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Ethiopia

The aftermath of Ethiopia's landmark May 2005 parliamentary elections has laid bare the deeply entrenched patterns of political repression, human rights abuse and impunity that characterize the day-to-day reality of governance in much of the country. This dispiriting reality has come as a shock to many international observers who had viewed the electoral process with a great deal of optimism. The run-up to the May elections witnessed displays of openness and genuine political competition unprecedented in Ethiopia's long history. But many Ethiopians experienced these limited openings in a context still dominated by heavy-handed government efforts to suppress and punish any form of political dissent. Worse, the aftermath of the May elections has been marred by seemingly intractable controversy and displays of government brutality that threaten to reverse the gains yielded by the electoral process.

Post-election Uncertainty and Violence

Official tallies in the weeks following the May 15 voting indicated that opposition parties had made enormous gains in parliament but had fallen well short of obtaining a majority. The largest opposition coalition, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), refused to accept those results, alleging that it had been robbed of outright victory by widespread government fraud. The government, in turn, has accused the CUD of conspiring to overthrow the government by force. At the time of writing, a full five months after the elections, it is still unclear whether the CUD will take its seats in parliament.

These tensions exploded in early June, when protests broke out in Addis Ababa in defiance of a government ban on public assemblies. Police and military forces responded with excessive force, killing at least thirty-six unarmed civilians and wounding more than 100. Security forces then arrested several thousand opposition supporters throughout the country. In November negotiations between the government and leading opposition parties broke down, sparking a fresh wave of protests. Ethiopian security forces again reacted with brutality, killing at least 46 people and arresting more than 4000 in Addis Ababa and other towns. The government then ordered the arrest of several dozen opposition politicians, journalists, editors and civil society activists. Ethiopian authorities have indicated that several among them are likely to face charges of treason, which carries a potential sentence of death under Ethiopian law.

Political Repression

Government officials and security forces in much of Ethiopia make routine use of various forms of human rights abuse to deter and punish dissent. For more than a decade, authorities in the country's vast Oromia region have used exaggerated concerns about armed insurgency and "terrorism" to justify the torture, imprisonment and sustained harassment of their critics and even ordinary citizens. Student

protests in 2004 at Addis Ababa University and in secondary schools throughout Oromia led to the arrest of hundreds of students, many of whom were mistreated while in custody. Ever since the protests and throughout 2005, regional officials in Oromia have gone to oppressive lengths to monitor and control the speech and conduct of students and teachers alike.

In rural areas in Oromia, local officials often threaten to withhold vital agricultural inputs such as fertilizer from impoverished farmers if they speak out against them or their policies. In other cases, local officials selectively enforce harsh penalties for the non-repayment of debts to justify the imprisonment of their critics or the seizure of their property. In the months prior to the May 2005 elections, regional officials in Oromia created new quasi-governmental structures used to subject the rural population to intense levels of surveillance and to impose restrictions on farmers' freedoms of movement, association and speech.

Abuses Committed by the Ethiopian Armed Forces

The Ethiopian government has taken no meaningful action to address widespread atrocities committed by Ethiopian military forces in the remote southwestern region of Gambella. Federal authorities have refused even to investigate human rights abuses so severe that they may rise to the level of crimes against humanity and continue to allow the authors of those crimes the enjoyment of near-total impunity.

In December 2003, military personnel joined civilian mobs in a rampage through indigenous Anuak neighborhoods in Gambella town, murdering as many as 424 Anuak civilians. In the months that followed, Ethiopian military forces subjected Anuak communities throughout the region to widespread and systematic acts of murder, rape, torture, arbitrary imprisonment and the destruction of entire villages. The immediate trigger for these abuses was a series of attacks in 2004 by Anuak civilians against civilians on other ethnic groups in the area.

A government-sponsored Commission of Inquiry set up to investigate the December 2003 violence in Gambella town resulted in a whitewash, and since then the government has refused even to investigate any of the abuses that have taken place throughout the region since early 2004. Reports of ongoing abuses continued to emerge from Gambella in 2005, albeit on a smaller scale than the violence in late 2003 and 2004.

Security forces frequently arrest civilians in other parts of Ethiopia, claiming they are members of the Oromo Liberation Front in Oromia state or the Ogaden National Liberation Front and Al-Itihad Al-Islamiya in Somali state. Few of those arrested are brought to trial. Some are released; others are kept in arbitrary detention for prolonged periods, often without a hearing or cause shown, sometimes incommunicado. Frequent reports of extrajudicial executions and torture emerge from Somali region, but access to the region has been restricted by the military to such a degree that these reports are impossible to confirm.

Restrictions on the Press

Many independent journalists, editors and publishers continue to endure harassment and intimidation, and criminal penalties for a range of speech-related penalties remain on the books. In June 2005, the Ministry of Information revoked the licenses of five Ethiopian journalists working for the Voice of America and Radio Deutsche-Welle because it disapproved of their coverage of the elections and the post-election controversy.

Judicial Delay

The courts in Ethiopia often step in to order the release of government critics jailed on trumped-up charges of treason or armed insurrection. However, judicial action often occurs only after unreasonably long delays, both because of the courts' enormous workload and because of excessive judicial deference to bad faith police requests for additional time to produce evidence. In addition, courts have shown themselves far less likely to contest prolonged pretrial detention in high-profile cases that have the attention of high-level federal officials.

Fourteen years after the overthrow of the former military government (the Derg), several thousand of its former officials remain jailed awaiting trial, charged with genocide, crimes against humanity, and major felonies. Former dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam, on trial in absentia, remains a guest of the Mugabe government in Zimbabwe, with little chance of being held accountable for his abuses so long as he remains there.

Local Human Rights Defenders

Ethiopia has only one large, nationwide human rights organization, the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO). Government officials routinely accuse the organization of working to advance an anti-government political agenda and its staff and ordinary members are often subjected to harassment and intimidation by local officials and members of the security forces. In June 2005, three EHRCO investigators were arrested and taken to military detention camps because of their efforts to document the human toll of the government's post-election crackdown. All three were subsequently released but were threatened with future criminal proceedings.

Another human rights organization, the Human Rights League, reopened its offices in March 2005 after winning a protracted court battle against government efforts to ban its operations. It remains to be seen whether the organization will be allowed to operate free of government interference.

Key International Actors

Ethiopia is considered an essential partner of the United States in its "war on terrorism," and Washington has generally been unwilling to apply meaningful pressure on the Ethiopian government over its human rights record. The U.S. suspects Islamic extremist groups are hiding in bordering areas of Somalia, and sometimes inside Ethiopia itself. The U.S. military, operating primarily out of a base in

Djibouti, cooperates closely with the Ethiopian armed forces in counterterrorism efforts and capacity building work. The United States is also the largest donor of bilateral aid in Ethiopia.

Other Western donors have also been reluctant to criticize Ethiopia's human rights record and have in many respects actually embraced the Ethiopian government as something of a model for Africa. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair invited Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to play a leading role on Blair's Commission for Africa, which was charged with finding solutions to some of the continent's most intractable problems. There is no indication that donors' unusually robust criticism following the post-election crackdown in Addis Ababa will translate into a sustained willingness to be more vocal in demanding that the federal government respect human rights.

The United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE) maintains approximately 3300 troops and military observers along the twenty-five kilometer-wide armistice buffer line between the two countries. In September 2005 the Security Council voted to extend UNMEE's mandate through March 2006, as tensions remain high between the two countries (see Eritrea chapter).