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INTRODUCTION

TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES AND MULTI-PARTY ELECTIONS IN ETHIOPIA

Kjetil Tronvoll & Tobias Hagmann

Introduction

This book addresses the intricate interrelationships between multi-party elections and traditional authorities in Ethiopia, as exemplified by nine case studies from the country’s contested 2005 national and regional elections. Although multi-party elections in Africa have attracted considerable interest in recent years (see Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Nohlen et al. 1999; Villalón and VonDoepp 2005; Lindberg 2006), the role of traditional authorities in elections is severely under-studied. This holds particularly true if one considers the fact that over 300 multi-party elections have been held throughout Africa since the ‘third democratisation wave’ reached the continent between the late 1980s and 2008. This volume addresses this lacuna by analysing how clan elders, customary leaders and indigenous political organisations – which we subsume under the broad heading of ‘traditional authorities’ – participated in and fashioned multi-party elections in Ethiopia, Africa’s second most populous nation.

The vast body of scholarly work on democratisation and electioneering in Africa and other parts of the world has different emphases and approaches to understanding the phenomenon, and can be loosely grouped into five different strands of research. One body of work focuses on the structural preconditions for successful or failed democratisation processes (see, for example, Bunce et al. 2009); another

1 We are indebted to Markus V. Hoehne, Staffan Lindberg, Judith Vorrath and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this introduction.
3 This classification is used purely to illustrate the range of scholarly literature on the topic. One may obviously group research on democratisation and elections into other categories too.
Adherents of this research strand who specialise in the study of democratic transition (Paris 2004; Lyons 2005; Jarstad and Sisk 2008), while yet another assesses the pitfalls of democratisation and highlights, for instance, how elections generate violence (Snyder 2000; Mann 2005; Mansfield and Snyder 2005). More relevant to our particular study on elections and traditional authorities in Ethiopia are two other bodies of literature.

The first is dominated by political scientists and economists who study the conditions under which some variant of liberal democracy has gained a foothold in Africa. Their predominant concern lies with the formal aspects of democratic transitions such as electoral codes, political parties, campaigning, judicial reforms or power sharing. For proponents of this research strand democratisation and election studies in Africa have typically concentrated on understanding the capacities and constraints of ‘modern’ governance institutions with reference to their own intrinsic objectives and standards. Democracy is assumed to be a universally shared norm and characteristic of political modernity, which is hoped to produce more participatory, representative and accountable governments in Africa. Consequently, this group of scholars measures democratisation as a function of a country’s ability to produce formal political institutions that are broadly based on universal principles and norms of liberal democracy. Formal institutions are, indisputably, crucial attributes of both established and emergent democracies; and the comprehensive Afrobarometer surveys show that Africans do indeed have similar perceptions of modern democracy as inhabitants of Western countries (Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi 2005). Nevertheless, given their preoccupation with modern state and party politics, this body of work often has little to say about the ‘traditional’ sector or sphere of society. The latter is seldom considered relevant to understanding democratic transitions and is stereotyped as non-political, non-democratic and a relic of the past.

The other approach to the study of democracy in Africa of relevance to the Ethiopia case – and generally represented in this volume – is dominated by anthropologists and historians. They seek to understand contemporary political transitions through the prism of local actors’

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4 Adherents of this research strand who specialise in the study of democratic transitions are known as transitologists (see Schmitter 1995).

5 http://www.afrobarometer.org/
practices and meanings. Focusing mainly on non-state actors, indigenous structures or customary organisations, these authors emphasise cultural embeddedness, historical trajectories, and the geographical context of popular representation at local level. In doing so, they question liberal democracy’s alleged universality and instead draw attention to the empirically variegated forms of political representation that exist in particular places and at particular times (Koelble and LiPuma 2008). Unlike the former research strand, which is interested in the impacts of market, policy and constitutional reforms on democracy, proponents of the latter research strand seek to comprehend democracy ‘from below’. This mission leads them to study the actors, processes and institutions of local democracy, e.g. how kinship groups define decision-making in village affairs along lines of descent, gender and age. Many of them have underlined the resilience of indigenous political structures, but little attention is paid to their involvement in the modern state, party politics, and multi-party elections.

Very few studies, however, try to combine these latter two approaches to political transition in Africa as we do in this book. We use local institutions of authority and power in Ethiopia as an entry point to scrutinise the consolidation and understanding of democracy as exemplified by the 2005 general elections. The ‘local’ and the ‘national’, the ‘modern’ and the ‘traditional’ have therefore been researched and conceptualised together, rather than artificially compartmentalised (Young 1993, 207). Such an endeavour requires an ethnographic grasp of the various ways in which the exercise of political power through modern democratic institutions is interpreted, positioned and contextualised in relation to local expressions of authority and power.

Given its distinctly multi-ethnic character, Ethiopia is a perfect case for studying the articulation between institutions of traditional authority and the conduct of multi-party elections in Africa. The 2005 elections are particularly well suited to this task as they were the most genuinely competitive elections held in Ethiopia so far, representing a moment of intense political struggle. They provided large parts of society with an opportunity to contest the existing political order established by the ruling Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic

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6 An allusion to the call of Bayart et al. (1992), among others, to study ‘politics from below’.
Front (EPRDF). This process involved complex strategies of co-optation, control and resistance between the incumbent government, political parties, ordinary citizens and traditional authorities, and went largely unnoticed by international observers. The notion of contested power captures these processes as both ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ powers adopted ambiguous roles and positions to confront each other during election time.

