

Political Conflicts in Ethiopia – in View of the Two-Faced Amhara Identity

Siegfried Pausewang¹

CUD, a party of the urban Amhara on the political right, claims to speak for all Ethiopians. But peasants of the Southern peoples, conquered after 1850, fear the loss of their cultural independence and the return of the Amhara landlords. A distinction between the rural Amhara and the urban “All-Amhara”, explained by the late Sevir Chernetsov in 1993 as a result of a historical process of assimilation, may help to better understand the political interest conflicts.

Ethiopia is in a deep crisis after the May 2005 elections. The process of democratisation, which made generally acclaimed progress until days before the election, seems to be seriously reversed. Demonstrations and unrest reigned for a long period in many parts of the country, with student demonstrations and violent intervention of police, security and military forces. A majority of the leaders of the largest opposition party, the Coalition for unity and Democracy (CUD), were imprisoned, accused of treason and genocide. They were facing severe prison terms or even death penalties if convicted². It appears that it will take a long time to heal the wounds this process has cut into the nation³.

Behind this deplorable state of affairs is a conflict of two different understandings of reality, which are virtually incomprehensible for each other. CUD won a surprisingly high proportion of votes, unprecedented for a party founded not much more than a year before the election. It sincerely believes it indeed has won a majority, but was cheated for the victory. This conviction is not entirely without reason, though there is little proof to substantiate it. On the other side, EPRDF defends its power, convinced that CUD owes its (relative) success to a misleading presentation of its position, and to dubious alliances. EPRDF is convinced, not without reason either, that a CUD victory would have thrown the country into entirely new conflicts and confrontations, once these internal contradictions would come to the fore.

To understand better this complex and entangled situation, it is useful to read again a series of articles the late Sevir Chernetsov published in 1993 and 1996. on the origin of the Amhara as an ethnic group, and as a nationalist identity in present day urban society in Ethiopia. It is worth while to discuss the consequences of this particular urban identity in present society, because it is an essential foundation of the urban-based All-Ethiopian political alternative to ethnic identities. At the same time, Chernetsov’s observations help to explain why this urban consciousness could without challenge assume the representation of all Amhara interests, and implicitly even assume that their

¹ Chr. Michelsen Institute, Bergen, Norway, email: Siegfried.Pausewang@cmi.no

² At the time of writing, the threat was real. At present, there are indications that they may be released soon.

³ See the debate between Christopher Clapham and Paul Henze in the Internet during 2006.

view represents the political ambitions of the progressive part of the entire population of Ethiopia.

It is all the more puzzling that Sevir Chernetsov's analysis is not reflected in the academic debate at all. It may well be worth to ask whether it is consciously veiled, in the interest of a pan-Ethiopian nationalist elite claiming to represent all Amhara, and even all Ethiopians⁴. Certainly this claim made it easier for CUD to attract protest votes of people frustrated with the present (local) government, who felt that any alternative would be better than continuing along the present patterns of local domination and control.

The Two-faced Amhara identity

Sevir Chernetsov observed that the Amhara, counted as the second largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, are much more populous than what the tiny province of Amhara could possibly be expected to procreate. He showed that this is so, because Amhara was for centuries a culture of assimilation. The language and the culture of the Imperial court was Amharic, since the reign of Yekuno Amlak and the "Solomonic line" of kings emanating from the historical Amhara province. Whoever wanted to advance in the administration, whoever had an ambition for a position in the court or in the military of the Emperors, had to speak Amharic reasonably well. The court retained an Amharic culture, but attracted ambitious individuals and bright young men from other ethnic groups, provided they volunteered to adopt the language and the customs at the court. Usually this also included adopting the Orthodox Christian religion. The culture of the court thus became an ethnic melting pot⁵. Amharic became a culture of assimilation. But it was also a court culture of an elite, and it installed in its bearers a consciousness of superiority. Amharic culture became a symbol of domination over other cultures and tribes. The court elite even justified its superiority over other ethnicities with a mission of civilising the primitive tribes, leading them to a progressive culture and saving them into a superior religious haven.

