

9-23-1998

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Recommended Citation

Gamst, Frederick C. (1998) "Election Monitoring in Oromia: What Are the Conditions for Democracy?," *New England Journal of Public Policy*. Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umb.edu/nejpp/vol14/iss1/7>

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Election Monitoring in Oromia

What Are the Conditions for Democracy?

Frederick C. Gamst

Professor Gamst, a member of the Joint International Observer group (JIOG), reports the problems he monitored during the 1992 electoral campaign and voting activities in the strife-ridden region of Oromia in Ethiopia. His analyses illuminate the background institutional barriers and the politically competitive reasons for the failure of the elections. Gamst discusses the nature of the multitudinous Oromo people and the consequences of any election victory by them for the destiny of Ethiopia. He also describes the sometimes violent aftermaths of the failed election of 1992 and its follow-up election of 1994, in which the Oromo were again denied reasonable participation in government. He closes questioning of U.S. policy and its relation to the election failure.

The Emerging Conflicts of Ethnicity after the Pax Atomica

A political *pax atomica*, technologically engendered by the nuclear stalemate of mutually assured destruction between the two superpowers, existed during the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the stalemate, a bloody time of unchecked local conflicts fueled by ideologies of ethnicity has emerged across the world. In the dawning glow of the new millennium, the world's paramount ethnological concerns loom: How inviolate are the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a polynational country, and what should be the limits of ethnic self-determination, including irredentism and secessionism?

These kinds of concerns find ever more incendiary expression, seem inextinguishable, and sometimes have a potential for flaring into a wider conflagration in places such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda, Angola, Sudan, East Timor, Palestine, Kurdistan, Chechnya, Chiapas, Kosovo, and virtually unknown Oromia. The dawning glow of the millennium, then, is tinged with ethnic incandescences.

Today, ethnic wars and lesser combat total about 150 and grow in number. Modern weaponry and other advanced technology savagely exacerbate these conflicts. Such fighting kills and maims more civilians than soldiers, drives countless persons as refugees from their homes and livelihood, destroys property in impoverished lands, militarily expends scarce resources in have-not states, and depresses commerce in countries with inadequate levels of employment. I turn to the problem of Oromia for a particularizing illumination of the conflagrant conflicts now flickering and flaring on the horizon of the new millennium.

Frederick C. Gamst, professor of anthropology, University of Massachusetts Boston, specializes in the Horn of Africa.



Background and Nature of the 1992 Elections in Ethiopia

During June 1992, as a member of the Joint International Observer Group (JIOG), I helped monitor what was to become the failed, governmentally coerced election process in former Welega province, southwestern Ethiopia. (Before 1989, Ethiopia comprised fourteen provinces.) The plan for the elections had the blessing of the United States and other Western governments and was viewed as the way to bring peace to war-ravaged Ethiopia. In part, the failure of the countrywide regional elections was fostered by a lack of normative and institutional support for voting. In a strife-ridden country, this voting would have resulted in giving long-contested authority to partisan “winners” who could not readily surrender what they had, at long last, “justifiably” secured.¹ Ethiopia is a polynational state of more than eighty ethnic groups or specific whole cultures. Many ethnic groups have one or more usually armed political parties. I was assigned by the JIOG to the western part, former Welega, of the Oromo people’s war-torn region, now called Oromia. This region has roadside debris of destroyed T-54 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and army trucks, all supplied by the former USSR. The Oromo speak Afaan Oromo, an Eastern Cushitic language, and constitute some 45 percent of the Ethiopian population of perhaps 50 million, and might number 23 million in Ethiopia. One of the largest ethnic groups in Africa, the Oromo also live in Kenya and, formerly, in Somalia. A pan-Oromo ethnic identity is a recent, ever growing cultural awakening.

