. Peasants and urban dwellers openly confronted the domination and control of the EPRDF, and questioned their political legitimacy to rule in Hadiya. The issue why this protest first surfaced with this force in Hadiya, might have several explanations. But, the fact that the HNDO is one of the longest running registered opposition parties, and the opposition party with probably the best grassroots organisation and mobilisation, are surely important in explaining this fact.

The forms of public resistance and disobedience vary, from the use of humour, irony and defamation, to a display of civil disobedience and disorder. The oral tradition of the peasantry was referred to in order to display political loyalty and support towards Beyene Petros and his party. Since the EPRDF propaganda tried to portray Beyene Petros and his candidates as inadequate politicians and liars, the peasants were often heard chanting slogans as, ‘the mill doesn’t grind cabbage, and the mule doesn’t give birth, so also doesn’t Beyene speak lies’. Closer to Election Day, another song was often heard in the rural areas. It was a mnemonic device, used to remember how to cross on the ballot paper on Election Day:

We eat banana,
we drink pineapple,
and we rest our head on the barkuma [wooden headrest],
like the elephant we can show great strength,
that is through the vote of the HNDO.

The banana, pineapple, headrest and elephant were all HNDO party symbols illustrating the candidates for regional and federal assemblies. In this way, much of the rhetoric of resistance against the EPRDF was hidden under the use of these symbols instead.

Ballots, bullets and bloodshed: Election Day turmoil

The peasants’ expectations for Election Day were a mixture of scepticism towards possible EPRDF manipulation and rigging of the balloting, and the display of force by the police and military. Sadly, the peasants’ worst expectations were fulfilled, and the voting turned into chaos in several constituencies due to attempts at rigging by the ruling party. Moreover, after the day was over, police and EPRDF cadres had killed five people when they tried to exercise their democratic rights.

Throughout Hadiya area on Election Day peasants were flocking towards the polling stations in order to cast their vote of resistance. The sight that met them at many polling stations, however, was
disappointing. In Soro constituency, for instance, the majority of the ballot boxes were stuffed with ballots prior to the opening of the polling stations in the morning. When I was driving through the area the morning of 14 May, a spectacular sight could be witnessed. Outside every polling station, several hundreds of men and women were gathered, sitting quietly on the ground with their backs turned against the polling station. In all areas the HNDO party observers and the peasants had protested about the rigging, and refused to start the voting until the ballot boxes were emptied. Thousands of people were also trekking into the rural town of Gimbicho, in order to personally make a protest to the woreda administrators and party cadres. The Hadiya people collectively made an open protest against the cheating and thus publicly confronted the hegemony of the EPRDF. Scott (1995: 203) lucidly explains that ‘when a practical failure to comply is joined with a pointed, public refusal it constitutes a throwing down of the gauntlet, a symbolic declaration of war’. This is what happened in Hadiya on 14 May, a symbolic declaration of war stating that ‘no longer will we accept the domination and harassment of the ruling party’. During such tense and politically charged moments, when hidden dissent crosses the threshold to open resistance, the power holders may turn to exaggerated means in order to re-establish the power relation of control and domination. This may explain what happened in two incidents in Hadiya during Election Day.

In Nakor kebelle in Lemu constituency the peasants were queuing outside the polling station, eagerly waiting to cast their vote. The people had already made up their mind, and wanted to vote for the ‘elephant’ and the ‘banana, headrest and pineapple’ (the HNDO federal and regional symbols). Malkamu, a peasant from the area explains:

When we came to vote this morning, there were EPRDF cadres, kebelle officials and even the election men were EPRDF, at the polling station. The confrontation started when the EPRDF cadres wanted to force us to change our choice of voting. We went directly for the signs of elephant, banana, headrest and pineapple, but they said ‘no, don’t choose that, but choose the bee’ [EPRDF]. They could not force me, but later I saw that other people were forced because they were illiterate.