Although there is a long scholarly tradition regarding the study of chiefs and customary authorities in colonial and post-colonial Africa, there is a glaring absence of empirical accounts of the roles of traditional authorities in multi-party elections. This research gap also exists in Ethiopia, where most scholars interested in national politics have tended to concentrate on the institutional features of ‘ethnic federalism’ and its impacts on local conflict dynamics as the starting point of their analysis (Young 1998; Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003; Keller 2005; Aalen 2006; Abbink 2006b; Turton 2006; ICG 2009). One exception is the anthology Ethiopia – The Challenge of Democracy from Below (Bahru Zewde and Pausewang 2002), which offers comparative insights into local perceptions of state institutions.

The nine chapters in the present volume analyse the relationship between traditional authorities and multi-party elections from the viewpoint of a diverse set of Ethiopians. The traditional authority and multi-party elections nexus is examined in very different localities, with seven out of the nine studies located in the central regional states of Oromiya (Daniel Mains, Terje Østebø, Charles Schaefer, Marco Bassi) and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region (Data Dea Barata, Lovise Aalen, Donald L. Donham), while two studies are situated in the so-called peripheral Gambella (Dereje Feyissa) and Somali (Tobias Hagmann) regions. The contributions in this volume forcefully demonstrate that democratisation, institution building and elections in Africa are evolving in a context enmeshed with customary forms of political, cultural and religious authority and power.

It is necessary to flag up three particular findings from these complex case studies concerning the roles played by traditional authorities in the elections. Firstly, both government and opposition parties relied

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7 Among the few noteworthy exceptions is Lehman’s (2007, 315) study of chiefs’ involvement in South Africa’s 2000 and 2006 municipal elections, in which he concludes that ‘traditional authorities may serve as a democratizing function in local politics.’
on traditional authorities to mobilise voters on election day; secondly, they gave legitimacy to political actors, namely party candidates and the elections; and thirdly, they were instrumental in (pre-)selecting candidates for the elections, particularly those of the ruling party. We also wondered whether traditional authorities might have played a role in resource distribution and allocation during the election process; but our cases do not support such a hypothesis.

These findings do not necessarily contradict the conclusions reached by other strands of democracy research; instead, they compliment and add nuance to more conventional election studies. This book is thus an important reminder that democratisation in Africa is best understood by making sense of how the adoption of new political practices and institutional procedures such as multi-party elections plays out and is perceived in local contexts.

Democratic transitions are by definition exceedingly political and so are the labels used to gauge multi-party elections. Whether an election is described as ‘free and fair’ or, conversely, as ‘rigged’ and marred by irregularities and political intimidation is not only a matter of objective measurement, but often of taking sides with a particular constituency (Bjornlund 2004; Hagmann 2006). While this book provides the most in-depth and comprehensive scrutiny of Ethiopia’s 2005 elections thus far, it is not our ambition to provide an assessment of the elections’ democratic fairness. Nor do we strive to answer the question as to whether institutions of traditional authority are compatible with democratic principles or transitions to democracy. Rather, the aim is to account for how customary politics intersect with formal electoral politics in Ethiopia. The contributions in this book neither equate traditional authorities with backwardness, nor do they romanticise them. Instead, they emphasise that a variety of customary actors and institutions are important to electoral politics, both as opponents and facilitators of the incumbent regime. Moreover, this volume highlights that traditional authorities influence the perceptions of multi-party elections and the formal power wielded by the state and its representatives; and vice versa, multi-party elections have an impact on the role and positions of traditional authorities.

A brief note on terminology and methodology is in order before positioning Ethiopia in the broader literature on traditional authorities.

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in Africa. Firstly, as will become apparent in the next section, the terms ‘tradition’ and ‘traditional authorities’ are fraught with analytical fuzziness and normative baggage. For example, there is controversy about what constitutes an elder and customary authority as both are contingent on local realities. For this reason there is not one but multiple understandings of tradition, the most basic one being that tradition comes from the Latin *tradere*, which translates as ‘that which is handed down’ (Hoehne 2007). Traditional authorities are thus not relics of the past but dynamic actors who ‘mediate the link between past, present and future’ (van Nieuwaal and van Dijk 1999, 4). Secondly, most of the contributors to this volume have made use of key informant interviews and some kind of participant observation in their field research location. Designated field research periods for this particular study have been relatively short (approximately one month), but all the contributors to this book were able to capitalise on their in-depth knowledge of the respective research sites, which they had gained during repeated stays in the same locality or region over several years, or in some cases even decades. Consequently, the present book not only provides insights into how traditional authorities involve in multi-party elections; it also provides a comparative update of local political dynamics across Ethiopia.

*Dialectics and dynamics of traditional authorities in Africa and Ethiopia*

Over the past two decades the literature on traditional authorities in Africa has offered important insights into the nexus between traditional authorities and decentralisation, the semi-official role of chiefs in local development and their continued importance for land management and allocation. Many authors have emphasised the ‘remarkable resilience’ and ‘continuing importance’ of traditional leaders (Logan 2009, 107). Three broad key arguments can be distilled from the literature on contemporary traditional authorities in sub-Saharan Africa (for a more nuanced discussion the reader is referred to van Nieuwaal and van Dijk 1999; Ray and Reddy 2003; Vaughan 2005; Buur and Kyed

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9 Most contributors carried out field research after 15 May 2005 as Ethiopian authorities had signalled to the project leader and co-editor, Kjetil Tronvoll, that international researchers were welcome only after election day.
Although some argue that the 19th century imperial state-building drive, by which northern highlanders subjugated the country’s southern and peripheral peoples and territories, represents a case of ‘internal colonialism’ (Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa 1990).

