



## Observatoire des Enjeux Politiques et Sécuritaires dans la Corne de l'Afrique

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### Note 8 Briefing Note – False Hopes and Real Fears: The 2015 Ethiopian Elections

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## Abstract

The 2015 Ethiopian general election, in which the representatives of the Regional Councils and the 547 members of the House of Peoples' Representatives (HPR) will be elected, represents an unprecedented challenge not only for the opposition but also for the ruling Front, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). Since the fateful 2005 general election, the opposition has tried to reorganize itself by building new coalitions, fronts, and by creating new parties. The government for its part has been working hard in order to avoid history repeat itself: the EPRDF has become developed into a massive structure of more than five million members, and new laws and rules have aimed at controlling the political, social and economic spheres. This policy has been efficient in the last election in 2010, when only one opposition member has been elected member of the HPR. In the meantime, Meles Zenawi, one of the central architects of the regime and Prime minister since 1995, disappeared in August 2012, leaving behind an unachieved project, i.e. the restructuring of the economy under the auspice of an Ethiopian "Democratic Developmental State". Since then, discontents grew in the streets of Addis Ababa and in the regions: Muslim demonstrations, Oromo demonstrations, to which have been added demonstrations organized by the opposition parties as of 2013 (the first ones since 2005). Further uncertainties have also emanated from within the EPRDF where balance of powers may be redefined between the four components of the EPRDF, or even within the Tigray People's Liberation Front itself, its dominant wing. In the opposition, while the "liberal wing" has been further fragmented since 2005 (two major parties, Unity for Democracy and Justice and All-Ethiopia Unity Party, could not merge in 2014 and the great liberal coalition has failed), the Blue Party has remained aside of the crisis and could benefit from its stability for its first participation to a general election. *Medrek*, a "forum" created before the 2010 election, composed of ethno-national and multinational parties united under the "social-democrat" banner and mainly rooted in Oromo and Southern region, may be the first beneficiary of the discontents and of the "liberal-wing" crisis, though *Medrek* will suffer from the loss of UDJ and its Amhara strongholds.



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## INTRODUCTION

More than 34 million Ethiopian citizens are now registered to go to the ballot box on 24 May 2015 at the occasion of the regional and national elections.<sup>1</sup> The campaign has now started and will last until 21 May 2015. This will be the fifth general election – as it is also called – since the coming into power of the still hegemonic Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in 1991.<sup>2</sup> Ethiopians are called to elect the members of the regional councils and the 547 representatives of the House of Peoples' Representatives (HPR), *i.e.* the lower House of the Parliament<sup>3</sup> in which the EPRDF has always been able to maintain a large majority since the implementation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1995 and the first general election held that same year.<sup>4</sup>

Every five years, the general election represents a critical moment of Ethiopian politics, not only because the majority of the HPR determines the political belonging of the Prime minister – the head of the Executive power – but also because this is the occasion for opponents and political parties to express publicly their programs, views, and critics against the government. For the external observer I am, the general election offers a moment to think about the government achievements and strategies, and to learn about opposition dynamics in this times of parties' and militants' realignments on the eve of what appears to be an unprecedented election.

In fact, it will be the first general election held without one of the central architect of the regime and sole Prime minister from 1995 to his death in August 2012, Meles Zenawi. The former leader of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) – the main pillar of the EPRDF – had been able to maintain the EPRDF's hegemony notwithstanding the implementation of a multiparty system. That sometimes implied the use of threat and coercion, as in the aftermath of the 2005 general election. 2005 represented the first liberalized electoral campaign driven by press broadcasted debates and popular demonstrations, but the results was a surprise for the EPRDF: who could imagine, in a victorious post-war context against Eritrea and in a conjuncture of economic recovery, that Ethiopian citizens would turn their voices to opponents, giving them a third of the House of People's Representatives seats? It was also a shock for one part of the opposition leaders who denounced electoral frauds and claimed more seats. The demonstrations called by these opponents turned deadly after the government decided to shoot the people on the streets, killing about two hundred and arresting thousands of activists, journalists, and supporters.<sup>5</sup>

2005 and its violent outcome has deeply shaped the political history of the young federal regime, whether from EPRDF's or oppositions' perspective. The EPRDF has been working hard in order to

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been written during a stay in the Institute of African Studies, Carleton University of Ottawa, as a visiting researcher. I would like to thank its director Blair Rutherford and the members of the IAS for their warm welcome and kindness. I also would like to thank Alexander Meckelburg for his helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The EPRDF was formed at the end of the 1980s under the auspice of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). From the beginning of the 1990s onwards, the EPRDF has been composed of the TPLF, the Amhara National Democratic Movement, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopia Peoples' Democratic Movement (SEPDM).

<sup>3</sup> The Upper House, the "House of Federation is composed of representatives of Nations, Nationalities and Peoples" (NNP) of Ethiopia, defined in the article 39 of the 1995 Constitution. Each NNP "shall be represented by one additional representative for each one million of its population » (Constitution 1995, art. 61).

<sup>4</sup> More than 6,000 candidates have been registered to enter the election (1,884 for HPR's seats and 4,166 for the Regional Councils). See the government affiliated media: "Over 6,000 candidates to contest in upcoming May general elections", Walta Information Center, 13 February 2015. [http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=121&Itemid=420](http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=121&Itemid=420), accessed on 17 February.