The voters lining up outside the polling station started to protest and shout against the NEB and kebelle officials, crying that they knew their democratic rights and that they were allowed to choose whoever they wanted. After some time of protest and shuffling, the officials and cadres became nervous and the police were ordered to shoot into the
crowd of protesting voters. People panicked and ran away, but left on
the ground outside the polling station were two dead women and
several injured. I was in the vicinity when this happened, and heard
about the unrest and decide to travel towards the area. On my way, I
met people who had fled from the shootings and they warned us not to
proceed any further. After a man had told the story about the incident,
I asked if I could note down his name and he answered:

Yes, I am Assres. I don’t fear to give you my name. This will thus be
internationally recorded, so I can die.18 I don’t want to live under such
conditions. They can take me if they want. We are tortured in every way. I’m
just an ordinary peasant and I tell you the truth. Please, even if I am killed,
tell the world about what is happening here and let God save us!

The second incident where the power holders freaked out when they
faced the public disobedience from the people was in Omoschoro kebelle
in Soro constituency, ending in the killings of three people. Early
morning at the kebelle polling station, the HNDO party observer, Mr
Mishamo Kabisso, had protested against the opening of the polls since
the proper regulations were not followed. The ballot box was not sealed
and it was stuffed full with votes! Mr Mishamo said, ‘we cannot sign
declaring that everything is ready to start the voting. This is forgery.’19

The EPRDF party observer became furious about his disobedience and
protest, and was heard swearing: ‘You son of a bitch, shut up! This
doesn’t concern you. You have to obey your orders.’ The situation was
tense when the woreda and NEB officials arrived to get an understanding
of the situation. The NEB coordinator, Mr Wondemu Kibret assessed
the situation and declared that everything was OK and that they
should proceed without checking and emptying the ballot box.
Moreover, the EPRDF candidate to the regional council from the area,
Mr Tassew Gebrie, also gave his orders that the process should
continue undisturbed by the vocal protests by the HNDO observer, Mr
Mishamo. He protested against the violations of the electoral act and
denied signing the form declaring a proper opening of the polling
station. Several hours had passed with arguing when they all took a
break for lunch. Mr Mishamo followed his wife Mrs Almaz to a
relative’s house nearby. While the two of them were sitting inside
eating their lunch, the EPRDF party observer entered the house and
threw a hand-grenade at them and quickly retreated. He said nothing,
gave no warning – just threw the grenade and ran out of the house.
Both Mr Mishamo and Mrs Almaz were instantly killed and several
other people injured. The EPRDF observer was then seen going back
to the polling station telling the NEB and kebelle officials that the
problem had been taken care of and that they could proceed with the voting!

The tragic events did not stop here. The eighteen-year-old son of the dead couple heard about the incident and came to the scene and saw his father and mother torn to pieces by the grenade. As is the tradition in many parts of rural Ethiopia, he brought a sword and aimed to revenge the killings of his parents. The EPRDF party observer had vanished, so the son got hold of the local NEB coordinator who had ‘accepted’ the killings. The son was heard saying to the NEB coordinator: ‘You are the cause for all this misery. If you hadn’t stuffed the ballot boxes with votes before opening, all these events would not have happened.’ With those words, he cut the sword over the NEB coordinator’s neck and killed him.

**RESISTANCE MATTERS: THE HADIYA POLITICAL UPRISING**

The open refusal to comply with a hegemonic performance and order is a particularly dangerous form of insubordination. When one get away with one act of insubordination, that will inspire further acts. And, that again, will inspire other people to act too. James Scott (1995: 205) explains:

> Why should a serf who refuses to bow before his lord continue to deliver grain and labour services? A single lapse in conformity can be repaired or excused with negligible consequences for the system of domination. A single act of successful public insubordination, however, pierces the smooth surface of apparent consent, which itself is a visible reminder of underlying power relations.