The Oromo problem has bedeviled Ethiopia, a modern empire, since its conquest creation toward the end of the nineteenth century.² Beginning in the 1500s, much of the history of the ancient kingdom of Abyssinia, located in the northern half of today’s Ethiopia and in Eritrea, included epoch struggles between the native authoritarian Amhara-Tigrayans, speaking Ethio-Semitic languages, and intrusive egalitarian Oromo groups.³ Since the 1960s, various Oromo organizations have been in armed insurrection against the sequential central governments of: the monarchy, with its king of kings Haile Selassie I; the revolutionary Marxist Derg, which destroyed the monarchy; and the present government of Ethiopia, resulting from crushing the Derg in 1991 after years of brutal civil war.

The Contesting Political Actors

Just before and after the 1992 elections in Ethiopia, the three principal bodies of contesting actors in western Oromia included, first, the recently militarily victorious Tigrayans from the far north of Ethiopia, with their national movement, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The Tigrayans organized their EPRDF to dominate their Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), which preceded the present government of the country. Tigrayan control of the transitional government existed before and after the elections of 1992. Control is through their Marxist, formerly guerrilla Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front and their Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front.⁴

The second actor is the EPRDF’s locally unpopular Oromo client group, the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization, hereafter, called client-Oromo. Similar ethnic client groups exist for other Ethiopian peoples. The EPRDF wields power independently of its subordinated organizations: in addition to the irregular troops of its client fronts, the

EPRDF controls the military and local security forces of Ethiopia. In opposition to the EPRDF and its client-Oromo is the third actor, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). This front is broadly popular and is often politically unwise, divisive, and separatist. The Oromo Liberation Front was the largest non-EPRDF organization in the transitional government. In 1991, all three fronts, along with others, finally defeated the Derg, which controlled Ethiopia from 1976 through 1990.⁵ “Others” especially include the militarily powerful Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, militarily victorious in its thirty-plus years of bitter armed struggle in the north against the successive governments of Ethiopia.

The Eritreans, with their Liberation Front, represent a lesser fourth player in the region. In 1992, the Eritreans sent peacekeepers to the Oromo region to separate the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front and the OLF, which had been engaged in destructive battles. Both sides were then supposed to consign their armed forces to specially designated holding camps. The Soviet-supplied vehicles littering the Oromia countryside result in part from the struggle for this region between the Oromo Liberation Front and the EPRDF. The Eritreans, almost until election time, successfully separated the Tigrayan troops and their Oromo clients from the OLF and maintained the truce. Enmity between the Oromo Liberation Front and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front is great, sometimes bloody, and appears to be enduring.

The currently-dominant EPRDF also has considerable opposition from the once long-dominant ethnic group of Ethiopia, the Amhara, and their independent political front, and from other ethnic fronts. These matters, however, are outside the scope of this presentation. Many Amhara are critical of the TGE’s partitioning of the country, following Leninist thinking, into ten ethnic administrative regions. These so-called self-governing territories, of which Oromia is one, create more problems of ethnic friction than they solve. With one or two exceptions of fronts not mentioned in this article, all the considerable number of fronts in opposition to the Communist Derg were also Marxist. Today, in conversations with representatives of some of these once unabashedly Marxist fronts it is denied that the groups either are now or ever were Marxist. But then, at this time of the “end of history,” few political groups want to use the label of passé fashion, *Marxist*, anymore.

The Political Contest

In sub-Saharan Africa, a voter usually elects according to his or her particular ethnic bloc. Thus, if any Ethiopian government dared to risk surrender of its power by holding a free and fair election — American style, as some Ethiopians label it — the Oromo would take almost half the vote. The Oromo, allied with some minor groups, would at long last control the government and the country. But such a control is what the Amhara and Tigrayans have always fought to prevent. (The Tigrayans suppressed their sibling Amhara in the civil war that ended in 1991.)

Paradoxically, as a consequence of the 1992 elections, the Tigrayans would be surrendering their authority, gained only through years of costly war involving tens of thousands of Tigrayan deaths, to one of their battlefield enemies, the Oromo. In 1992, the Oromo observed an American-brokered truce with the Tigrayans. As I prepared to travel to Ethiopia for the elections, I could not fathom how the Ethiopian political world would indeed be turned upside down with the culturally alien democratic elections advocated by the political missionaries from the West. But then, the Tigrayans

controlling Ethiopia were allowing foreign observers to monitor their election process. In every spare moment, my mind dwelt on this Ethiopian paradox of Tigrayan-sponsored democratic elections leading to Oromo empowerment. (I later learned that several million dollars' worth of U.S. aid, desperately needed by the Tigrayans' government, was contingent upon the holding of the 1992 elections.)

