

# ELECTIONWATCH

## ETHIOPIA



### Ethiopia Pre-Election Watch: May 2010 Parliamentary Elections

Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous nation, will hold parliamentary elections on May 23, 2010. Despite being Africa's oldest independent country, Ethiopia has only held three national-level elections, two of which were boycotted by opposition parties. The previous elections, held in May 2005, was marred by significant post-election violence and allegations of fraud.

In 1994 Ethiopia adopted a new constitution, marking the transition from a one-party communist state led by Mengistu Haile Mariam to a multi-party system with an elected, bi-cameral legislature. As is the case in many countries around the world, the democratic principles included in Ethiopia's constitution have been slow to take hold.

Having played a major role in the ousting of Mengistu, The Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in the first national elections held in 1995, and has served as the ruling party under the leadership of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, for the last 15 years. In order to maintain control of government, EPRDF and Prime Minister Zenawi have instituted policies designed to intimidate and restrict the opposition and other safeguards of democracy such as the media. Opposition parties boycotted both the 1995 and 2000 national elections.

In 2005, EPRDF faced its most serious challenge as opposition political parties campaigned vigorously and subsequently participated in the poll. The campaign period and Election Day processes were deemed generally acceptable by domestic and international observers, though some electoral irregularities were reported. The 2005 elections were marred however, by the violence that ensued in the post-election period.

On the evening of Election Day, Prime Minister Meles Zenawi instituted a 30 day ban on rallies in Addis Ababa and took control of the capital's police and military. The following day, EPRDF declared victory, a claim countered with allegations of fraud by opposition parties. Violent clashes between protestors and security forces ensued, leaving hundreds dead. It is estimated that 20,000 people were arrested during election-related protests and that more than 100 opposition leaders, journalists and aid workers were jailed and accused of treason.

In September 2005, official results gave EPRDF 327 seats in the House of Peoples' Representatives, the lower and directly elected body within the Federal Parliamentary Assembly. The opposition was successful in reducing the majority held by EPRDF, taking control of 32 percent of the House of Peoples' Representatives 547 seats. Of the opposition seats, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy holds the vast majority (109 of 174).

It is expected that EPRDF will maintain a parliamentary majority as a result of the 2010

elections. The Ethiopian Federal Democratic Forum/Medrek, a coalition of eight political parties, poses the greatest challenge to EPRDF. Post-election violence and the continued crack-down on activists however, has noticeably reduced the vibrancy of the political opposition in advance of the 2010 elections. Opposition leader Birtukan Mideksa of the Unity for Democracy and Justice Party (a member of the Medrek coalition) has been incarcerated since December 29, 2008 for example, and will not be released in advance of the May 23 elections. Labeled a political prisoner by the US Department of State and a "victim of arbitrary detention" by the United Nations Human Rights Council, the continued imprisonment of Birtukan poses a significant challenge to a free and fair electoral process.

Additionally, the government of Ethiopia passed a law in January 2009 that limits the ability of organizations that advocate for democracy, human rights and gender equality to receive funding from foreign donors; 90 percent of their budgets must be generated from domestic sources. With limited domestic resources, organizations such as the Research Center for Civic and Human Rights Education, the Ethiopian Women Lawyers' Association and the Ethiopian Human Rights Council, which monitored the electoral process in 2005 and provided voter education services, have had to significantly scale back their activities in advance of the 2010 election.

In the immediate pre-election period tensions have flared in the Oromia region of Ethiopia, where six people have been killed in the last four weeks, including an EPRDF candidate and two Medrek activists/members. Two more died when a grenade was thrown into a meeting of the Oromo People's Democratic Organization. The Medrek coalition has also expressed concern over the ballot counting process, claiming that it was prevented from registering party poll agents and will lack a representative at thousands of polling stations across the country, particularly in rural areas.

Approximately 31.9 million people are registered to vote at 43,000 polling stations across Ethiopia. Seventy-nine political parties and more than 6,500 candidates are registered by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia to contest the elections to both the House of Peoples' Representatives and Regional State Councils. Members of the Regional State Councils indirectly elect the 112 members of the House of Federation, the upper house in the Federal Parliamentary Assembly. The official campaign period came to an end at 6pm on May 20 and polling will commence at 6am on May 23. Official election results are scheduled to be announced on June 21.

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