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JIMMY CARTER

Ethiopia Election - May 11-17, 2005

The Carter Center has had a long and deep involvement in Ethiopia, beginning in 1988 when I responded to a joint request from the International Red Cross and the UN High Commissioner on Refugees. Dictator Mengistu Haile Meriam was refusing to permit food, water, and medicine to be delivered to Ethiopian camps that housed refugees from Somalia and Sudan. The U.S. had withdrawn our ambassador, and there was no Western leader who could deal with him. Within an hour, he and I had worked out a solution to the problem, with international representatives delivering the supplies under Ethiopian military escorts.

Subsequently, Rosalynn and I spent 28 full days, 14 in Atlanta and 14 in Nairobi, negotiating between Ethiopians and Eritreans, attempting to secure a satisfactory level of peace after a 30-year war, with autonomy for the occupied territory. Despite difficulties with Eritrean leader Isaias Afwerke, we made a lot of progress, which led ultimately to Eritrea becoming an independent nation. During these months, in 1989 and 1990, I also became acquainted with Meles Zenawi, the leader of Tigrayan revolutionaries. He would meet me at airports in Paris, Atlanta, and London when I came into the region, spread his war maps on the floor, and describe his progress against Mengistu's forces. After Meles prevailed in 1991 and despite my concerns about Eritrean leadership, he granted Eritrea complete independence in 1993, cutting Ethiopia off from the Red Sea and making it the most populous landlocked nation in the world.

The promise of Eritrean democracy has not been realized, and Eritrea has been involved in the Sudan conflict since 1994, invaded Yemeni islands in 1995, and a serious border dispute with Ethiopia erupted in 1998 that cost 100,000 lives.

Since 1992, The Carter Center has helped Ethiopia write a constitution, arrange for enlightened war crimes trials, eradicate Guinea worm, control river blindness and trachoma, and increase food grain production. We have also assisted in preparing curricula and training students at seven new public health institutions.

Prime Minister Meles Zenawi represents a relatively small ethnic group from Tigray, and has had difficulty retaining political control in the face of strong opposition from the much larger Oromo and other tribal groups. His parliamentary elections in 1995 and 2000 (which we did not observe) were carefully orchestrated to ensure a ruling party victory, and we accepted invitations to observe this election after the prospects seemed much more democratic. We established an office in Addis Ababa in March, and our intermediate term observers in the country visited as many regions as possible.

The most highly publicized event was the expulsion of observer teams from the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Although I appealed personally to the Prime Minister, he refused to reverse the decision. This left our Center (50 persons), the European Union (160 persons), African Union (31 persons), and several others as international observers, a total of about 330. All of us had unimpeded access to opposition leaders, polling sites, and other aspects of the electoral process.

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Ethiopia is a large nation, with a population of more than 70 million, 30 million of whom are eligible to vote, with 25.6 million registered to cast ballots in 36,000 polling stations. Thirty-seven political parties have qualified candidates to seek the 547 parliamentary seats plus local community posts. Meles's ruling party, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) now holds 481 of the seats, and there are two significant coalitions among the opposition: Union of Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) with 12 parties and a better organized Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) with four parties.

There has been increased freedom for all candidates to campaign, opposition parties were granted 56 percent of television time, and for several months there have been televised public debates every week or two, each of them unrestrained and lasting about three hours.

A number of domestic observer groups were disqualified by the National Election Board (NEB), but this decision was reversed by the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, this decision came late in the electoral process, greatly hindering the efforts of domestic observers to mobilize in rural areas. There have been continuing reports from the opposition of intimidation and from the ruling party of attempts to disrupt the electoral process. We and other international observers have investigated as many of the complaints as possible and found a few of them to be justified and called on the NEB to investigate fully such complaints.

Co-leaders of our delegation are former President of Botswana Ketumile Joni Masire and former Tanzanian Prime Minister Joseph Warioba. Preceding the election, we met with John Hardman, Rachel Fowler, Samantha Aucock, and our delegation leaders, U.S. Ambassador Brazeal, Prime Minister Meles, members of the National Election Board, Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Information, the first lady, opposition party leaders, domestic observer groups, civil society leaders, other international observers, President Girma Wolde-Giorgis Lusha, and the large press corps, and we attended a reception at the U.S. embassy.