The titling of elders thus occurred primarily as a result of customary practices rather than of a state-sponsored process. Titled positions are either hereditary and passed on from father to son, or else they occur within dominant or ‘aristocratic’ clan lineages in a given ethnic group.

Ethiopia does not fit the pattern of invented colonial chiefs, as it was not colonised but ruled by a state-appointed nobility rather than customary authorities. Its long and proud history of centralised government accrued little state-sanctioned power to local indigenous chiefs and leaders. Imperial and revolutionary state- and nation-building did not rely to any major extent on traditional authorities, and state appointees had relatively few connections with the local population, although both regimes enlisted and appointed selected local chiefs to garner political support locally (Abbink 2005, 178–181). Emperor Haile Selassie’s government awarded friendly chiefs noble titles and privileges of the Imperial order (Tronvoll 2009c). During the Derg’s socialist dictatorship, state collaboration with customary institutions remained minimal (Pankhurst and Getachew Assefa 2008, 75). While an expanding state bureaucracy, commodification and urbanisation have significantly altered customary leaders’ position since the 19th century, traditional authorities continue to play an important role.

10 Although some argue that the 19th century imperial state-building drive, by which northern highlanders subjugated the country’s southern and peripheral peoples and territories, represents a case of ‘internal colonialism’ (Holcomb and Sisai Ibssa 1990).

11 The titling of elders thus occurred primarily as a result of customary practices rather than of a state-sponsored process. Titled positions are either hereditary and passed on from father to son, or else they occur within dominant or ‘aristocratic’ clan lineages in a given ethnic group.
role – ranging from the more symbolic to the powerful – in managing community affairs in many parts of present-day Ethiopia. This holds particularly true for the multi-ethnic Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People’s Region (SNNPR) or Southern region, parts of Oromiya region and the border regions of Afar, Somali, Gambella and Benishangul-Gumuz where most pastoral groups live. While individual clan leaders and chiefs have been, and continue to be, co-opted – but not formally incorporated – by the Ethiopian state, customary authority has not been discredited in toto in Ethiopia and plays a vital role in community affairs.

A second and opposing viewpoint suggests that traditional authorities must be considered as an ‘original African institution’ (Skalník 1996) that enhances local democracy. Chiefs and customary leaders are somewhat romantically portrayed as indigenous African grassroots representatives that predate the advent of repressive, bureaucratic colonial institutions and are therefore more legitimate than the state. Despite a history of co-optation by the colonial state, customary leaders play a vital role in post-colonial African politics as they develop new ‘strategies of legitimating power and wealth’ in changing political circumstances (Lentz 1998, 46). Particularly in rural areas where state presence is nominal, traditional authorities successfully compete and overlap with bureaucratic, religious and kinship authorities (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2003). In northern Mali, eastern Congo or Somalia, where protracted conflict has led to partial or complete state collapse, traditional authorities shoulder state-like tasks by managing conflicts and providing basic security at local level (Menkhaus 2007; Bellagamba and Klute 2008; Raeymaekers et al. 2008). The most comprehensive survey of local perceptions of traditional leaders was conducted by Afrobarometer and involved some 5,700 respondents in seven southern African countries. In her presentation of these research findings, Logan (2009) reports that most survey participants do not see any contradiction between local government and traditional leadership, and that allegiance to the latter is part of a typically hybrid African political system.

Whether or not traditional authorities enhance the ‘democratic character’ of political life in Ethiopia must be answered with some provisos. It is difficult to generalise as the country’s population is made up of over 80 ethno-linguistic groups with distinct cultural traditions and languages (for an overview see Tronvoll 2000). Most of these groups practise or are familiar with distinct customary norms regulating
family, community and religious affairs. A rich and sophisticated body of customary law co-exists with federal and regional statutory law across Ethiopia (Pankhurst and Getachew Assefa 2008). Traditional authorities play a prominent role in adjudicating intra- and inter-group conflicts on the basis of customary law, which is mostly unwritten but highly regulated and adaptive to new circumstances.

While the importance of customary law in Ethiopia may be seen as an indicator of cultural self-determination and, ultimately, of local norms of representation and decision-making, its modalities are often at odds with Western democratic values, since they discriminate against youth, women and minorities and usually exclude them from customary legal processes. Furthermore, indigenous forms of community representation such as age groups or elders’ councils are characterised by a male-dominated gerontocracy. Having said this, some of Ethiopia’s communities have, both historically and presently, traditional institutions that – within the bonds of patriarchy – act in accordance with certain democratic principles of community representation. This is notably the case of the Oromo gadaa age grade system, which ethnographers and Oromo nationalists have praised, but also romanticised as an ‘indigenous African political system’ (Asmarom Legesse 2001) whose separation of powers has been compared to that of constitutional democracies.