<sup>5</sup> On the 2005 elections and its aftermath, see Jon Abbink, « Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 Election Crisis in Ethiopia and its Aftermath », *African Affairs*, vol. 105, n° 419, 2006, p. 173-199; Berouk Mesfin, "Le fédéralisme ethnique en Ethiopie: entre déclin et endurance", *Observatoire des enjeux politiques et sécuritaires dans la Corne de l'Afrique*, Note 5, Les Afriques dans le Monde – Sciences Po Bordeaux, août 2014.

avoid such a scenario to repeat itself, notably while preparing the 2010 general election.<sup>6</sup> Among other things, it has dramatically increased the number of its militant base from about 500,000 up to more than 5 million, thus transforming the hegemonic Front into a structure impossible to circumvent for those wishing to get easier access to credit, to a cadre position or sometimes to pesticides if one cultivates the land.<sup>7</sup> It also adopted post-2005 laws aiming at controlling the political sphere, among which the 2009 "Proclamation on Anti-terrorism"<sup>8</sup>, a sword of Damocles threatening those who would "cross the line". The global EPRDF strategy has proven very efficient, as only one opposition member has been elected in the lower House since 2010<sup>9</sup> - another seat being occupied by the independent candidate Abeshir Woldegiorgis. It has thus been concentrating the quasi-totality of the parliamentary seats (if not of the votes) since the last general election. In such a context, the perspective of opponents to get a seat in 2015 seem to be very narrow, and until very recently, the main opposition parties like All-Ethiopia Unity Party (*Mähihad*, as it is known from its Amharic acronym), Unity for Democracy and Justice (*Andinnet*), Blue Party (*Semayawi*) as well as the *Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum (Medrek)* were wondering whether they would participate or boycott the coming election.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the post-Meles era has shown many tensions rising on the political scene: popular mobilizations have been increasing throughout the country like demonstrations organized by the parties since 2013 (the first ones since 2005), sometimes making public socio-political and economic problems with ethnic or religious connotations, while tensions have also multiplied within the EPRDF and within the core Tigrayan component itself. Such a situation makes the atmosphere extremely tense and peace fragile in Ethiopia today. Based on several stays in the country these last years, this paper attempts to draw what makes the forthcoming election quite exceptional and unpredictable. I shall first briefly discuss the recent signs of growing discontent. I will then turn to the crossroads on which the EPRDF seems to be standing today. Finally, I will draw a brief and general picture of the opposition parties who have been torn by internal and inter-party conflicts in 2014.

### Growing discontent

Since the death of Meles Zenawi and his replacement by his *protégé* Haile Mariam Dessalegn, more open discontent in different parts of the country and in many segments of the society has appeared in the past years. Political discontent came out through more or less spontaneous mobilizations and took different forms: religious, ethnic, or socio-economic, these different dimensions being of course articulated and interdependent.

The various demonstrations held by Muslim people since 2011 are worth being mentioned here. There had been other Muslim mobilizations (like in 1974 under the military *Derg*, the previous

<sup>6</sup> See Kjetil Tronvoll, 2010, "The Ethiopian 2010 Federal and Regional Elections: Re-establishing the One-party State", *African Affairs*, Briefing, 110 (438), p. 121-136.

<sup>7</sup> For recent developments on the administrative structure of control of the Ethiopian Developmental State, see for instance René Lefort, "Free market economy, 'developmental state' and party-state hegemony in Ethiopia: the case of the 'model farmers'", *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 50, n° 4, 2012, p. 681-706; Iginio Gagliardone, "New media and the Developmental state in Ethiopia", *African Affairs*, 113/451, 2014, p. 279-299; Rony Emmenegger, "Decentralization and the local developmental state: Peasant mobilization in Oromia, Ethiopia", *Africa*, Forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> See Federal Negarit Gazeta, *A Proclamation on Anti-Terrorism*, Proclamation No. 652/2009, 15 Year, No. 57, Addis Ababa, 28 August 2009 ; See also Federal Negarit Gazeta, *A Proclamation to Provide for the Registration and Regulation of Charities and Societies*, Proclamation No. 621/2009, 15 Year, No. 25, Addis Ababa, 13 February 2009.

<sup>9</sup> This seat has been occupied by Girma Seifu, for the Unity for Democracy and Justice Party (*Andinnet*).

<sup>10</sup> Interviews conducted in October-November 2014, Addis Ababa.

regime) as well as in the 1990s, e.g. in 1994 in Addis Ababa.<sup>11</sup> But the recent ones have surprised due to their size and their lasting character, up to 2014. Rather than the result of a growing animosity between Christian Orthodox (about 43% of the Ethiopian population) and the Muslims (about 34% of the population)<sup>12</sup>, these demonstrations appeared as a resistance of the latter against the EPRDF's growing political intrusion into Islamic affairs.<sup>13</sup> In fact, from 2011, the EPRDF has aimed at controlling the Muslim institution inherited from the previous regime, the *Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council* (EIASC), by promoting what it has considered a "moderate" Sufi interpretation of Islam (the Al-Ahbash).<sup>14</sup> This strategy arose from a conjunction of different factors: in the context of the "Arab springs", the EPRDF tried to anticipate any popular mobilization of that kind; the regional context also, triggered by several radical Islamic movements and terrorist attacks (Kampala in July 2010, Westgate in September 2013, just to mention two of the bloodiest) have also contributed to the will to impose what the Front considers "moderate" Islam in order to counter what it opposes to "radical Islam" (i.e. "Salafism", "Wahhabism", often taken publicly as synonymous with "terrorism"); last but not least, the will to control the Islamic institutions has to be understood in the specific context of the Ethiopian "Democratic Developmental State" that requires a global control of social, political, economic, religious and secular institutions in order to serve the "development" of the country.<sup>15</sup>