In the 20th century, the Amhara court culture became increasingly a culture of the educated: those who wanted to advance in administration had to get an education, and those who got an education – in Amharic language – had the best chances of administrative advancement. Thus, Amhara became gradually a language and culture of education and of the educated. And at the same time, it became a culture of the urban elites who became increasingly ethnically mixed.

In my article published in *Varia Aethiopica*, in memory of Sevir B. Chernetsov, published in 2006, I called this double meaning of the term "Amhara" the "two-faced Amhara identity". It tried to show that this double meaning, which is not consciously perceived as a duality, or even may be deliberately veiled, has an important impact in Ethiopian political life today. Little could I know at the time of writing, before the elections of 2005, how central this issue would become during the events after May 2005 and up to present day.

I will not repeat here a description of the two faced identity, nor the arguments for a distinction between urban and rural Amhara identity. The interested reader will find them in the book in Memory of Sevir Chernetsov⁶. I will just recall and summarise those

⁴ See Pausewang 2005: 273, 286

⁵ For a more elaborate discussion see Pausewang 2005 – the two-faced Amhara identity.

⁶ Nosnitsin, Denis and others: *Varia Aethiopica*. In Memory of Sevir B. Chernetsov (1943 – 2005), St. Petersburg 2005, Byzantinorossica.

traits that are important for showing the significance of this distinction in present Ethiopian political debate.

All Amhara or All Ethiopian?

Indeed, the issue became topical in 1991, when the urban elites demanded their participation in the political dialogue and hence in those bodies that were to debate the future political and administrative setup. When EPRDF invited representatives of all ethnic groups to the famous Addis Ababa Conference on Peace and Reconciliation, sixteen years back, one group of urban intellectuals demanded their place in it, who did not want to identify as ethnic group. They identified as Ethiopians, regardless of ethnic origin. But the EPRDF registered them as Amhara, according to their language and cultural identity and to their urban residence in Amhara-speaking cities.

In order to register as a legal political party they had eventually to yield, and to adopt the term “Amhara”. However, to distance themselves from ethnic locality and origin, they called themselves “All Amhara People’s Organisation” (AAPO). They understand themselves as the nucleus of a true Ethiopian nation, above the multitude of ethnic identities, rather than an Amhara ethnic group.

Later, in 1992-1993, a public debate raged in Addis, whether the Amhara were a nationality or not. According to one side in this debate, as advocated by Meles Zenawi and Endreas Eshete, among others, the Amhara are a nation with a territory and a culture as any other ethnicity in Ethiopia, and should take their proper place among them. This interpretation is certainly correct for the rural Amhara in some areas of Ethiopia. The other side, voiced by Mesfin Wolde Mariam, Getachew Haile and others, described the characteristics of the urban assimilated Amhara, and claimed that the Amhara were the nascent Ethiopian nation, and should have the right to live anywhere in Ethiopia, and to represent all Ethiopians, or at least the interests of a future-oriented, integrated Ethiopian nation. The debate could easily have been resolved, had one decided to distinguish the two groups of Amhara. But for different reasons neither side had an interest to make such a distinction.

At the 1994 Conference of Ethiopian Studies in Michigan, Takkele Taddese(1994) described the Amhara as “a supra ethnically conscious ethnic Ethiopian serving as the pot in which all the other ethnic groups are supposed to melt.” The Amhara think and feel as Ethiopians, he claims. They do not distinguish different ethnicities, but try to integrate all into Ethiopia.

In this sense, the Urban Amhara, now identified as a distinct group, had no qualms to assume the role of speaking for all Amhara. They identified their cultural and political views as the Amhara position, assuming a role of leadership. Without much reflection they absorbed and dominated the rural Amhara. And these, in turn, felt taken care of, without realising that many political interests were subsumed which were not really theirs.

Borders between rural and urban Amhara are indeed fluctuating. Many rural Amhara feel pan Ethiopian, and agree to the subconscious supposition that the Amhara are a race of leaders, destined to govern Ethiopia. They have no objections to Ethiopia being or becoming an Amhara state. On the other side, many urban Amhara trace their descent from rural areas of Amhara ethnicity, and see the rural Amhara as their kin whom they support and whose interests they assume to know.