The most important aspect of the countrywide elections of 1992 was democratic integration of the Oromo people and their Oromo Liberation Front into the new, post-Derg Ethiopia. In addition to the 1993 independence of the province of Eritrea, if, as many of them desire, the Oromo were to secede from Ethiopia, the polynational country would undoubtedly fragment still further into political chaos and economic nonviability.

Monitoring the Election Strife

My immediate observer group, comprised of seven ardent observers using three Toyota Land Cruisers, was among the very first to roll out of Addis Ababa for the field assignment. In western Oromia, our assignment was monitoring and reporting on the registration and campaign processes prior to a democratic election and then on the election itself. No idea of a loyal opposition existed on either side in the election campaigns, however. One either supports a political-military front or is its enemy who must suffer the consequences of this blatant offense. Fear was in the air, and for good reason.

Enough fuel was displayed in our vehicles' roof-mounted Jerry cans to create a blazing inferno from a potshot in the overweaponed countryside, and we carried cases of German bottled water and ready-to-eat U.S. Army meals. Our white vehicles were emblazoned with the Joint International Observer group's emblem, a dove and a large eye, in blue and white. "Yêfêrènjibuda ayn nêw [Of foreigners' evil eye it is]," one Ethiopian remarked about this arcane, to him, new symboling. When my vehicle mate and I saw ten-year-old Oromos with hand grenades attached to their clothing, we would smile broadly and wave energetically in a friendly fashion. Rocks would have been tolerable, but fragmentation grenades . . . In the eastern part of Oromia, our counterpart observers, old and good Ethiopia hands all, had to leave the monitoring field prematurely because of the palpable direct threats to their personnel's safety.

The Joint International Observer group had not tested the short-wave radios of their three vehicles destined for western Oromia, and we never could use them for the planned crucial monitoring reports and the vital security linkage to our headquarters in Addis Ababa. Telephonic communication was available, but not always, only from western Oromia's capital of Nekemti.

"I could have told you that, if someone asked me," commented our driver, an Ethiopian army combat veteran, about the limitations of our radios. Several of our skilled and knowledgeable Ethiopian drivers were miffed at not being consulted during the JIOG's planning phase or invited to its night-before-departure briefings. These included a lengthy explanation of elaborate, on-paper, radio protocols and call signs and a question session. The white bwana still held ethnocentrically insensitive, and thereby inefficient, sway in Africa.

In the field, we found that the militarily powerful Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and its Oromo clients engaged in systematic harassment, intimidation, coercion, illegal force, false accusations and imprisonment, and administrative measures preventing the registration of peasants and townsmen in most areas controlled by the Oromo Liberation Front. Police-state actions included jailing supporters of the

Oromo Liberation Front as “bandits” for mere acts of electioneering and partisan public speech.

One “bandit” was an accredited, overworked physician. My vehicle mate and I felt we had no authority or mandate to do anything about these political prisoners. Beyond discussing with their government captors and visibly taking notes on the facts of their detention, we said only that imprisoning the opposition was not part of a bona fide election process.

A pair of German election observers, one an escapee from the German Democratic Republic, went much further, however. They insisted, successfully, that they had the authority to visit the political prisoners, tape-record interviews with and photograph them. A few of these “bandits” were consequently released. When I asked the Germans about their authority for their action regarding the political prisoners, the reply was: “*Wie meinen Sie? Was meinen Sie?*” Yes indeed, what did I mean? What possibly could I mean under the circumstances, repressive and dangerous to the political prisoners? Whatever the appearance of us American observers, the Germans were not candidates for citizenship in a police state.