Another significant mobilization took place as a reaction to the new "Addis Ababa and the Surrounding Oromo Special Zone Integrated Development Plan", known as the "Masterplan", made public by the Addis Ababa City Administration in May 2014. The Ethiopian Developmental State wants to join the middle-income countries in 2025, and part of the plan is to develop the capital as a great economic and political platform. The plan requires new lands in order to host industries and a fast-growing population. Addis Ababa, itself a city-state in the federal regime, is also situated in the middle of the Oromo region (home of the Oromo, the largest ethnic group which represents about 35% of the Ethiopian population). By integrating eight towns administered by the Oromo region, the 2014 Masterplan created fears that the Addis Ababa City Administration was expanding its territory illegally at the expense of the Oromo people.<sup>16</sup> Many Oromos went to the street in different regions, and especially on university campus (like in Ambo and Weda Walabu). The reason for the violent confrontation that broke out between the demonstrators and the police is still not clear but many people died in the confrontation<sup>17</sup>, and many were jailed. These events highlight on the lack of negotiation as the source of conflicts, which could have been avoided through different political

<sup>11</sup> See for instance Hussein Ahmed, « Islam and Islamic Discourse in Ethiopia (1973-1993) », in *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies, Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Harold G. Marcus & Grover Hudson (dir.), Lawrenceville, The Red Sea Press, 1995, p. 775–801; Haggai Erlich, *Saudi Arabia and Ethiopia: Islam, Christianity, and Politics Entwined*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner. CO and London, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> *National Census*, 2007. The population was then estimated by the Ethiopian Central Statistical Agency around 74 million.. In February 2015, the ECAS estimated the Ethiopian population at 87,9 million.

<sup>13</sup> See Dereje Feyissa & Bruce B. Lawrence, « Muslims Renegotiating Marginality in Contemporary Ethiopia », *The Muslim World*, Hartford Seminary, 2014, p. 281-305; and Jon Abbink, 2014, Religious freedom and the political order: The Ethiopia 'secular state' and the containment of Muslim identity politics, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, Vol. 8, Issue 3, 2014, p. 346-365.

<sup>14</sup> See Terje Østebø, "Islam and State Relations in Ethiopia: From Containment to the Production of a "Governmental Islam"", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 81, n° 4, December, 2013, p. 1029-1060; Manuel J. Ramos, "From Beleaguered fortresses to belligerent cities," in Dias A.M. (ed.), *State and Societal Challenges in the Horn of Africa: Conflict and Processes of State Formation, Reconfiguration and Disintegration*, Lisbon, University Institute of Lisbon, Centre of African Studies, 2013, p. 14-31.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Nicolas Bach, ""Peurs" et pratiques répressives: mobilisations musulmanes et pouvoir éthiopien (2011-2014), *EchoGéo*, forthcoming.

<sup>16</sup> See Kalkidan Yibeltal, 2014, "A new master plan. Complicated-turned deadly", *Addis Standard*, Vol. 4, Issue 40, June 2014, p. 10-13.

<sup>17</sup> Officially 11, more than 30 according to Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/countries/africa/ethiopia/>.

means. It can also be considered as indicative of the government readiness to react violently in case of popular upsurge in the coming months.

Although such conflicts tend to appear in form of religious or ethnic mobilization, it is important to bear in mind that ethnicity or religion cannot be considered as primary sources of such conflicts. Rather, they are a manifestation of claims raised at a specific time, in a specific socio-economic and political context. To put it briefly, these claims appear in a specific context: first, the Ethiopian Developmental State, and a sustained growth, which in many citizens' lives does not translate into the improvement of living conditions yet; second, the narrowing possibilities for citizens to express their views through political autonomous institutions. Thus, the relevant question to be raised would confront the conjunction of socio-economic marginalization with political marginalization, in a context where administrative and political borders have been drawn along "ethnic", or more precisely along "national" lines since 1995.<sup>18</sup> What appeared an original and innovative formula in the post-war context of 1995 is now being increasingly questioned<sup>19</sup> and did not solve the "national question" that arose in protest against Haile Selassie's Ancien regime, and was first articulated by the Ethiopian Student Movement in the 1960s-1970s. This "national question", I believe, has remained central in structuring the Ethiopian political field and party system.

In fact, discontent is still in part framed by the "national question". That has been the case recently for some parties (like the All-Ethiopia Unity Party or *Māhihad*, and the Unity for Democracy and Justice, or *Andinnet*) denouncing "ethnic-cleansing" or "displacements" of Amhara peoples from Benishangul and Gambella regions in 2014. *Medrek* also demonstrated in May in order to contest the police violence against Oromo people. Further, the contested group is not only the EPRDF as a political Front, but the "Woyane", in reference to its dominant ethnic group, *i.e.* the leading Tigrayan. These accusations stressing ethnic lines have been creating an atmosphere of ethnic fears. This is not to say that these threats are objectively ethnically based, but fears come from people's perception of reality, not reality. And one can worry about these growing ethnically based aggressive discourses, a tendency in which the government plays its role. In 2005 and 2010 for instance, Meles Zenawi himself played a dangerous game by comparing some opponents with Rwandan *Interhawame* groups and the broadcasting stations *Voice of America* and *Deutsche Welle* with the Rwandan *Radio Mille Collines*. This tense ethno-political climate has recently been illustrated by the debates raising with the erection of the Annolee monument in Hetosa, Oromo region, last year. The statue represents an open hand stretched upward and holding a cut women's breast, commemorating the massacres and mutilations of Arsi Oromos by Minelik II's troops in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many Amhara intellectuals and opponents reacted by denouncing EPRDF's "divide and rule" policy and recalling, on the contrary, the great achievements of Minelik as modernizer of Ethiopia. My aim is not to debate whether Minelik was a "bloody killer", a "hero", or both. However, what we can note is the very tense political situation illuminated by these competitive memories.