A third argument suggests that there has been a ‘resurgence’ of traditional authorities and a ‘re-traditionalisation’ of politics in Africa since the 1990s (Chabal and Daloz 1999; van Nieuwaal and van Dijk 1999; Englebert 2002). The comeback by traditional authorities as state-recognised community representatives, resource managers and peacemakers occurred in the context of democratisation and decentralisation programmes that assigned traditional leaders new roles in local government (Lutz and Linder 2004; Buur and Kyed 2007). In a number of African countries including Mozambique (West and Kloec-K-Jenson 1999; Buur and Kyed 2006), Sierra Leone (Fanthorpe 2005; Jackson 2005) and South Africa (van Kessel and Oomen 1997; Beall et al. 2005; LiPuma and Koelble 2009), post-conflict decentralisation was coupled with a delegation of important state functions to traditional authorities. These state functions include

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12 The Ethiopian constitution of 1995 recognises the adjudication of disputes related to personal and family laws by customary and religious laws and courts (art. 34, 5).
taxation and community representation, and they have formalised the position of elders or chiefs as powerful, government-recognised entities.

After ousting the Derg from power in 1991, the EPRDF did decentralise, but it did not re-traditionalise the Ethiopian polity. The ruling party went to great lengths to advocate ethnic and cultural diversity within a multicultural federation composed of ethno-national groups and enshrined the right to ethnic self-determination in the new constitution. The Tigray People's Liberation Front's (TPLF) conception of ethnicity is grounded in the Marxist-Leninist tradition that informed Stalin's dealings with the Soviet Union's nationalities (Vaughan 2003). It has therefore made sure that ethnic groups participate in national politics via their modern elites and political parties rather than through traditional authorities. In other words, the EPRDF's philosophy of ethnic politics has been markedly modernist and provides no space for customary powers within the representative institutions of the country. In Ethiopia's Southern region, a resurgence of deference to traditional religious and political leaders occurred in the 1990s following the downfall of the Derg. But the EPRDF's post-1991 discourse of cultural and ethnic autonomy did not translate into recognition of traditional authorities by the Ethiopian state (Abbink 2005, 178–179). While traditional authorities are not formally recognised, regional and local administrations regularly mobilise pro-government elders to implement policy. In the border regions, selected clan elders work as advisors or ammakari on the payroll of the district or woreda authorities. In the Somali regional state, their task mainly consists of informing the government about security matters and mediating inter-clan conflicts (Hagmann 2007).

While the first argument encourages us to examine the emergence of titled elders such as chiefs critically, the second argument draws attention to customary authorities' continued relevance in everyday African politics, while the third argument emphasises their malleability and dynamics in post-colonial contexts. Bearing in mind the dialectical relations between the colonial and post-colonial state and traditional authorities in Africa, a number of propositions can be

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13 During its armed struggle against the dictatorial Derg government (1975–91), the TPLF sought to abolish traditional hierarchies and cultural institutions, which it considered discriminatory and a backward influence on the peasantry (Young 1997).
formulated regarding their roles in multi-party politics. Firstly, traditional authorities are intrinsically contemporary actors whose acts and roles are seen to be linked to the past. While there are clear boundaries for what is locally perceived as morally appropriate and therefore in line with ‘tradition’, these boundaries are subject to change and negotiation (Hoehne 2007). Whether or not, and to what degree, traditional authorities’ involvement in modern elections is perceived as legitimate can thus only be established by taking into account the perceptions and opinions of those on whose behalf these authorities speak and act.\(^\text{14}\)

Secondly, in order to remain relevant to present-day politics, traditional authorities have to constantly modernise, i.e. adapt to the constraints and opportunities of new political contexts such as regular elections. It is important to note that this is a two-way process. Elections are bargained, interpreted and influenced by expressions and holders of traditional power in various localities, while at the same time the electoral process itself impinges on and reconstitutes these very same expressions and holders of traditional authority. Thirdly, traditional authorities are concomitantly empirical actors – or what Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (1997) call ‘strategic groups’ – and a repertoire or ‘discursive genre’ (Bayart 2005, 110) that can be utilised by a multitude of different actors for a multitude of different purposes.\(^\text{15}\) In elections elders, chiefs or customary leaders operate as strategic groups with identifiable interests and strategies to mobilise voters, promote preferred candidates and influence the election outcome. As a powerful societal ideal, rhetoric and resource, traditional authority is not monopolised by elders or traditional leaders alone, but bestows legitimacy on whoever-government or opposition-can credibly claim to operate in line with local political customs.

*‘Empty democracy’: Ethiopia’s electoral experiences in retrospect*

Since Ethiopians were ruled under a feudalist-imperial monarchy until 1974 and a socialist dictatorship until 1991, their experience of

\(^{14}\) In this sense, traditional authorities’ legitimacy hinges on both their ascribed and their performative abilities (Buur and Kye 2006).

\(^{15}\) Strategic actors ‘are composed of actors who defend shared interests in the appropriation of resources, in particular by means of social and political action’ (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 1997, 240).
multi-party elections is recent and the result of the EPRDF’s coming to power.\textsuperscript{16} Although elections under Emperor Haile Selassie and Lt Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam primarily served to perpetuate power, Ethiopia was not completely void of pluralistic politics before 1991 and political competition thrived within the imperial and socialist systems of governance.