The Transitional Government of Ethiopia continued to place all manner of road-blocks in the path of its formal election process, the main one being not sending the crucial election registration books and registration cards to the many rural areas firmly dedicated to its opposition, the Oromo Liberation Front. Thus no voting could occur in these districts oriented to the OLF. The government thereby ensured that it did not suffer the defeat and the consequences that a democratic election would engender. (Registration for voting included the designation of a person’s ethnic group, a cause for intimidation.)

The OLF often retaliated in kind against acts of violence by government-controlled forces, and it sometimes attacked without immediate provocation. In western Oromia, all the observers from both sides received written lists, sometimes quite long, reporting attacks on and imprisonment of people and destruction of property. Deadly violence, however, was relatively rare until the end of the period for the election process. Some of the problems with registration must be attributed to unfamiliarity with a culturally alien, complexly bureaucratic procedure and to numerous local snafus.

Oromos privately voiced their fears to me and to other observers. For example, in one tension-ridden town, the proprietress of a coffeehouse and brothel, astonishingly, would not take money from me and my vehicle mate for our coffees. She was so relieved, she said, to have us coming through town periodically in our Toyota. My fellow observer and I hoped that our temporary and powerless presence did not imply to local people something we could not ensure, protection for free political and other expression. Such speech in Oromia is at best foolhardy and can be personally lethal. (Some Oromo thought we might be in their area for mundane matters, such as providing vaccine for their diseased livestock.)

My vehicle mate and I found only a bare handful of Oromo Liberation Front offices in the approximately two-thirds of western Oromia controlled by the transitional government. When we visited one such office, the two young Oromo Liberation Front irregulars were astonished to see us, for they placed their AK-47 assault rifles, hastily drawn as we entered, behind a wooden counter. While we sat chatting with them about the election process, first a policeman and then a surveillance type of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia came in and stared at us and asked what we were doing in the OLF post. They then stood within earshot outside the doorway.

My co-observer and I patiently worked on many problems and contradictions in election activities. At one election precinct in a small city, we found that the registration of voters was greatly retarded, and reduced, because the client-Oromo member of the mandated three-man registration committee, including a “neutral” and an OLF representative, consistently arrived several hours after the office opened early each morning. Local Oromo and Amhara complained vociferously to us about this reduction of their right to register. At first it was difficult to catch the young uniformed client-Oromo soldier, who was bivouacked in a camp about two hours’ walk outside of town. He informed me that he could not possibly arrive earlier because of his lengthy morning trek.

In a reply well polished in dealing with my students, I told him to arise, if necessary, at 4:00 A.M. or earlier to fulfill his obligation as one of the three necessary registrars at the precinct. My request was entirely unreasonable; he glowered. I recorded his name and his explanation and reply to me in my notebook and next asked the assembled crowd of more than fifty persons what day it was, then recording their responsive symbolic factoid. Never before had my ever-present ethnologist’s field notepad wielded such power as during that June. After all, our radio was not functioning and the city lacked telephone service to Addis Ababa: I did not have a communication link to stand on. The next day, the errant client-Oromo registrar arrived twenty minutes early. His commander had ordered him to take lodging at one of the client-Oromo buildings in town.

Client-Oromo troops were supposed to be stationed in their truce camps, but they loomed as an intimidating armed uniformed presence in the towns. Our local protests over this election violation were to no avail, although some troopers then began to appear without their guns. Nevertheless, those opposed to the transitional government felt endangered. As a result of the success with the tardy client-Oromo registrar, one gray-haired elder made a public show of thanking me and grabbing my hand and kissing it while a throng beamed in approval. I was mildly embarrassed by this display, but far more apprehensive over his personal safety. A week or so later, he came by to talk to me in Nekemti as he fled from his province and the client-Oromo. When he left, we embraced and kissed each other twice on each cheek, in the manner of two Amhara friends.

One of the most telling observer experiences was with the three-man Zonal Election Committee for western Oromia, consisting of a “neutral” chairman, assigned from a TGE agency in Addis Ababa and partisan client-Oromo and Oromo Liberation Front members. The committee’s mission was to serve as the final level of appeal in western Oromia regarding disputes over procedure and charges of foul play in the election processes, accordingly safeguarding the success of the elections.