What makes the current situation quite unprecedented compared to the previous 2010 general election has been the multiplication of demonstrations organized by some opposition parties since 2013. No such occupation of the streets of Addis Ababa or other cities had been observed since 2005. The Blue Party (*Semayawi*), founded in January 2012, opened the floor in May 2013 when it demonstrated in the capital city. *Semayawi* has organized a few demonstrations till today, leading to the regular arrest of their members. Since then, many demonstrations have been organized by other opposition parties, although most often not without difficulty. Among other, *Māhihad* and *Andinnet* co-organized a demonstration in the northern town of Baher Dar in February 2014; *Medrek* demonstrated twice in Addis Ababa (April and December 2014) and once in Awassa (June 2014);

<sup>18</sup> See the stimulating paper of Jon Abbink, "The Ethiopian Second Republic and the Fragile "Social Contract", *Africa Spectrum*, 44, 2, 2009, p. 3-28; See the classic work of Sarah Vaughan, *Ethnicity and Power in Ethiopia*, PhD, University of Edinburgh, 2003. For a more recent presentation of the Ethiopian regime, see Jon Abbink and Tobias Hagmann (eds.), *Reconfiguring Ethiopia: the politics of authoritarian reform*, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance, *International Crisis Group*, "Ethiopia: Ethnic Federalism and its Discontents", Africa Report n°153, September 2009.

*Mähihad* also demonstrated in Sewela in the south in May 2014 and *Andinnet* last 25 January 2015 in Addis Ababa. The use of force by the police during the last demonstration organized by *Andinnet* could announce a radicalization of the government as the election approaches.

### **An opportunity to renegotiate power: the EPRDF at a crossroads**

Meles Zenawi died before finalizing an internal process of generation change within the EPRDF. Haile Mariam Desalegn, the new Prime minister, is a product of this policy that started in the aftermath of the 2010 general election. Originally from Wollayta, in the Southern region, Haile Mariam is also a Protestant.<sup>20</sup> Both tell a lot about current Ethiopian politics in general, and the EPRDF in particular, not only in terms of “ethnic federalism”, but also in terms of power sharing within the Front. On the one hand, Haile Mariam can be considered a technocrat, a product of the EPRDF, representing a new way of leading the country – and many young cadres from all the regions will follow this logic in the coming years. On the other hand, and more probably, one can see Haile Mariam’s position as resulting from a strategy in which the TPLF would keep the control of the key institutions from the behind (economics, military, intelligence) and accept a not ambitious technocrat until the TPLF chooses a “real” and “strong” successor for Meles.<sup>21</sup> In this case, it would mean that the succession is still on the way within the TPLF, and that a much more tense competition could be observed in the aftermath of the election.<sup>22</sup> The fact that we still don’t know if Haile Mariam has been re-appointed Prime minister by the EPRDF could be revealing of such tensions within the TPLF leadership.

These developments also highlight the troubled relation between the federal government in Addis Ababa and the former TPLF fiefdom in Tigray. The Tigray region in the Northern part of the country had been the political center of the country in the 1990s. The power then shifted to Addis Ababa after the 2001 crisis within the TPLF, when Meles Zenawi reaffirmed his power as the head of the TPLF, and the head of the Ethiopian state.<sup>23</sup> The power shift to Addis Ababa could have exacerbated rancor in Tigray where complaints seem to be raising for the disappointing benefits the population would have gained since the TPLF took power.

The complex evolution of the relation between the federal government and the Tigray region has been articulated with two other sources of tensions within the EPRDF since 2001. First, as Meles Zenawi benefited from the support of the Amhara branch of the EPRDF (*Amhara National Democratic Movement*, ANDM) in order to consolidate his leadership in 2001, the ANDM has been expecting more benefit from their support. Second, the recent events around the Masterplan engendered tension within the Oromo component of the EPRDF (*Oromo People’s Democratic Organization*, OPDO) and between the OPDO and the TPLF (some OPDO members and Oromo journalists working

<sup>20</sup> For a recent contribution on the relations between Pentecostal Churches and the Ethiopian political sphere, see for instance the special issue edited by Emanuele Fantini et Jörg Hausteijn in *PentecoStudies*, vol. 12, n° 2, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> The EPRDF is in fact fulfilling Meles’ plan elaborated more than two decades ago, in which the establishment of an army of cadres aims to be used as intermediaries between the party and the population in order to control the latter. See two of the founding texts of the EPRDF written in the first years of the regime, “Our Revolutionary Democratic Goal and the Next Step”, (Sene 1985 EC), June 1993, translated from Amharic and published in the *Ethiopian Register*, June 1996, p. 20-29; and “EPRDF’s Organizational Structure and Operation: Lessons for the Opposition”, translated from Amharic and published in the *Ethiopian Register*, September 1997, p. 16-19.