It is important to note that such acts of disobedience, that publicly challenge and perhaps break the power relationship of control and domination, may be irreversible. If the denial of subordination is not immediately beaten back and suppressed, it will lead to a change in the power relationship. However, even if the disobedience is curtailed, no longer can the relationship of domination be restored as it was prior to the public resistance. Since people have witnessed that the power relation can be challenged, and eventually broken or subdued, they will no longer let hegemonic control and domination go unchallenged. The legitimacy of domination has withered away, and the public resistance and challenge of power has created an awakening among broader segments of the dominated group.

Due to widespread protests against the elections in several zones in southern Ethiopia, the NEB decided to conduct a re-election in some
of the ‘troubled’ constituencies. In Hadiya zone, seven constituencies were involved in the re-election, which was conducted on 25 June 2000. During the re-election, several teams of diplomatic observers were present in Hadiya. The NEB had also deployed election coordinators from Addis Ababa to staff all polling stations in the zone, due to mistrust of the neutrality of local personnel. Both the NEB and the diplomatic observers agreed that the re-election was conducted satisfactorily. The peasants flocked to the polling stations and once again cast their votes in favour of the opposition party HNDO. The HNDO secured six of the seven seats that were re-elected, thus securing an overwhelmingly victory over the EPRDF in Hadiya.

The vote of protest by the Hadiya electorate, however, brought the revenge of the EPRDF. In a press conference held by Dr Beyene Petros on July 21 2000, in Addis Ababa, he accused the EPRDF local cadres of being vengeful against the drought-affected people in southern Ethiopia. He said that drought victims in Hadiya and other zones were told to ‘ask Beyene’ when they requested assistance from governmental officials (US Dept. of State 2000). Dr Beyene Petros alleged the use of hunger and food aid as a political weapon, and tactics adopted by the ruling party to prevent the electorate from buying fertilisers for agricultural production. Hadiya informants also spoke about intimidation and harassment of HNDO members by EPRDF cadres in the aftermath of the election, to show that they were still in control of the kebelle and woreda structures in the region. Also the US Department of State reports on these incidents and confirms the political use of fertiliser and food aid in the SNNPR as a retaliation for voters electing opposition candidates. The US Department of State also reported that no juridical or administrative action had been taken against the government human rights violators and election officials in the SNNPR by the end of 2000 (US Dept. of State 2000). How, and if, central EPRDF authorities will follow up and instruct their regional cadres to obey the law, is still an unsettled issue.

THE CONDUCT OF THE ELECTIONS ELSEWHERE IN ETHIOPIA

Is the Hadiya case representative of what happened elsewhere in Ethiopia during the 2000 elections? Since Hadiya and SNNPR were the only places where the elections were truly contested, with the exception of Addis Ababa, it is difficult to give a clear-cut answer to this question. However, the issues of violence, intimidation and rigging were not exhibited anywhere else on the same scale as in Hadiya.
Gedeo zone, also in the SNNPR, experienced harassment and threats against voters on election day in certain areas, but there was no attempt at direct large-scale rigging as in Hadiya. Moreover, no people were reportedly killed on election day in Gedeo or elsewhere in the country, as happened in Hadiya.

In the great majority of constituencies in Ethiopia, where the EPRDF or EPRDF-affiliated parties ran without any notable competition from opposition candidates, the ‘election’ was conducted in a peaceful and satisfactory manner. The polling stations had sufficient material, they were well staffed with qualified personnel, voters were allowed to cast their ballots without intimidation, and the counting and announcing of votes were undertaken according to the law and the rules of the election. In urban areas, though, where opposition candidates ran for election, as in Addis Ababa and parts of Oromia and Southern region, certain irregularities were observed. Political cadres and kebelle officials tried to influence the electorate to vote for EPRDF candidates, and restrictions were placed on free political campaigning by opposition candidates. But, in general terms, in Addis Ababa and other urban centres the electorate for the first time had real political alternatives to choose between. This, it must be said, is a small step forward in relation to the 1995 elections. Of greater concern, however, are the events described in this article, and the escalation of violence in areas where the opposition party were well organised and filed popular candidates.