Integration or self-determination?

The development of the Amhara from a nationality among others to a new nationality on a higher level was not unique or seldom in history. The French language, originally a dialect among others in a tiny area in the Isle of France, became a national language in the same way, through the localisation of the king's court. French became a national language in fierce competition with other languages and cultures. And French nationalism was not invented before the French Revolution, long after the French language had, for a period, been spoken all over Europe as the language of the nobility and the royal courts. For Sevir Chernetsov, it may not have been an abstract concept to introduce a distinction between rural ethnic identities and a court language and culture: His own culture gave him a good example. St. Petersburg certainly is not located in an area belonging to the home of Russian culture and language. Yet the present day inhabitants have no hesitation to identify and understand themselves as Russians and to accept Russian as their language.

The same process could not go that far in Ethiopia because the different peoples in the South felt excluded and discriminated against. While even the rural Russians and French participated in the gains of colonialism, in Africa or in Asia, the rural inhabitants of Southern Ethiopia have not forgotten the historical experience of being conquered by Emperor Menilek, during the second half of 19th century. They have not overcome the trauma of Menilek using modern firearms imported from Europe, to crush their resistance. For them, Ethiopia participated in the "scramble for Africa" on the colonisers side, being the only African power to succeed in participating in the partition of Africa into colonial spheres of interest. They still suffer from the deep trauma of being treated as second class human beings.

They experienced being economically exploited, culturally suppressed, and relegated to a kind of sub-human status, by the administration and the nobility from the North. For them, all people who came with Menilek and his administration from the North are considered Amhara. Even if these people came from minority groups, themselves only recently conquered, anyone who served Menilek's administration or received land rights and privileges in their country, was considered Amhara. And rightly or not, they feel they continue to be exploited today, just as they were in the time of the Emperors. This has to be kept in mind if one wants to understand the parties and their conflicts in the election of 2005 and its aftermath.

The opposition parties before the election of 2005

The experience of earlier campaigns (1995, 2000, 2001) taught the opposition that only a cooperation in a solid block of the opposition parties could give them any chance of winning an inroad against EPRDF. Competing against each other, none could win. Indeed, a broad coalition of parties was attempted formed, but broke up when precisely the differences described above prevented some of the Southern groups from continuing the cooperation. Eventually two blocs of parties in opposition to EPRDF formed, both with very general programmes, both avoiding to name the precise cause of their conflict.

CUD was formed in summer 2004 as a coalition of four urban parties. The All Amhara People's Organisation, which had renamed itself as "All Ethiopian Unity Party" led by Hailu Shawel; the newly formed "Rainbow Ethiopia – Movement for Democracy and Social Justice", a party of Addis Ababa intellectuals and businessmen organised around Professors Mesfin Wolde Mariam and Berhanu Nega; the "Ethiopian

United Democratic Party” (EUDP), a merger of several parties around the Ethiopian Democratic Party of Lidetu Ayelew, which had grown out of AAPOs youth wing; and the small “Ethiopian Democratic League”. It was formed as a cooperation for the purpose of winning the election. It could attract substantial support from the urban intellectual and business elites, and got the vocal support of a majority in the diaspora, especially the Ethiopian refugee population in the United States who want to change the present system at any cost. As such, it was for the first time a party constellation which could raise funds to finance a campaign. It got the support of large parts of the non-indigenous population in the small rural towns, especially the wealthier and more educated parts, such as teachers and businessmen. Therefore CUD had little problems in finding suitable candidates to field, even in rural areas. In Amhara region, as well as in the major towns all over the country, CUD could file candidates for every single constituency. And even in many rural constituencies it could attract personalities with substantial local support, such as teachers, to stand as candidates.