<sup>22</sup> René Lefort goes as far as considering the leadership “in disarray”. See René Lefort, “Ethiopia : a leadership in disarray”, *Opendemocracy*, 4 July 2014, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/rené-lefort/ethiopia-leadership-in-disarray>, accessed 27 February 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Paulos Milkias, “Ethiopia, the TPLF, and the Roots of the 2001 Political Tremor”, *Northeast African Studies*, vol. 10, n° 2, 2003, p. 13-66; Medhane Tadesse & John Young, “TPLF: Reform or Decline?”, *Review of African Political Economy*, vol. 30, n° 97, 2003, p. 389-403. On EPRDF-State relation, see Sarah Vaughan, “Revolutionary democratic state-building: party, state and people in the EPRDF’s Ethiopia”, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5/4, 2011, p. 619-640.

for the National television lost their duties and work after the event). More generally, the central government seems to be redefining its relations with the federated regions of the country that could lead to increased regional autonomy and appear a very interesting evolution of the federal regime.

These evolutions and the more collective leadership of Haile Mariam Dessalegn offer a renewed opportunity for the EPRDF. The system implemented by Meles Zenawi during his life could work a more balanced way after his death. By forcing the different components of the EPRDF to further collective leadership and further debates within the Front, the period could be a great opportunity for the EPRDF to redefine its political practices. While most observers have been wondering who would be the next strong man of the regime, it could on the contrary open possibilities for a more collective and inclusive way of doing politics. If the TPLF leaders, who still control the key sectors of the system, accept such an evolution, it could lead to a redefinition of the roles within the EPRDF rather than a simple replacement of a strong leader by another one. Democratization would not suffer from such evolution.

However, chances for such reform remain scarce in a near future. For in the coming months, the EPRDF leadership will have to stand united in the electoral perspective. Also, the deadline corresponds to the end of the first five year *Growth and Transformation Plan* (2010/2011-2014-2015) in June 2015.<sup>24</sup> The second five years plan has not been made public yet, but it is expected to follow the project of building the Ethiopian Developmental State initiated by Meles Zenawi. This has consisted in the restructuring of the Ethiopian economy (transition from agricultural based economy to further industrialization) that is to be boosted by mega-projects and the rapid growth of infrastructures. The recent pre-inauguration of the light urban train in Addis Ababa in February 2015 is part of that much broader plan that has transformed the capital city and many parts of the country into impressive and vast construction sites: roads, highways, hydroelectric dams, irrigation schemes, bridges, railways etc. Reports by Haile Mariam in the Parliament on 5 February on the progress of these works were quite positive<sup>25</sup> and many Ethiopians appreciate the improvement of infrastructures in the country.

But discontents have also been raising against these mega-projects in some regions: reports have mentioned the social costs of displaced populations due to irrigation schemes or the environmental impacts of dam projects (Renaissance dam in Beni Shangul, or Gilgel Gibe III in the South).<sup>26</sup> The question of national debt will also certainly be discussed in the coming months, as the government decided to issue its first Eurobonds (one billion dollar for a maturity of ten years) in order to support the costs of the megaprojects.<sup>27</sup> On the eve of the election, numerous people are questioning the immediate social benefits of these projects and the official double-digit GDP for their day-to-day life. Be they real or not, complaints are increasing *vis-à-vis* what people perceive as growing corruption and increasing social inequalities.

In the coming weeks, one can expect governmental discourses and attitudes built on two main pillars already used in last years: one, the benefits of Ethiopian Developmental State (light urban train, dams, roads, railway) for the achievements of which the EPRDF is presented indispensable, and

<sup>24</sup> Available on the official website of the Ethiopian Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, <http://www.mofed.gov.et/English/Pages/Government.aspx>

<sup>25</sup> "Public urged to contribute share for success of upcoming elections", Walta Information Center, [http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=17482:public-urged-to-contribute-share-for-success-of-upcoming-elections-&catid=52:national-news&Itemid=291](http://www.waltainfo.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=17482:public-urged-to-contribute-share-for-success-of-upcoming-elections-&catid=52:national-news&Itemid=291), accessed on 10 February 2015.

<sup>26</sup> See for instance GRAIN reports on [www.grain.org](http://www.grain.org); or Sean Avery, "What future for Lake Turkana", Oxford, 2012, <http://www.africanstudies.ox.ac.uk/what-future-lake-turkana>; or Megan Perry, "Dismantling the Omo Valley, pour Sustainable food Trust", <http://sustainablefoodtrust.org/articles/land-grabbing-omo-valley/>

<sup>27</sup> See "Ethiopia eyes debut bond deal tomorrow", *Financial Times*, <http://www.ft.com/fastft/245291/ethiopia-eyes-debut-bond-deal-tomorrow>, accessed on 4 December 2015; for a critical view, see Eric Toussaint, "Afrique: la chute du prix des matières premières peut déboucher sur une nouvelle crise de la dette", CADTM, <http://cadtm.org/Afrique-la-chute-du-prix-des>, accessed 18 February 2015.

second, threat (which means a growing place of the Eritrean question in the government affiliated media, or the Somali *Shabaab* threat). This evolution has already been confirmed as tensions have been increasing since last summer 2014 – the EPRDF put in jail opponents, journalists, accusing them of supporting terrorist groups and forcing others to flee the country.<sup>28</sup>

As in many other countries, the official antiterrorist discourse has been built on assimilations, threatening legal opposition so that it does not cross the line. This line, difficult to trace in reality, seems to be any form of connection with opponents operating from outside who would be connected with the Eritrean regime. This is the case of *Ginbot 7*, Berhanu Nega's group whose Secretary Andergachew Tsege (British citizen) was arrested in Yemen and sent to Ethiopian authorities while he was transiting on his way to Asmara. In Addis Ababa, Habtamu Ayelewu, former Public Relation, and Daniel Shebeshi, of *Andinnet*, was arrested last summer 2014 and accused of such links with *Ginbot 7* (an accusation he already faced in the past). Six *Zone9* bloggers arrested in April 2014 and three of their journalist friends are still waiting to be judged, also charged with Terrorism and accused of being agents of *Ginbot 7* in Ethiopia.