In our meeting with the prime minister, he made it plain that he wants a peaceful resolution of the border dispute with Eritrea, will not initiate military action, and will work with any mediator between him and Isaias Afwerke. He will accept the recommendations of the U.N. border commission but not in advance of negotiation, because this would preclude Isaias's willingness to address other outstanding issues, which Meles described as normal relations between friendly nations. If the Eritreans launch a war, it will not be confined to the border, but an all-out conflict with the goal of changing the administration in Asmara. Meles considers the U.S. government the only interlocutor powerful enough to induce (force) Isaias to agree to negotiation.

Meles claimed that the entire leadership of the EPRDF was committed to an honest and fair election, and they have issued instructions to expel anyone from the party who violates this commitment. Nevertheless, Meles recognizes that local EPDRF leaders, some of whom are overly enthusiastic and not controlled by the leadership, may have acted improperly. Meles told us he wanted all international observers to assess any allegations of impropriety and report them to him or the NEB.

The major campaign issues raised by the opposition during more than a dozen televised public debates have been the government's: a) willingness to live peacefully with Eritrea as an independent nation and not part of Ethiopia; b) refusal to permit private ownership of land; c) emphasis on development in the rural areas; and d) respect for ethnic minorities as political entities. All these issues are advantageous for the opposition in the urban areas, and such basic changes would require a revolutionary constitutional transformation. Other inevitable issues have been education, economic growth, transportation, and electoral questions.

In my private conversations with Prime Minister Meles he maintained his somewhat unpopular views. He insisted that regardless of any possible future conflict Eritrea should be independent if the decision is made by public referendum, and that economic development of Ethiopian rural areas should be the highest priority and without private ownership of land. He explained that every farm family has a legal and binding right to cultivate their land and to pass it on to their descendants, but not to sell it to rich landowners who would then use former owners as serfs. "Only a leader from Southern Ethiopia would ever make this change," he said.

On election day, Rosalynn and I observed more than 40 polling places in Addis Ababa, and our other teams visited sites in Dire Dawa and seven more regions. There was a tremendous turnout with long and patient lines, no significant violence, and opposition observers never reported any serious problems. We happened to concentrate on a key problem area, in the extreme eastern corner of the city, where a local election official had assigned more than 4,500 voters to each of a half dozen voting places, in violation of the NEB's 1,500 limit per site. At closing time there were still thousands of voters waiting, many having been in line since daybreak. We got the top NEB officials to announce that anyone in line could vote, and the managers came to the area to handle the situation. (The last persons voted at 5:30 the next morning.)

Each of our teams witnessed closing and counting procedures, which were without notable incidents, but the final tabulations will be a very slow and methodical process over a period of about four weeks. There was a strong showing of support for the opposition in the early counts and post-election concern because some opposition leaders condemned the process. Meles announced a 30-day prohibition against any mass demonstrations in Addis Ababa during the long tabulation period, explaining to me that his supporters were facing defeat in this area, and he needed to prevent confrontations. Opposition parties continued to report intimidation, harassment, and incidents of violence and say they will challenge the election results in some areas. Observers are investigating these reports.

On Monday I shared our observations with the leader of the European Union delegation, had a roundtable discussion with some reporters, and then a press conference with my co-leaders Masire and Warioba.

Although there is no way to predict the final results or the likelihood of altercations between now and June 8, there is little doubt that the opposition parties will make substantial gains. While there were serious problems in the run-up to the elections, many positive strides were made. Depending on the transparency and fairness of the tabulation and publication of results, the election could represent a quantum move forward in democratization for Ethiopia.

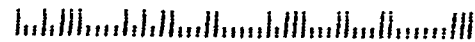
Jimmy Carter

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The Honorable George W. Bush
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The White House
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