The other broad coalition, the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), was more or less the continuation of the party coalition that tried to coordinate the opposition campaigns in the 2000 and 2001 elections, without those parties that joined the new CUD group. Under the alternating chairmanship of Prof. Beyene Petros (Southern Coalition) and Prof. Merera Gudina (Oromo National Council), UEDF continued to coordinate the campaign of the small parties with more or less ethnic background from the South.

In addition, there were several smaller parties running, the most important of them being the Oromo Federal Democratic Movement (OFDM) under Bulcha Demexa, a newly founded party that tried to organise the Oromo discontent with the governing party in Oromia, OPDO (a member of EPRDF), within the federal structure and the Constitution.

The elections of 2005

The emergence of Rainbow gave the urban Amhara opposition to EPRDF a tremendous boost in self confidence, because it developed an organisational capacity and attracted a wide interest in urban circles, and even among the intellectuals and in the business community residing in rural small towns all over the country. AAPO, renamed All Ethiopian Unity Party, under its new Chairman Hailu Shawel, had also felt the wind from behind. The war against Eritrea had made Ethiopian nationalist positions more acceptable again, and debates on the issue of access to the sea, and the Ethiopian demand for a harbour, underpinned nationalistic feelings. Hailu Shawel was quick to join the new coalition on the right, with Rainbow, EDP and others. Being the only one who had a functioning party structure, however limited it was, and a well established membership, he was able to influence the new coalition and to successfully claim the chairmanship.

The CUD brought a new quality into the electoral campaign. It managed to mobilise a tremendous enthusiasm, especially in urban Addis Ababa where people developed a feeling of mastering a secure majority. True to the All Amhara tradition to take their view of political options for the view of the majority of all Ethiopians who care for Ethiopia as a nation, they over-estimated this expectation of success.

The government was initially willing to go as far as possible to make the coming elections as open and free as possible – without losing its grip on power. EPRDF relied on its continued control over the rural areas. It relied on its claim to represent the

interests of the peasantry. As long as the peasants are 80 to 85 % of the entire population, EPRDF believed to be able to afford loosing some seats in the major towns, without endangering their secure majority in the national parliament and the regional parliaments. There was a strong pressure from the international donor community to make the coming elections more open, and EPRDF considered itself able to control the situation even with a more open campaign, and with international observers present.

In Addis Ababa, the CUD campaign took off. CUD had no problem in mobilising candidates, and could compete for all seats both in the national Parliament and the City Council. Also in the other major cities, and in Amhara region, CUD had no problem in competing for all seats at election. Among the Gurage, the ethnic group that is known for its specialisation on trade and its tradition of urban migration, and is the most integrated group, CUD could gain overwhelming support. Even in Oromia and Southern region, CUD was able to file candidates in most urban and many rural constituencies.

CUD euphoria took off when it managed to gather a huge crowd of supporters at its mass rally one week before the election. One day after the EPRDF had brought together over one million people on Maskal square, CUD was allowed to stage its own rally. Though CUD could not, like EPRDF, offer free public transport, have public offices order their employees collectively to participate, and hire busses to bring people in from other towns, CUD could gather a crowd that was, according to most estimates, substantially larger even. Police watched the crowd, but did not intervene. The rally remained peaceful, even when the electricity failed just at the moment when the leaders were to address the crowd over loudspeakers. The word spread, and we have reports that people in rural areas decided that CUD could win: If they could hold such a rally before the eyes of EPRDF, without security forces intervening, then EPRDF must have lost its power⁷.

The shock of May 15

EPRDF had certainly never anticipated that CUD could win more than a minority of the votes and, particularly, of the seats in parliament. It relied on its firm control over its clientele in the rural areas. The first impressionistic overviews from the votes on election day, March 15, must have given the party a veritable shock. In Addis Ababa, the general expectation was a huge majority for the opposition, and the feeling in the public was an euphoria of an election victory for CUD. The EPRDF must have felt its grip on power threatened. The general feeling in Addis Ababa certainly justified the worst fears. When the first results from counting came in, panic seems to have erupted. The counting was delayed in most constituencies in remote areas, and the accumulation of results took more than a month – a period which made any control of the process impossible, and allowed manipulations and rigging of results⁸.