These recent events illustrate the very tense regional context in which the Horn of Africa's country is going to conduct the next coming election. The last Report of the UN Monitoring group on Somalia and Eritrea confirmed, without being explicitly able to prove it, material support and training provided by Asmara to such groups as *Ginbot 7*, the Ogaden National Liberation Front, or the Tigray People's Democratic Movement.<sup>29</sup> These movements themselves are claiming growing armed forces hosted and supported by the Eritrean government, even if their real size is very difficult to evaluate. It is however certain that the situation is further diminishing potential improvement of the relation between Eritrea and Ethiopia, which could have real destabilizing consequences for the whole Horn of Africa. The EPRDF shall not only invite *Ginbot 7* to negotiate, as it did a few months ago – a negotiation rejected by Berhanu Nega. The EPRDF has to take concrete measures and give real signs of political opening to these groups. Making them come back in Ethiopia and opening the political floor remains the only option to avoid armed conflicts. As Meles Zenawi repeatedly declared, "democracy cannot be imposed from outside", an idea which I do agree with. But I would also say that any model of democracy would fail as long as it is "imposed" and not negotiated and participative, even if the model is imposed from within. It is high time to negotiate and let people decide, from the lowest administrative levels, who will have the last word.

### **Permanence and innovation for opposition parties**

Since last year, opposition parties have been trying to grasp the opportunity of recent discontents: *Medrek* demonstrated against the violent reaction of the police in Oromo region, *Māhihad* demonstrated against displaced Amhara people, or Blue Party (*Semayawi*) declared its support toward Muslim people. Nevertheless, as Girma Seifu (*Andinnet*) explained already one year ago, the EPRDF "is really working strong to avoid opening the political space".<sup>30</sup> In fact, parallel to the economic control envisaged by the EPRDF, social control has been sharpened. For the Ethiopian Developmental State requires a tight grip on every social group, as the implementation of the "One

<sup>28</sup> Militants of opposition parties are regularly threatened or arrested for various periods going from a few days to several months. Until last summer 2014, some private magazines and newspapers had been challenging the government or giving platform to opponents to express their views (like *Fakt*, *Lomi*, *Addis Guday* or the famous blog *Zone9*). Most of these have been closed since then, and some of their leading journalists have been charged or condemned for inciting rebellion or for being linked with terrorist groups. Temesgen Desalegn has been condemned in October 2014 for his publications in *Feteh* two years before, to spend the next three years in prison.

<sup>29</sup> See "Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Pursuant of Security Council Resolution 2111 (2013)", 13 October 2014, available on: [http://www.un.org/french/documents/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/727&TYPE=&referer=http://www.un.org/french/sc/committees/751/monitoringteam.shtml&Lang=E](http://www.un.org/french/documents/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/2014/727&TYPE=&referer=http://www.un.org/french/sc/committees/751/monitoringteam.shtml&Lang=E), accessed 24 February 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, Addis Ababa, 7 February 2014.

out of Five" (*and lä amest*) system has recently illustrated. This system organizes the civil servants, public offices, schools, and university staffs, in groups of five peoples, one of which is supposed to regularly report to higher administrative scales about people's work and behavior. This adds to the preexisting political-administrative structure the EPRDF has put in place since the beginnings of the 1990s.

Actually, the pressure the government puts on opposition parties shows the latter's potential to attract votes, as in 2005: then about one third of HPR's seats were initially won by the two largest opposition coalitions. The first one, known as *Kinijit*, can be described as a right-wing coalition bringing together parties criticizing the current federalism based on "Nations, Nationalities and Peoples", and defending on the contrary a pan-Ethiopian conception of the nation – what they call "multi-national". The other coalition, *Hibrät*, was not radically opposed to ethnic-federalism, but rather opposed non-democratic practices of the EPRDF government, the centralized system though federalism, and EPRDF's economic hegemony. In the violent aftermath of the election, some elected opponents decided to take their seats in the HPR, while others boycotted.<sup>31</sup> The coalitions soon broke apart and did not transform themselves into lasting Fronts.<sup>32</sup> The Ethiopian Democratic party for instance decided to occupy their seats and left the *Kinijit* coalition, whose leading members were put in jail.

Once freed from jail, some *Kinijit* former leaders like Bertukan Mideksa and Eng. Gezachew tried to get their leadership positions back. But after internal fights, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) eventually arbitrated in favor of Ayele Chamisso's group within *Kinijit* who was officially recognized as the president of what remained of *Kinijit*. The group led by Bertukan and Eng. Gezachew decided to establish a new party based on the same program but called the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ, or *Andinnet*). They were soon joined by former EPRDF leaders, like the former minister of Defense Siye Abraha, and the former president of the Republic Negasso Gidada. This alliance however created discontents within *Andinnet*. Some members accused *Andinnet* leadership of not respecting the founding principles of the party (like multinationalism) by integrating former EPRDF leaders and joining *Medrek* (supporting ethnic federalism), while Bertukan spent the whole electoral campaign in jail. One part of the new dissenting group within *Andinnet* eventually left after the 2010 election to create a new party whose rhetoric shall be based on the "new generation". That is how the Blue Party was officially created in January 2012.