At our first meeting with this pivotal committee, the chairman would not answer my opening general questions, to tell us observers the well-known, publicly announced date of the election, June 21, or the names of the two partisan members sitting next to him — also public knowledge and men with whom we had earlier chatted amiably. So much for my old textbook field practice of beginning with easy, bland questions. The neutral chairman said he needed instruction from Addis Ababa before he could deal with the foreigners who came to observe in his province. He was to remain constantly ill at ease with the Joint International Observer group presence.

Several days later, this neutral chairman appointed by the transitional government expelled the opposition Oromo Liberation Front member from the zonal committee. The stated reason was that the opposing leader had been late for meetings on two occa-

sions. This act solved the problem of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's opposition raising difficult questions and concerns not being addressed. Accordingly, I made a telephone call to JIOG headquarters at the comfortable Hilton Hotel in Addis Ababa regarding this highly destructive action. At first, the JIOG person said this was just one of the problems that I should expect to encounter in the field and wanted to dismiss my report without recording it. After some words, I convinced him of the gravity of this "minor incident" and had him agree to file a formal report to the transitional government. The OLF man was reinstated in a few days, after someone on high realized the implications of his expulsion. The highly partisan EPRDF's Transitional Government of Ethiopia was not and could not realistically be considered a neutral party to the elections, any more than we in the United States could have solely the Democrats or Republicans administer our national electoral process. By my conscientious, unrelenting effort, I had provided the transitional government's election process with at least one element of legitimacy. I wondered whether I was a provider of fig leaves to both the Ethiopian and American governments.

The Election Shambles

A week before the election date of June 21, I had assessed and privately said to my fellow observers that there would be no elections in the Oromo region. As it turned out, I was not quite correct in this assessment.

Complaining, four days before the twenty-first, that the election process was rigged and unfair, the Oromo Liberation Front withdrew from the elections. The OLF later withdrew from the transitional government.⁶ The TGE canceled the elections in the part of Oromia controlled by the OLF. But the government allowed elections to proceed in places tightly held by its own forces, as in Nekemti. At such sites, a slate of all-Oromo-client candidates ran unopposed. On election day, we observers were told by JIOG headquarters and American embassy personnel to "monitor" (hence, legitimate) this one-party balloting, an electoral fraud that gave "stuffing the ballot box" a good name. I did not intend to help make genuine a coercive police-state election.

During the day of briefing after their arrival in Addis Ababa, several American observers expressed to a facilitator of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) their view that we might be serving as "window dressing" for a "show election" of the military government of Ethiopia. The USAID representative replied publicly that it was not at all the U.S. government's intention for American observers to serve as window dressing. I took him at his word. Accordingly, on June 19 I said I would not so serve on the day of the coercive one-party election in western Oromia. But this decision became moot.

With reports of increasing unrest and marked armed violence in the south, including Oromia, reaching the concerned Joint International Observer group headquarters in Addis Abba, our instructions for our activities in the field constantly changed. We were, first, ordered to stop our customary travels behind Oromo Liberation Front lines and work only in the EPRDF-controlled areas. (The Oromo of the Liberation Front, with whose members I had many intimate conversations, was, logically, extremely friendly to us.) Then, we were told to remain strictly inside Nekemti town and next we were allowed to range a limited distance out of this town. Finally, we were instructed that on June 22, for their personal safety, the remaining Joint International Observer group observers in western Oromia, as a group, were either to be flown or to drive in convoy

to Addis Ababa. This full withdrawal would be on the day after I and two other observers had JIOG orders to complete the group's previously scheduled arrival by us in Addis Ababa on July 21. Our two-day trip, in a single vehicle on the sole road to this metropolis, was without incident.