While acknowledging that they had lost all seats in Addis Ababa to the opposition, EPRDF was quick in declaring itself as the winner of the federal elections. But also CUD officially claimed to have won, accusing the government of having rigged the votes and stolen the CUD victory. Leading figures of CUD threatened to take the issue

⁷ For an interesting account of the mood in rural areas at the election, see René Lefort: “Power – *mengist* – and peasants in rural Ethiopia: the May 2005 elections, “ in: *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45, 2, June 2007, 253-273.

⁸ See the reports of the different observer groups, the Carter Center and the European Union Observer Mission.

to the streets. Hailu Shawel, the chairman of CUD, had already before the elections declared that demonstrations could lead to an “orange revolution” like in Ukraina and Georgia, in case the government should violate transparent and fair elections. But EPRDF had also understood the prospect of an “orange revolution” as a threat. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was quick in declaring an emergency situation for Addis Ababa, banning all kinds of demonstrations for a period of one month. CUD announced demonstrations, but backed out when the government made it quite clear that they intended to use force to prevent any form of unrest or demonstration.

Most probably, most of the leaders of CUD had not expected to win a clear majority in parliament. But the euphoria in the oppositional circles in Addis Ababa was such that people felt over-confident. And Hailu Shawel, the chairman, did not want to lose the momentum. CUD was convinced they had won a clear victory, which was stolen only by fraud and manipulation, particularly in the counting. Indeed the general oppositional feeling in Addis Ababa was supported in this belief by an internal paper from the EU Election Observer Mission that unfortunately was leaked to the opposition. EUEOM had collected from its observers all over the country the results from constituencies where they observed the counting, and where voting station results were publicised. On the basis of these reports, somebody in EUEOM had mathematically calculated that EPRDF would not have received a majority, provided that the reported results were fairly reflecting the overall distribution of votes. The figures indicated that (unless the single constituency voting system worked to CUDs disadvantage,) CUD might have become the strongest faction in parliament, and together with other opposition parties, it could have received a majority.

The paper had two weak points, which EUEOM and its leader Ana Gomes certainly were quite aware of: firstly, the EU observers were distributed in accessible areas along roads, in places with sufficient security and accommodation facilities. But EPRDF had its strongholds precisely in those areas they typically did not reach. So it is likely that an uninhibited counting would have substantially increased the votes for EPRDF when the results from more remote areas were coming in. Second, the calculation of the observers did not take into account the geographic distribution, which could well tilt the balance: In a single constituency voting system, a large number of narrow majorities could outweigh huge oppositional gains in few urban centres.

Indeed, the EU mission itself and its leader, Ana Gomes, never said anything to the effect that the opposition should have won. That would have been against their terms of reference and their mandate. EUEOM criticised concrete events in sharp words, and it said that the delays in counting were casting doubts on the process, and that a total lack of transparency made it impossible to reconstruct the votes and establish reliable results. But the unfortunate leakage of this internal paper gave the government a welcome occasion to discredit the EU observer mission. It accused Ana Gomes of being biased in favour of the opposition, thus dismissing her criticism of human rights violations and flaws in the election, particularly the counting.

The fatal error of CUD

In any case, CUD, and particularly its chairman, Hailu Shawel, were convinced of their victory and determined not to let it slip away. They announced demonstrations, but had to back out as the government threatened an intervention of the security forces. But CUD kept the situation in suspense, waiting for an occasion to bring its assumed majority into a better position. To them, their political views were the essence of

political reason, sanctioned by an electoral majority. The public debate continued to confront the views of CUD against those of EPRDF. There was no third position visible. As in the election campaigns, public debate was essentially polarised between the two. CUD would not consider any third position. It assumed to have received a popular vote and hence a mandate to change Ethiopian politics and to implement its programme. Even if, in their public announcements, most CUD leaders were putting emphasis on implementing changes with public consent, they still firmly believed in a majority mandate for their policies. In this, they felt so confident that they insisted in building a broad coalition, and promised to invite all political groups to consultations. Some envisaged a new national conference of reconciliation.