Next to *Andinnet*, a new coalition called *Medrek* was built around *Hibrät* political figures like, among others, Merera Gudina and Beyene Petros. The group was also established before the 2010 general election and even united with UDJ, as the latter decided to be part of *Medrek* a few months before the vote. *Medrek* represents an original initiative as the sole coalition that has been able to maintain itself after a general election, changing its coalition status into that of a Front in the summer 2012. Furthermore, *Medrek* has been the only Front represented in the HPR since 2010, through its *Andinnet* member Girma Seifu. But at the end of 2013 *Andinnet's* president Negasso Gidada was replaced by Eng. Gezachew whose program aimed at merging with *Medrek* for the next 2015 election or leave the Front in order to merge with another party, *i.e.* the historical All-Ethiopia Unity Party (*Mähihad*).<sup>33</sup> But *Medrek* is a strategic Front that does not plan to write a common and unique program or build a unique party. One founding principle of *Medrek's* leaders is to put aside their main divergences (concerning the privatization of land and constitutional reform) and focus on accessing the government. *Andinnet* eventually left *Medrek* in spring 2014 to join *Mähihad*, what could have been a partial rebirth of the "real *kinijit*". A pre-merging agreement was even signed between *Andinnet* and *Mähihad* in June 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Terrence Lyons, "Conflict-generated diasporas and transnational politics in Ethiopia", *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol 7, n° 4, December 2007, p. 529-549; Jon Abbink. "Discomfiture of Democracy...", *op. cit.*

<sup>32</sup> The legal statute of a coalition only allows to participate in one election. In order to last, the joining parties have to transform into a Front (in the National Electoral Board).

<sup>33</sup> Many leading figures of *Andinnet* are former members of *Mähihad*.



But the merging process created great troubles within UDJ and *Mähihad*. Internal conflicts about the project were publicly expressed in the private press, where interviewed party members' criticized the way the merging had been decided and was conducted. These tensions reached their climax in autumn of 2014, when both leaderships were overthrown. Under internal and diaspora pressures, Gezachew resigned in October and a new president, Fekadu Belay, was elected by UDJ's National Council to lead the party to the general election. Within *Mähihad*, a surprising outcome of the General Assembly organized in November, was the election of the challenging group led by Mamushet Amare. The latter was elected president of the party against the president-in-office Abebaw Getaneh.

Yet, two dramatic events occurred on July 2014 and January 2015. The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia, after having rejected the merging between UDJ and *Mähihad* in July 2014, arguing of formal irregularities raised by contesting factions within the parties, received a second wave of complaints, now raised by the October-November marginalized groups within UDJ and *Mähihad* (respectively Tegestu Awolu and Abebaw Getaneh groups). The NEBE gave its arbitration on 29 January 2015 in a public meeting, where it officially declared both new leaderships inadmissible. Abebaw Getaneh was confirmed the legitimate president of *Mähihad*, and Tegestu Awolu UDJ's president.

The decisions of the NEBE left both groups divided and internal problems unresolved just four months before the election. Both parties had difficulties to register as many candidates as they wished - the delay *Mähihad* and UDJ asked to the NEBE was rejected. UDJ may be the party suffering most from this decision. Its representative in the HPR is part of the marginalized group; the two newspapers it started publishing have been closed; the party could suffer from a decrease of financial support from the diaspora following this crisis; and the citizens' trust could be affected also. These developments have also increased an atmosphere dominated by mistrust and accusations of being EPRDF's agent among party members. UDJ is now standing in a Bermuda Triangle, which angles are *Medrek*, *Mähihad*, and *the Blue Party*.<sup>34</sup>

Two political formations could benefit from that situation. *Medrek*, on the one hand, even if it lost its Amhara stronghold with UDJ, has proved its capability to remain stable after the departure of UDJ – replaced by the Sidama Liberation Movement in February 2014. *Medrek* has also been able to register "the largest number of opposition candidates", especially in the Oromo region through its Oromo party, the Oromo Federalist Congress led by Merera Gudina and Bulcha Demeksa (168 candidates for the HPR and 475 for the Oromia Council), i.e. "the largest number of candidates ever".<sup>35</sup> The OFC and *Medrek* could benefit from growing discontents in the region where conflicts occurred in 2014, but more generally in the South where it is well established. In the North, the Arena Tigray party component will have to struggle in the fiefdom of the TPLF, but could also benefit from growing discontent there.

The second formation that could benefit from the situation, on the other hand, is the young *Semayawi*. The party led by Eng. Yilkal<sup>36</sup> has suffered from repeated arrests and threats (as the others parties) but has shown great ability to deal with internal and external threats. It could also gain voices of Muslim in the cities, where *Semayawi* supported their demonstrations. The Alliance of nine parties established last November under the auspice of *Semayawi* is also a sign of its growing influence on the political scene. The party has even recently hosted former UDJ members expelled following the NEBE decision. One has to observe now if this will further strengthen the party or engender tensions between the very united youngsters and the new comers.

<sup>34</sup> Following the decision of the NEBE on 29 January 2015, some UDJ members joined the Blue Party. But their new registration as candidates for the Blue Party was rejected by the NEBE.

<sup>35</sup> Merera Gudina, Chairman of the OFC, personal correspondence.