Until the adoption of the country’s first constitution in 1931, the Emperor’s power was absolute, unlimited and unquestionable. A legislative body consisting of two houses was established, but members of the lower house – the Chamber of Deputies – were chosen by the nobility and local chiefs, while members of the Senate were appointed directly by the Emperor (Aberra Jembere 1998). In furthering the modernisation of the imperial state, Emperor Haile Selassie introduced a new constitution in 1957, creating a Chamber of Deputies that for the first time was elected by universal suffrage every fourth year. Political parties continued to be banned and individual candidates competed using their own means and standing in their local community. Interestingly, these elections were ‘fiercely contested’ and few seats were safe for re-election: only 59 of 210 sitting members were re-elected in the second election in 1961, and only 85 out of 250 in the 1965 elections. The Emperor maintained his prerogative to appoint Senate members, but the introduction of an elected Chamber of Deputies freed up political debate in the country considerably (Clapham 1969, 142–143, 151). Despite the important efforts put into voter registration, voter turnout in the final elections under the Emperor in 1969 was minimal (Markakis 1974, 279).

The elections of individual candidates introduced by Haile Selassie were curbed after the military coup d’état of 1974, which eventually thrust Lt Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam into power in 1977. In a bid to crush political pluralism and consolidate its regime, the military leadership purged political opponents and unleashed terror on the urban population in a period that came to be known as ‘the red terror’ (Markakis 1987; Clapham 1988; Bahru Zewde 2009). Following the 1975 land nationalisation and the creation of peasant associations or kebeles, the Derg drafted a new constitution in 1987 establishing a People’s Democratic Republic run by the Marxist-Leninist Workers’

\textsuperscript{16} This section is a shortened and updated version of a section previously published in Tronvoll (2009b).
Party of Ethiopia (WPE). The new constitution formally vested state power in an elected national assembly, the Shengo. Candidates for the Shengo elections were, however, nominated by the state cadre system at kebele level, and the process was entirely controlled by the WPE. Non-official candidates were refused nominations, and the candidate the WPE had placed first on the list was evidently expected to win (Clapham 1988, 95).

Founded in 1975, the TPLF had grown out of a group of nationalist Tigrayan students in Addis Ababa. Ideologically committed to Marxism-Leninism, it successfully mobilised aggrieved Tigrayan peasantry in its armed struggle against the Derg, which mirrored the earlier insurgency by the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) (Young 1997; Aregawi 2009). The military junta of Lt Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam was ousted in May 1991 by EPRDF forces, a coalition of ethno-nationalist liberation fronts whose most powerful constituent was and still is the TPLF led by Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. The EPRDF promised to implement an ambitious programme of political reforms, including democratic standards and the respect of far-reaching human rights (Harbeson 1993; Tronvoll 2000). In June 1991 an all-inclusive ‘Peaceful and Democratic Transitional Conference of Ethiopia’ hosted by the EPRDF in Addis Ababa approved a Transitional Charter as the supreme legal basis for governing Ethiopia during the transitional period that lasted up to 1995 (Vaughan 1994). The EPRDF and the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) were the main architects of the Charter, which was intended to seal a decisive break with the country’s past authoritarian culture as the Charter announced a ‘politics of plurality’ (Leenco Lata 1999, 26). The Charter incorporated the rights and liberties articulated in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The June 1991 conference agreed on elections to a new national assembly at the end of the transitional period and established a transitional government consisting of a legislative (Council of Representatives) and an

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17 Derg stands for ‘committee’ in Amharic, referring to the Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, the Police and the Territorial Army, which was established in June 1974.

18 The other fronts were the Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Movement (EPDM), later renamed Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM), the Oromo People’s Democratic Organization (OPDO) and the Southern Ethiopia’s Peoples Democratic Front (SEPDF).

19 Certain pan-Ethiopian nationalist organisations such as the historic Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) were banned from participating.
executive branch (Council of Ministers). The transitional period drew to a close when the new constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia came into force in August 1995 (FDRE 1995). This established a bicameral parliament: the House of Peoples’ Representatives (HPR), composed of 547 members directly elected for five years, and the House of the Federation consisting of 108 representatives for each of the country’s ‘nationalities, nations and peoples’, including minority groups. The House of the Federation does not legislate, but is in charge of constitutional interpretation and decides on issues related to national self-determination (Assefa 2007).

Since the first multi-party elections for local and regional assemblies in 1992, scholars have evaluated Ethiopia’s democratisation in critical terms. Some prophesied that the democratic transition would fail in its incipient stage (de Waal 1992; Walle Engedayehu 1993; Harbeson 1998); others were unsure whether the elections were an end to or just the beginning of a transition period (Lyons 1996; 2006) – or simply an extension of it (Harbeson 2005). A sober assessment of Ethiopia’s election record since 1992 casts serious doubts over the incumbent regime’s democratic credentials (Pausewang et al. 2002; ICG 2009; Tronvoll 2009a). With the notable exception of the 2005 ballot, elections in federal Ethiopia have resulted in very little genuine multi-party competition and only limited opportunities for expressing dissent. A comprehensive review of multi-party elections under the EPRDF reveals the following common trends. Firstly, the EPRDF and its allied parties – often referred to as affiliate or satellite parties – have monopolised most electoral processes due to their organisational strength, political determination and readiness to intimidate and harass opposition candidates. Secondly, the ruling party’s grip on local state institutions, particularly the kebele, allows it to exert considerable control over the rural population, which depends on the goodwill of the state for access to land and public services. Thirdly, elections have always been more ‘free’ and competitive in major urban centres such as Addis Ababa, where a more cosmopolitan, and internationally monitored, public space exists that is less controlled by the EPRDF. Fourthly, as a result of the ruling party’s dominance Ethiopia’s opposition groups have weak organisational capacity, limited voter outreach, and are at times

disorganised and riddled with internal rivalries. Fifthly, electoral contests and party politics in general have been characterised by distrust, refusal of dialogue, and the prevalence of conspiracy theories between competing political elites. Taken as a whole, the state of electoral democracy in Ethiopia is perhaps best summarised by this quote from an informant in SNNPR recorded in Data Dea Barata’s chapter for this book: ‘This government gave us empty democracy.’