They did not reflect over how many of the votes received were purely protest votes. In the Southern region and in Oromia, in particular, it would be naïve to expect that a majority of people could adopt CUDs programme and see in it their political solution. Since the new Constitution was ratified, the public debate on articles 39 and 40 had been conducted between EPRDF and an urban opposition. The peoples of the South are not interested in more centralisation. They may want some minor corrections of the federal borders. But for them, the federal structure offers in any case more influence and more independence, more cultural freedom than they have experienced from the central state of the Emperor or the Derg. The majority of peasants want more security of access to land, but not a privatisation of land which would lead to concentration of ownership and eviction of peasants. They have little interest in an Ethiopian harbour. But they know that the only harbour Ethiopia could possibly claim, is Assab. And claiming Assab means war. Likewise, they have hardly any particular interest in Eritrea. But they know that a new round of war against Eritrea would claim the lives of many of their youths who would be the first ones to be recruited and sent to the frontlines as cannon fodder. Sure, the leaders of CUD emphasize that they do not want a new war, but hope to achieve their goals with peaceful negotiations. But they are nationalists, and they would be ready to put force behind their national interests if they feel provoked by another state⁹.

In short, the major political views of CUD can not possibly be the agenda of the rural majority. And it can not be the political programme of the “Southern” peoples, those who were conquered during the 19th century and who for generations felt exploited and suppressed. In Ethiopia as a whole, about 80 to 85 % are rural people, and about 60 to 65 % are non-Amhara and non-Tigre “Southern” peoples.

The rural Amhara are uncomfortably placed in between those two groups. They may feel attracted to the urban Amhara, whom they feel their kin. They may also feel attracted to Ethiopian nationalism, in which they might expect to belong to the “higher culture”. But in terms of material interests they are closer to the rural peoples of the South. Their poor majority has an interest in the protection of their access to land, and the security of this access, rather than in ownership in a Western sense – as advocated by the moneyed urban groups. But they have little access to the urban debate. They can not read urban newspapers, nor are they able to participate in the debates. And few of them have sufficiently reflected political positions to understand that the interests of the urban Amhara do not necessarily represent theirs.

The Gurage, too, are in a double-faced situation in between. The Gurage are known as the most urbanised rural dwellers, with a long tradition of temporal rural-urban

⁹ For more detail see the programmes of the member parties in CUD.

migration, with strong traditions of trade and of other urban businesses. An increasing part of the livelihoods of even rural Gurage comes from urban migration and from remittances. They are closer to urban interests. And they are closest to the urban Amhara, they speak Amharigna and have adopted much of the urban patterns of life. For them, uninhibited access to urban markets and urban culture may feel more attractive than a preservation of their own rural culture. This explains why both in Aamhara region and in Gurageland, CUD securely won the elections.

In all other regions, there is good reason to assume that rural votes for CUD were mostly protest votes. Peasants are dissatisfied with the way EPRDFs local party cadres implement EPRDFs policies, and control the rural population¹⁰. Therefore many of them decided that anything else could only be better. When they understood that there was a party that offered a realistic chance to win, they gave it their vote. Not because they supported its programme, or even knew it, but because they felt time was ripe for a change.

A different motivation for voting CUD was reported by René Lefort from villages in North Shoa: Peasants wanted to know who was to win. They were convinced they had to vote for the winner, otherwise they would be severely punished afterwards. When they saw CUD could rally thousands of unarmed people without the armed military intervening, they believed God had decided that EPRDFs time was over, and voted for CUD.

Indeed, a vote is a vote, also if it is a protest vote. That is one of the weaknesses of electoral democracy: it is not able to distinguish the motives for a vote. In a modern state, any party programme is composed of so many issues and interests and objectives, that it is to some degree accidental which ones overweigh in a voter decision.

In any case, imagining that CUD would have won the election and taken over government, there is no doubt that new conflicts would have broken up as soon as CUD had tried to implement its programme. But there is not either any reason to doubt that CUD would have felt entitled to implement it, as they felt the vote had given them the mandate to do so.