<sup>36</sup> Yilkal's registration was eventually not accepted by the NEBE. As the number of candidates exceeded 12 in his constituency, the NEBE selected (according to the electoral law) 6 candidates based on their scores in preceding elections. The remnants would be elected by a lottery system. As it is the first election the Blue Party is competing for, it fell in the second category. But Yilkal was not "selected".

## CONCLUSION

The question of boycotting the election is still a debated issue today. The decision has not been taken so far by these parties, even if some candidates individually expressed their will to boycott (as within *Māhihad*). But boycott shall not be an option if they want their party to survive, for the above-mentioned parties already boycotted the local elections in 2013 (election of lower *kebele* representatives), which means they will have to take part in the 2015 general election. Indeed, according to the electoral law, boycotting two successive elections leads to the erasing of the party from the list of the NEBE, *i.e.* the disappearance of the party. That would not only mean a waste of time in order to be registered again as a party, but also a risk for these parties to see their current names taken by new emerging parties affiliated to or manipulated by the ruling Front (in order to weaken them), or by dissenting groups within the parties themselves or by former members.

But as the opposition parties are now campaigning, three main *scenarii* seem to be emerging, from the most stable to the worst destabilizing. The first one, what could be called an 'optimistic scenario', would be a relative opening of the lower House for the 2015 general election and a remaining majority for the EPRDF. We can imagine, for this first *scenario*, that some seats would be won by the strongest opposition parties in their strongholds and in Addis Ababa - *Medrek, Andinnet, Māhihad*, the *Semayawi*, and the Ethiopian Democratic Party, among others. In that case, the opposition parties shall not repeat the 2005 experience and may accept to seat in the Parliament. Haile Mariam Dessalegn would remain Prime minister and the EPRDF would reorganize its internal balance of forces between its four organizations. A smooth political transition could then be considered as the opposition groups would participate to power and public policies and negotiate the projects of the Development State still going on (such projects being impossible to stop in the coming years). The participation of opposition groups in the Parliament could also lead to a smooth redefinition of power balance between the federal government and the regions. It would eventually lead to a "professionalization" of opponents who have been hardly or not participating in the political leadership and the concrete definition of public policies since the beginning of the 1990s.

A second *scenario* could be a kind of mix between the 2005 and 2010 *scenarii*. Like in 2010, the EPRDF would gain the quasi-totality of the seats in the HPR, and like in 2005, some oppositions groups would decide to go to the streets and demonstrate in order to contest the results. The opposition would however remain fragmented and few would decide to go to the streets. In order to avoid the bloody outcome of 2005, and under international pressure, the reaction of the government may not be as violent as it was in 2005. But imprisonments of journalists and political activists would be fast and massive. Internal and regional stability would be preserved and the external diplomatic representatives would criticize but not condemn the Ethiopian ally. The opposition parties would pay a heavy price again, as they would suffer further fragmentation. The democratization of the country would be postponed again, decreasing the possibility for a peaceful transition for the 2020 election.

The third - and worst - *scenario* would be the conjunction of three crisis emerging from a quasi-total victory of the ERPDF in the next election: one within the EPRDF itself, around the succession of the Prime minister and the redefinition of powers among the Front's groups, until the eventual breakup of the EPRDF. This first historical crisis would increase conflicts between the federal government and the regions (like the Somali region, Gambella, Oromo, Amhara and Tigray). This crisis would articulate with massive demonstrations of opposition groups supported by external actors (diaspora for instance) in which radical groups could see an opportunity to infiltrate the political scene (*Ginbot 7*, Patriotic Front, Oromo Liberation Front for example). Due to internal conflicts between the TPLF and the Eritrean support to these groups, such developments shall lead to a military reaction from the EPRDF's most radical branch who would decide to "finish" the 1998-2000 war and topple the destabilizing regime in Eritrea - an opportunistic war for most radical wing of the TPLF to impose itself at the top of the Front. That would lead to a third regional and transnational crisis where the international African and European actors would strongly support the Ethiopian government so that the conflicts in South Sudan and Somalia would not extend within Ethiopia, fragment the region and further attract the so-called "Islamic State" in the region.

*Scenarii* are not easy to draw and must be considered with the greatest care. What we can see however in the current situation is a great opportunity for the EPRDF to redefine its leadership from within and with the opposition groups, all external actors, and above all its citizens. This is an opportunity it shall not miss if it wants trust to increase not only within the political sphere but also within the economic sphere, a *sine qua non* if the EPRDF wishes to attract external funds and develop further economically. The first *scenario* appears the only possibility towards a smooth and progressive broader participation of citizen and political groups in the country. The more the EPRDF waits in the preparation of such a transition, the more the risk of political radicalism will increase. In the coming months, the EPRDF will have to work very hard in order to control its local administrators and its security forces so that last year events do not happen again.

Prognoses appear premature and above all uncertain, as public opinion remains very difficult to gauge due to the absence of surveys, to the size of the country (where the majority of the population is rural), to regions still difficult to access, and also to the lack of systematic academic investigations. But academic research shall develop in the coming years, so that one could learn more about the political behavior of Ethiopians, the way they vote or decide not to vote, the way they decide to get involved in politics, or why they decide whether to support the EPRDF or demonstrate. One development is however encouraging: Haile Mariam Desalegn's investiture as Prime minister represented the first peaceful transition since Minelik's death in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Peace shall prevail, and power shall be progressively shared in the coming years. It is now time for the EPRDF and the other Ethiopian political groups to continue the country's extraordinary history and become an African and global leader in terms of democratic innovation.