The first multi-party regional and district or *woreda* elections were held one year after the *Derg*’s fall on 21 June 1992. Despite the conducive juridical framework of the Transitional Charter, the EPRDF’s political dominance frustrated its ‘junior’ government partners to the point that the OLF, the All Amhara People’s Organisation Party (AAPO), and other political parties withdrew from the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) and the election process. All non-EPRDF parties accused the EPRDF of intimidation and harassment. Consequently, the 1992 elections were entirely controlled by the EPRDF and marked by an absence of electoral competition. The most comprehensive election observation study of the time concluded that the elections fell well short of achieving their proclaimed objectives and were impaired by acute administrative and logistical shortcomings (NDI and AAI 1992, 3–4). Ethnic unrest related to the electoral process in Oromiya region and the subsequent crackdown on OLF fighters prevented the 1992 election from conveying a message of multi-party politics to the population at large.

On 5 June 1994 elections to the constitutional assembly, charged with revising and ratifying a draft constitution, took place. They were conducted in an atmosphere of growing distrust and polarization. Widespread breaches of electoral standards were observed, as well as repression of opposition parties. Prior to the elections a concept paper discussing various constitutional principles was disseminated for consultation among a small portion of the public. This provided an opportunity for open criticism but failed to make a significant impact upon the final text to be voted on (Abbink 1995). Voters were basically asked to express their preference between two crucial articles in the draft

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21 This phenomenon is characteristic of many opposition parties in Africa (Rakner and van de Walle 2009).
22 The few remaining non-EPRDF representatives in the TGE withdrew in 1993 to establish the opposition Southern Ethiopia Peoples’ Democratic Coalition (SEPDC).
constitution: whether they favoured state or private land ownership (Art. 40.3 and 40.4) and whether they wanted the contentious principle of self-determination ‘up to and including secession’ (Art. 39) to be included as a constitutional clause. Many voters did not understand the purpose of the elections and falsely believed they were voting for local councillors. Opposition parties continued to boycott the election process and left citizens without any opportunity to select candidates of their choice (Pausewang 1994).

The first federal and regional elections were held on 7 May 1995. They were meant to showcase the democratic culmination of the transitional period, but took place in a context of political polarization where the opposition withdrew from the elections due to the absence of a level playing field (Lyons 1996). A research-based observation report dismissed the elections as ‘neither fair, free nor impartial’ (Tronvoll and Aadland 1995, 59), concluding that although the technical performance of the balloting had improved since previous elections, there were widespread violations of the Electoral Law. More seriously, government officials quelled local anti-EPRDF sentiments and stirred up apprehension among the rural population, leading to conformity in voting behaviour. Some political openness and debate were allowed in Addis Ababa, which represented some progress on earlier elections. However, the use of coercion in rural areas signalled the beginning of a new governmental strategy. In order to compel the electorate to register and participate in the non-competitive elections – presumably in order to make a display of popular support – the authorities threatened non-participants with exclusion from the rural land reforms to be conducted in the aftermath of the elections (Aspen 1995; Tronvoll and Aadland 1995; Poluha 1995; Getie Gelaye 2004).

Multi-party competition was revived when the opposition parties abandoned their non-engagement strategy in advance of the 14 May 2000 federal and regional elections. One novelty was the public broadcast of a debate in November 1999, in which all contending parties presented their programmes and openly criticised their opponents. However, while the government allowed opposition leaders to talk freely to international representatives and their fragmented ethnic constituencies in the capital, they faced considerable restrictions from local authorities and EPRDF cadres when campaigning in rural areas. In constituencies where opposition parties posed no challenge to the incumbent, they were relatively free to conduct their political activities.
In districts where the opposition managed to challenge the ruling party, however, severe infringements and irregularities occurred (Pausewang and Tronvoll 2000). There was widespread harassment of opposition candidates, election rigging and violent incidents including killings in Southern region where opposition parties threatened the EPRDF monopoly (Tronvoll 2001). Open and blatant violations of the electoral process forced the National Election Board to order re-elections in several constituencies in SNNPR on 31 August, which allowed the opposition Southern Ethiopian Peoples’ Democratic Coalition (SEPDC) to win nine seats in the House of Peoples’ Representatives, in addition to three others won by opposition/independent candidates (Pausewang et al. 2002). Key EPRDF leaders were greatly disappointed by this ‘loss’ and ordered cadres to be more vigilant in upholding the party’s grasp of the rural electorate. Thus, when local elections were conducted in December 2001, the process was even more controlled and manipulated by the government, resulting in several clashes and violent incidents (Pausewang and Aalen 2001).