Because the JIOG had, from the beginning, booked my fellow observer and me to fly out of Ethiopia the morning after the elections, July 22, its headquarters in Addis Ababa had explicitly instructed us to get tickets on the sole flight out of Nekemti town in the days prior to the election. The two-engine plane was solidly booked with frightened, mostly Amhara women and children fleeing to the safety of the national capital. We were told to displace two of these passengers, using our superior social clout as foreigner-observers. In other words, we were ordered to depart, so to speak, on "the last train from Paris," by kicking off two refugees. What would *Casablanca's* Rick have thought of such behavior?

My co-observer and I went through the motions of talking to the Ethiopian Airlines agent in Nekemti to see just what the consequences of our actions would be. To please the Joint International Observer group and the transitional government, the agent was willing to bump two of the hapless women and children escapees for us. The two of us decided to drive out of Nekemti, instead of flying. It was a far better thing we did, in this the worst of times. After all, we reflected, the traditional American male norm was "women and children first." We reported to our JIOG controllers that it was impossible to guarantee the airplane seats from Nekemti but that they should try to secure them for us at a central office of the Ethiopian Airlines in their own Hilton Hotel in Addis Ababa. So we drove.

At first, the JIOG had directed me and two other observers from western Oromia to return by air to Addis Ababa. This was supposed to be on election day, a day without air service, after our early morning observations of some voting in Nekemti. After changes in directives, we were ordered to be in transit by road beginning the day before the elections. Thus, only by chance, we observed some Leninist one-party "da" balloting in Ambo town, former Shewa province, for which we had no assignment, introduction, or familiarity whatsoever. The two other observers accompanying me also acted as witnesses in this informal, uninformed capacity.

The leader of the Eritrean peacekeepers in western Oromia, mediating the truce between the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and the Oromo Liberation Front, was an acquaintance of mine from years ago in Paris who came to see me. Warmly holding my hand, in the customary manner of a friendly Tigrayan, he quietly informed me that because of combat actions in the region he was withdrawing, for their security, his peacekeepers from the far west of Oromia. For the same reasons, our fellow three intrepid election observers in that area were flown out, leaving behind our third Toyota.

The OLF forces began to mobilize and move out of their truce-imposed cantonments. One such force overran some Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front troops north of Nekemti; another force in the far west attacked a government election vehicle and its escorting Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front troops. The EPRDF began multiple responses. Like chess pieces, troops and tanks were being deployed by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia for post-election enforcement of its authority. Prudently flying low, on June 20, a Soviet-built, military helicopter (one of a few still in repair) came to Nekemti and, on June 21, I observed four empty flatbed tank carriers moving west toward Nekemti along the road from Addis Ababa.

(Tanks are not run long distances cross-country for engagements, but instead are transported to save wear and tear.) The EPRDF might, perhaps, be a novice at free elections, but enforcement of social control — that was its expert activity.

The Aftermath of the Election

At a post-election evening meeting of JIOG people that I attended in Addis Abba, a U.S. congressman visiting the capital city for the election day said the following about the voting and about Meles Zenawi, president of Ethiopia under the transitional government: President Meles was a concerned leader; there were (only) some “problems” with the election; and the leaving of the truce camps by the Oromo Liberation Front had nothing to do with the election process! “Aren’t congressmen insightful?” one American observer said afterward, and other Ethiopia hands from America agreed with him as they smiled.

In any event, the EPRDF made a fundamental error in policy when it followed an outmoded Leninist ideology of using federated ethnicity, that is, a union of Soviets of specific cultures, as the basis for its reconstruction of the Ethiopian polity. Ethnic identity is the basis for the new administrative regions of Ethiopia. Reinforcement of nationalistic ethnicity and the divisiveness of ethnocentrism and sectarianism were the harvest to be reaped from the Leninist seeds being sown by the transitional government. The former Yugoslavia and the former Soviet Union are factious and unstable examples of such Leninist policy for a state based on ethnic blocs. A blundering and potentially bloody miscalculation of this kind by the EPRDF merely feeds movements for the “Biafraization” of the country, for example, for the Oromo Liberation Front’s well-supported movement for an independent Oromia. It is to be hoped that, in their near-stalemated political contest, the EPRDF and the Oromo Liberation Front will not eventually turn Ethiopia into another former Yugoslavia.