Assuming to represent the views and interests of the majority, made CUD over confident. The urban climate after the election, and the radicalisation of large parts of the urban people, reinforced this assumption. It led CUD leaders to a fatal overconfidence in their strength.

Confrontation or consolidation?

As long as CUD (and the other opposition parties) hoped to correct irregularities and fraud during the election in the review process, they were willing to postpone their demonstrations and their “orange revolution”. But government knew that this hope would soon be frustrated. And government wanted to impress on them without doubt that it was determined not to allow any street action that could threaten its grip on power. It wanted to nib any unrest in the bud, and waited for an occasion. It is likely that the student protest of June 2005 was welcome, if not even provoked, as some indications suggest, to demonstrate preparedness. Police and special forces cracked down on students and on first signs of urban protest. The police opened fire, killed over 30 people, and arrested thousands of students, party leaders, journalists.

¹⁰ For more detailed discussion see Pausewang 2004.

When CUD later understood that their protest against individual election results was futile, and the process of reviews ended with giving the EPRDF back some seats they had lost in the first place, CUD decided to boycott the parliament, as well as the City Council. They had some good arguments, as the government had in the last moment, after the election, brought together the old parliament to amend pertinent laws, making it more difficult for opposition politicians to implement their programme. In particular, the City Council was stripped of important functions, limiting its authorities and depriving it of control over financial resources and security. Still, the decision to boycott was not unanimous. Influential leaders argued that boycott would harm the CUD itself. They thought it was better to exert their influence as much as possible, while preparing for the next round. They thought they had received a mandate, and were obliged to do whatever stood in their power to represent their voters. But a vocal group around Hailu Shawel, the leader of the All Ethiopian Unity Party, the earlier All Amhara party, insisted in the boycott.

Hailu Shawel wanted to go for “all or nothing”. He probably expected that the population of Addis Ababa, backed by the national majority, would not tolerate the reversal of their election decision, and would rise to defend CUD. If he could not directly call for a demonstration or a general strike, and drive people into the bullets of the security forces, he could make life untenable for EPRDF by depriving it of any public support.

But the expectation that the urban Amhara were All Amhara, and that they were the ones to front the interests of the Ethiopian nation, made CUD overestimate its influence. Government answered the boycott by asking parliament to withdraw the immunity of those who boycotted. Thus they were normal citizens, not members of parliament any more. The next step followed logically. CUD initiated cautious demonstrations of protest. Government reacted in escalating the confrontation, arresting thousands of CUD members, students, journalists, businessmen and other supporters of CUD. Almost 200 people got killed in the street riots. The leaders of CUD were arrested and eventually brought to court, accused for treason and even genocide. EPRDF claims that these leaders had provoked peaceful public protest well knowing they would become violent, and speculating on it to paralyse the government. The reference to the “Orange Revolution” in Georgia and Ukraina gave the background to calling it an attempt at toppling the democratically elected government by illegal means. Some CUD leaders were quoted with statements that could be interpreted as trying to turn the mob against the Tigreans as the cause of the problem. Thus they were accused of trying to infuse anti Tigrean hatred and violent mass actions to eliminate the Tigreans.

Prospects for the future

It is unpredictable how Ethiopia will get out of the present impasse. In any case, Meles Zenawi has lost considerable confidence in the foreign community. His image as a democratic leader, maintained even in face of serious criticism after earlier elections, has been badly damaged. There are efforts to negotiate a deal in which the government would drop its accusations and the court cases against the CUD leaders, while these should accept to take their seats in Parliament and in the City Council. So far Meles Zenawi has refused to even consider such an arrangement before a court decision. But most recent reports strongly indicate that the CUD leaders may be released at any time, maybe even during the days of this conference. After the court convicted them as guilty, international protests mounted and the government appears to feel the pressure to be too

strong to resist. Whether the leaders, once released, could manage to rebuild CUD, is another open question.