The 15 May 2005 federal and regional elections constitute a radical turning point in Ethiopia’s election history. They have been somewhat optimistically labelled ‘founding’, ‘formative’ and ‘genuine’ by veteran observers of Ethiopian politics (Clapham 2005; Harbeson 2005; Lyons 2006). In the run-up to the elections, the citizenry witnessed an unprecedented openness and plurality of political opinions. Live television and radio debates between government and opposition leaders sparked popular interest and permitted politicians to criticise government policies and candidates quite frankly. For the first time the EPRDF faced a real challenge at the ballot box from a coordinated national opposition (Lyons 2006). Two opposition alliances – the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) and the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) – fielded candidates in the majority of the country’s constituencies. After the close of polls on election day, and a few


24 The 2005 elections are also noteworthy for being the first time that a large coordinated international election observer mission had been undertaken in Ethiopia. The European Union deployed over 200 observers in every region apart from Somali region, which conducted elections on 21 August 2005.
hours into counting, EPRDF realised that it had lost Addis Ababa and that the opposition had received a majority of urban votes. The incumbent party therefore ordered an immediate halt to the counting of ballot papers. Ensuing protests were rejected while government officials instructed the National Electoral Board to review the election-day process. The EU observer mission gave a negative assessment of the closing and counting process in almost half of the urban polling stations it observed and even more in rural stations (European Union 2006, 2). The opposition contested the election results in 299 separate claims on the grounds of alleged irregularities during the ballot count, but only 31 of the complaints resulted in the National Election Board ordering repeat elections.\footnote{Unless otherwise specified, all election results referred to by the authors of this volume were sourced from the National Election Board of Ethiopia’s (NEBE) website http://electionsethiopia.org.}

After election day, the human rights situation deteriorated rapidly as the government banned all demonstrations, whilst state media published statements by EPRDF officials claiming election victory. In mid-June, security forces shot indiscriminately at demonstrators in Addis Ababa, killing several dozen people. After a dubious recount and re-elections in selected constituencies, the National Election Board proclaimed the EPRDF victorious. Although the UEDF and CUD had dramatically increased their representation in parliament compared to earlier elections, they rejected the election results.\footnote{Opposition parties won 172 and the EPRDF and its allied parties 372 seats in the House of Peoples’ Representatives. In Addis Ababa, the CUD won 137 out of 138 seats on the city council.} Renewed nationwide demonstrations were called, in which over 100 demonstrators were killed in Addis Ababa at the beginning of November 2005.\footnote{A total of 193 people were killed during the June and November 2005 post-election demonstrations, according to the report by the official inquiry commission. ‘Ethiopian Opposition Dismisses Probe into Killings,’ Reuters, October 30, 2006.} Subsequently, government security forces embarked on a heavy-handed crackdown against opposition supporters, the private media and civil society representatives in Addis Ababa and other opposition strongholds. About 20,000 to 30,000 opposition members and sympathisers, mostly affiliated to the CUD, were detained for shorter and longer periods. The CUD leadership, including the newly elected mayor of Addis Ababa, was arrested on charges of instigating violence,
attempted unconstitutional change of government and even attempted genocide. What had begun as the most significant moment in Ethiopia's democratisation process at the start of the year and resulted in a record voter turnout of 80 to 90 percent in May had turned into a bloody affair by the end of the year, ushering in a period of increased authoritarianism by the EPRDF government (Abbink 2006a).

In a reversal of the 2005 elections, the EPRDF won the April 2008 local and by-elections by a landslide. Although more than 3 million woreda and kebele council members were voted in across the country, no independent election observers were present. The crackdown on opposition supporters that began at the end of 2005 left many voters disillusioned about the meaningfulness of these local elections (Aalen and Tronvoll 2009b). While the EPRDF had thoroughly misjudged its popular support in 2005 (Lefort 2007), it had dramatically expanded its party base by 2008 by making access to public posts and services increasingly dependent on membership of one of its regional parties. The 'systemic pattern[s] of repression and abuse' (Human Rights Watch 2008, 1) by government officials signaled a revival of the tactics that the EPRDF has already employed before 2005 to intimidate, harass and exclude opposition candidates (Aalen and Tronvoll 2009a).

Traditional authorities and multi-party elections in Ethiopia

Which roles did traditional authorities play in the 2005 Ethiopian elections? Were they actively involved in campaigning and mobilising voters and, if so, for which political party? Which strategies did they pursue and to what degree can these be described as ‘traditional’? Were clan elders and customary leaders able to defend their community’s interests in the election process or were they co-opted by one or all of the political parties? How did they engage with party and state officials before, during and after the elections? As the contributions to this book demonstrate, the answers to these questions vary greatly according to the local context and the different junctures of the election process. Since traditional authorities intersect not only with political parties but also with a wide range of other social groups, interaction patterns in election times defy sweeping generalizations. Almost all authors underline, however, that political parties and state officials relied to varying degrees on customary leadership and repertoires to mobilise voters in rural Ethiopia. The contributions in this book recount the multiple
experiences that traditional authorities and other social groups made in Ethiopia's 2005 federal and regional elections. Unsurprisingly, a very different picture emerges when the 2005 election events are told from the vantage point of urban unemployed youth, marginalised low-caste groups or peripheral pastoral groups. Despite these variations, four recurrent themes in the articulation between institutions of traditional authority and the conduct of the 2005 Ethiopian elections deserve a mention.