The varying conduct of the polls in different parts of Ethiopia poses a difficult question: What is the most representative context of the 2000 elections and the content of democracy in Ethiopia? The conduct of the polls in Tigray and large parts of Amhara and Oromia, where there were no opposition candidates and everything went ‘smoothly’; or the context of manipulation and violence experienced in Hadiya and parts of Gedeo where the EPRDF met a stiff challenge from well-organised and popular opposition parties? This substantial enquiry has to be left unanswered, since it deserves a much more elaborate analysis than presented in this brief article.

**WHAT NOW, HADIYA?**

The Hadiya electorate’s vote for HNDO in the 2000 election may be a turning point in Ethiopia’s process of democratisation. For the first time, an opposition party won control over an ethnic zone from the EPRDF. What will happen next in terms of continuing democratisation
and challenge to EPRDF hegemony, is, however, difficult to say. As this is written, Ethiopia enters a period where local (kebelle and woreda) elections will be conducted throughout the country (spring and summer 2001). Whether the EPRDF will allow a level playing field in these elections or try to control and manipulate them as in the first round of elections in Hadiya, remains to be seen. However, there are already indications that government control and manipulation will continue as before. It is thus still too early to say whether the EPRDF hegemony has been permanently broken in Hadiya, or whether the EPRDF will manage to regain control over the peasantry by way of coercion and persuasion in order to win the local elections in 2001.

The lesson of the 2000 elections, however, is that well-prepared and well-organised parties can challenge the EPRDF at the grassroots. Thus, there is a growing hope in Ethiopia that the Hadiyas’ act of insubordination on voting day will inspire other people to organise politically in democratic organisations and parties, in order to challenge the EPRDF political hegemony on a democratic basis within a constitutional framework. The Hadiya people have shown the rest of Ethiopia that peaceful, democratic resistance matters – that it is possible to challenge the EPRDF hegemony without taking up arms and ‘going to the bush’, as has been the traditional way of acquiring political power in the country.

NOTES

1. The main political event taking place was of course the war with Eritrea and the new Ethiopian offensives that very week.
2. These parties were: Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front (ARDUF); Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia (CAFPDE); Coalition of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (COEDF); Ethiopian Medhin Democratic Party (Medhin); Oromo National Congress (ONC); Southern Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Coalition (SEPDC); Tigrean Alliance for National Democracy (TAND); and Tigray-Tigrigni Ethiopians for Social-Democracy.
6. Human rights perpetrators and officials of the former Derg regime are today on trial charged with human rights violations and genocide under the Red Terror campaign.
8. For a closer description on how the administrative system was organised during the Derg, see Dessalegn 1984; Pansewang 1999; and Andargachew 1993. Andargachew Tiruneh, in particular, describes the political working of the kebelle system in detail: ‘An outstanding example of their political function was the role they played in harassing, detaining and eliminating members of the various political organisations during the red terror’ (1993: 261).
9. There were supposed to be several diplomatic observers in the area, but because of the...
renewed Ethiopian offensive in the war against Eritrea, which started only two days before voting day, all diplomats (except one American) had cancelled their scheduled observation trips to Hadiya and stayed in Addis Ababa.

16. See Tronnvoll 2000 for the working of the federal system and the protection of minorities in Ethiopia; Brietzke 1995 for the federal principles of the new constitution; and Abbink 1998 on ethnicity and political configurations in southern Ethiopia.
18. Name altered to preserve informant’s identity for his own protection.
19. The details of the events were told to me by several people present at the scene.
20. These were: Sika 1 and 2 (in Shone); Konteb 2 and 3; Soro 1 and 3; and Lome 2.
22. Norwegian Institute of Human Rights, University of Oslo, had a research team of seven people in the country studying the conduct and understanding of the elections in Addis Ababa, Tigray, Amhara, Oromia and three locations in the SNNPR. This section builds on the findings of the research group published in Pausewang & Tronnvoll 2000.

REFERENCES