To follow the elections of 1992, the Transitional Government of Ethiopia officially planned for a multiparty democracy in 1993. After the elections, Tigrayan and Eritrean forces, continuing their cooperation since 1987, moved through far western Oromia, first encircling and then reducing the Oromo Liberation Front as a military threat to the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front.

The transitional government became increasingly coercive and unwilling to allow pluralistic dissent or exercise of basic freedoms. Holding private property became ever more an anathema. As was experienced by the election organizers of the Oromo Liberation Front, disagreement by anyone with the Tigrayan Marxists in control of the TGE became unpatriotic and criminal. Dozens of criticizing Ethiopian journalists have been imprisoned.

Matters came to a head in January 1993 at the campus of Addis Ababa University, where faculty members and students openly criticized the transitional government, its policies, and its suppression of ideas. EPRDF troops fired at assembled students, killing at least one and wounding others. The Transitional Government of Ethiopia then dismissed without due process forty of the faculty members and administrators and directly took control of the university.

On September 7, 1993, EPRDF troops shot and killed and wounded dozens of civilians in a church in Gonder town. The praying congregation had refused to scatter at the command of the soldiers who were attempting to arrest a priest. In December 1993, a Conference on Peace and Reconciliation met mainly at the request of political groups

not in the transitional government. But the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Force would not participate and arrested several of the conference delegates. In January 1994, the TGE expelled two nonclient ethnic fronts from the government because of their participation in this conference. The true base of support for the TGE had narrowed largely to the Tigrayans and their Tigrayan People's Liberation Front, their client fronts, plus a few quite small organizations. Former president Jimmy Carter tried to mediate this dangerous situation, in vain.⁷

The follow-up elections to those of 1992 were finally held on June 5, 1994. Not surprisingly, creating Soviet-scale results, the EPRDF won 89 percent of seats for the new national assembly. On September 20, 1994, according to Amnesty International, hundreds of peaceful persons demonstrating against the summary arrest of a former university professor and dean were imprisoned and beaten.

On April 19, 1995, Amnesty International charged that during its four-year rule, the government of Ethiopia detained thousands without charges, made dozens vanish, and tortured others. In September 1995, the first U.S. Peace Corps volunteers since 1977 entered Ethiopia. Some were posted to the high school in Nekemti. On October 7, 1996, the Committee to Protect Journalists, in New York, released its report, "Clampdown in Addis," criticizing the government's repression of journalists. In December 1996, Somalia and Ethiopian forces clashed near Dolo.

During 1997, Amnesty International requested that the Ethiopian government release the Oromo leaders it arrested and imprisoned, without having been charged with any offense, during its crackdowns against the organizations of these people. Many of these leaders had merely been protesting violations of human rights by the government. The government accused the Oromo Liberation Front of the 1997 bombings in Harer and Addis Ababa, something denied by the OLF. And in 1998, the Tigreans of Eritrea and the Tigreans of Ethiopia went to war, replete with attacks of jet fighter bombers, over some contested border strips of semidesert.

Today, Oromo client administrators, now governing Oromia, have not put a stop to the ethnic cleansing in their region of Amhara and other non-Oromo persons by Oromo militants. In the Somalia region, formerly the Ogaden area of Ethiopia, Oromia, and other regions, strife flares between local people and Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front soldiers.

With the Oromo Liberation Front outside the government, no effective balance to Tigrayan power exists. In the vacuum of the disengagement of the OLF, the client-Oromo assumed power under the aegis of the EPRDF. Through decentralization of power to ethnic regions having puppet governance, the Tigrayans maintain control of Ethiopia. Support from the West, including the United States in its Panglossian illusion, continues for the Tigrayan government. In return for a stable government — thus, no unpalatable TV newscasts — the United States settles for the rhetoric rather than the substance of democracy in Ethiopia. Rewarding this government by supplying the second-largest amount of aid it gives to an African country, the United States does little to have the EPRDF seek an accommodation with the majority of Oromo, Amhara, Somali, and others not recognizing its ethnic client organizations.