For a democratic future of Ethiopia, it would be most important that the hitherto silent majority is also represented properly in the political debate, both in parliament, in the election campaigns, and in the mass media. As long as ethnicity has some influence in politics, the Oromo, the Sidama, the Gedeo, and all the other peoples in the South need to be heard. Their historical experience and their different interests can not be ignored. And above all, the interests of ordinary peasants, small family farmers and rural dwellers need to have a word in the political discourse: they are the vast majority of the Ethiopian people.

This will hardly happen as long as both the urban All Amhara, but also the EPRDF, are allowed to assume that they represent the interests of the rural people. The fiction of an all-Ethiopian common ground needs to be punctuated. And also the EPRDF has to end its policies of claiming the loyalty of the peasants, and enforcing their obedience. Even where a strong feeling of being one nation reigns, there are differences in political views. They need to be organised to be given a voice.

The baseless assumption of other groups' loyalty entails a danger of provoking resistance, violence and chaos. Democracy is not possible without proper and free representation of all social and ethnic and other groups, all social interest groups, and all political aspirations and views.

References

- Aalen, Lovise and Siegfried Pausewang, 2001: *Withering Democracy: Local Elections in Ethiopia, February-March 2001*, Oslo: Norwegian Institute of Human Rights (NIHR report).
- Abbink, John, 2000: "The Organisation and Observation of Elections in Federal Ethiopia: Retrospect and Prospect," in: John Abbink and G. Hesselning (ed.): *Election Observation and Democratisation in Africa*, London: Macmillan
- Clapham, Christopher, 1969: *Haile Selassie's Government*, London: Longmans.
- Clapham, Christopher, 2004: "From Haile Selassie to Meles: Government, People and the Nationalities Question in Ethiopia", paper presented at a conference on "Conflict Resolution in the Horn of Africa" in September 2004 in Bergen, Norway (to be published).
- Chernetsov, Sevir, 1993: "On the Origin of the Amhara", in: *St. Petersburg Journal of African Studies* I (1993), St. Petersburg, pp.97 - 103.
- Chernetsov, Sevir, 1996: "On the Problem of Ethnogenesis of the Amhara", in: Rolf Gundlach, Manfred Kropp and Annalis Leibundgut (eds.): *Der Sudan in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Sudan Past and Present), Frankfurt am Main: Lang (Nordostafrikanisch/ Westasiatische Studien, I), pp. 17 – 35.
- Lefort, René, 2007: "Power – *mengist* – and peasants in rural Ethiopia: the May 2005 elections", in: *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 45, 2, June 2007, 253-273.
- Merera Gudina, 2003: *Ethiopia: Competing Ethnic Nationalisms and the Quest for Democracy (1960 – 2000)*, Addis Ababa: Shaker Publishing.
- Nosnitsin, Denis and others, 2005: *Varia Aethiopica. In Memory of Sevir B. Chernetsov (1943-2005)*, Saint-Petersburg 2005: Byzantinorossica.

- Pausewang, Siegfried, Kjetil Tronvoll and Lovise Aalen (eds), 2001: *Ethiopia since the Derg. A Decade of Democratic Pretension and Performance*, London, New York: ZED Books
- Pausewang, Siegfried, 2004: *Local Democracy and Human Security in Ethiopia. Structural Reasons for the Failure of Democratisation*, Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA Report No. 45).
- Pausewang, Siegfried, 2005: "The two-faced Amhara identity", in: Nosnitsin 2005, 273-286.
- Tadesse Tamrat, 1994: "Ethiopia in Miniature. The Peopling of Gojam", in: Harold G. Markus (ed.): *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies, Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, September 1994*, Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, vol. I, pp. 951 - 962.
- Takkele Tadesse, 1994: "Do the Amhara exist as a Distinct Ethnic Group?" in: Harold G. Markus (ed.): *New Trends in Ethiopian Studies, Papers of the 12th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Michigan State University, September 1994*, Lawrenceville, NJ: The Red Sea Press, vol. I, pp. 168 - 187.
- Tronvoll, Kjetil and Sarah Vaughan, 2003: *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Political Life*, Stockholm: SIDA.