Perhaps the Ethiopian elections of 1992 did not fail in their intent. Perhaps there was no paradox in their conception in Addis Ababa — or in Washington. As regarding the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sudan, and the Congo, the Bush and Clinton administrations desired to see no, hear no, and speak no evils of massive fatalities and suffering from ethnic strife in the Horn of Africa. To admit to the existence of such atrocities

requires moral policymaking and leadership resulting in corrective action, unpopular for a U.S. president seeking affirmation from the public opinion polls — and the voting polls. ❁

This speech, originally delivered at the Distinguished Lecture Series, University of Massachusetts Boston, December 12, 1994, has been updated by the author.

Notes

1. What follows applies to the former Welega province, now the western part of Oromia, as based upon my firsthand in-field experiences, discussions with subjects of research, and events reported to me by nine fellow observers in the province. My comments as an ethnologist, with more than three decades of experience in Ethiopia and Ethiopian affairs, do not necessarily reflect the views of any other person or organization.
2. Emperor Menelik the Great, an Amhara, added by armed force what became his southern, frequently Oromo, provinces to the largely Amharan and Tigrayan core provinces of Christian Abyssinia in the north. Menelik's conquests realized an Abyssinian control of southern Ethiopia.
3. Today, as in the past, the Oromo refer to their Amhara-Tigrayan conquerors generally as *Habesha* (Abyssinians) and individually and locally as *neftenya* (rifle bearers). The Abyssinians were the newly superimposed regional armed elite, and even in the 1960s carried a rifle as a symbol of power on ceremonial occasions. In the past Amhara-Tigrayans labeled the Oromo as the "scourge of God" and today refer to Oromo by the prejudicial term *Galla*, which has a range of denotations and connotations, but it could best be explained as the Abyssinians' label for the menacing hordes of a non-Christian, African "other." For *Habesha*, *Galla* are the kind of people to be politically subordinated and culturally marginalized, including persecuted and discriminated against in a wide range of overt and covert ways. During the past century or so, being Oromo means being mentally and socially marred by Abyssinians' views of history. The interpretation of such marring is nurtured, in part, by an Oromo intelligentsia residing in the Horn and scattered globally in the Oromo diaspora. The Oromo are usually characterized by Western scholars as egalitarian, by which some manner of being democratic is meant. That is, in their traditional generational system of social organization consisting of age sets and age grades (*gada*), some Oromo groups still have and most formerly had married men discussing and initiating political and religious policies and actions, including juridical.
4. Meles Zenawi, a Marxist Tigrayan, is the president of Ethiopia. He heads the post-Derg government of Ethiopia and is the leader of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), including its ethnic client organizations. Besides their homeland in the former Tigray province on the southern border of Eritrea, the Tigrayans are the largest and dominant ethnic group of Eritrea. Tigrayan-dominated Eritrea was allowed its independence in 1993, against Amhara protests, by the Tigrayan-controlled transitional government. To the anger of the Amhara, Eritreans held many government and private commercial jobs in Addis Ababa, the capital of a country now no longer that of the Eritreans yet one with great unemployment for the educated.
5. The Derg's control was effected in large part by means of several billion dollars' worth of Soviet military aid and advice used to kill and maim hundreds of thousands of Ethiopians. Many were murdered by the state and buried in secret mass graves. Owing to the Derg's doctrinaire central planning and control of resources and its relentless warfare, many hundred thousands of other Ethiopians starved to death or became displaced refugees.
6. Separately, in its region to the north, the independent party of the once-dominant and numerous Amhara, the All-Amhara People's Organization, also withdrew from the election. Other non-EPRDF fronts withdrew from the elections in their respective areas. Elections were held in most areas, however.
7. On March 23, 1994, the Carter Center reported: "After extensive discussions with leaders of opposition groups and with the government, we have been unable to find a mutually acceptable basis for direct talks between the government and opposition groups."