Firstly, traditional authorities' elbow room during the 2005 elections must be understood in relation to a number of constraining political factors. The most important of these is the de facto conflation of the EPRDF and the local and regional state institutions under its control. All the contributors provide evidence that, at the local level, citizens perceive the state, the government and the party as one and the same, and neither the National Election Board, nor local kebele officials are any exception to this rule. Ethiopia's highland communities have a long history of popular non-distinction between power and authority projected by the 'state' and/or the 'government', which are both expressed by the Amharic word mengist (Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003, 34). Before and during the 2005 elections local EPRDF officials established, and in some regions reactivated, a sub-kebele structure charged with peasant mobilisation for state-led rural development activities and political control at neighborhood level (Human Rights Watch 2005; Aalen and Tronvoll 2009a; Segers et al. 2009). Although the importance and impact of this sub-kebele structure has not been uniform across the country and absent from the border regions, it is symptomatic of the government's attempt to keep the rural populace acquiescent. In many ways the EPRDF's expansion of administrative control at the local level echoes the Derg's earlier policy of population control, which Christopher Clapham (2002, 14) has succinctly described as a process of 'encadrement'. The recent expansion of the sub-kebele structure and the mass recruitment of party cadres can be seen as challenges to customary authorities as the Ethiopian state increases its administrative grip. This observation also applies to religious authorities as Terje Østebø's chapter on Bale illustrates. While some Muslim institutions remain outside the EPRDF's realm, other religious organisations including the shari’a courts have been co-opted by the ever-suspicious party-state. As they are in charge of land allocation, kebele administrations are important competitors for customary authorities in Ethiopia.
Secondly, several of the chapters in this book reveal how modern party politics reproduce traditional structures and relations of domination, including cultural hierarchies and the social stigma attached to lower status groups. In their quest for electoral gains, government and opposition parties exploited traditional figures representing historically privileged groups, a pattern most prominent in multi-ethnic SNNPR. Donald L. Donham describes how, in South Omo, the UEDF and partly also the EPRDF deliberately recruited members from Maale aristocratic lineages to secure peasant support. As Lovise Aalen reports in her chapter on Wolayta, the EPRDF relied on descendants of the dominant clans and social groups to fill the ranks of its local party cadres, thereby reviving old hierarchies and inequalities. Data Dea Barata describes how multi-party politics are recreating the traditional yara hierarchy among the Dawro. Although the low-caste Manna potter group votes in the elections, some of its members are assigned roles in the election process that are reminiscent of their subject status. Yet electoral politics do not only reproduce traditional hierarchies. Among Ethiopia’s segmentary lineage groups, multi-party elections have accentuated competition along clan lines. This was most notably the case among the Nuer in Gambella region whose sub-clan groups (or cieng) and clan elders competed fiercely for party candidatures on the ruling party’s ticket. As Dereje Feyissa’s detailed ethnography demonstrates, the principle of ethnic-based representation sparked a conflict-ridden dynamic of tribal fragmentation in the run-up to the elections. In this process of inter- and intra-clan competition, modern party and traditional clan politics combine at different levels of clan segmentation until they become indistinguishable.

Thirdly, precisely because they were so contested, the 2005 federal and regional elections provided traditional authorities with considerable opportunities to further their constituencies’ and their own interests. In locations where the EPRDF and its allied parties were expected to win, clan elders lobbied to have their kin and political allies included on the ruling party’s list of candidates. Where opposition parties managed to challenge the EPRDF, traditional authorities’ strategic value as potential vote mobilisers was even more significant. As Tobias Hagmann’s chapter illustrates, this was particularly the case in the

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28 This is an observation supported by other political science Africanist literature; see for instance Herbst (2000).
Somali region where elections were conducted on 15 August, three months after the general poll, allowing a group of Ogaadeen elders to wrestle important concessions from a temporarily weakened federal government. Like their predecessors, the 2005 elections were not only about determining which party held how many parliamentary seats, but also an opportunity to strengthen one’s bargaining power vis-à-vis the regional and federal administrations. In his analysis of electoral politics in the Borana and Guji zones, Marco Bassi describes how the Borana customary leaders’ stance towards the 2005 elections was motivated by their grievances resulting from territorial disputes with their neighbours in the Somali region as they strove to use the elections to gain advantages for future negotiations about the disputed regional boundary. In the political economy of ethnic claims that is characteristic of Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism, elections offer ethnic groups a chance to renegotiate their share of the regional, and to a lesser degree federal, cake (Hagmann and Alemmaya Mulugeta 2008; Fekadu Adugna 2010).

As several of the contributors demonstrate, the educational background of potential party candidates is crucial to securing influence, government employment and other state-sponsored benefits. Party leaders and traditional authorities have promoted and vaunted candidates with higher formal educational qualifications, and the ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1985) of education was frequently a decisive factor in the pre-selection of candidates. Combined with effective political strategizing, it allowed groups to vote one of their kin into office and to gain or maintain access to state resources that have been increasingly devolved to local level (Paulos Chanie 2007).

Fourthly, the 2005 elections were not simply a moment of intense conflict between the EPRDF and the opposition, but also took on the contours of an inter-generational conflict. Ethiopia has one of Africa’s largest youth populations, which for the first time in general elections vented its frustration at the government’s unkept promises of democratisation and development. This was notably the case of urban and more educated 20- to 30-year-old youths. This generation has no or only limited memories of the Derg’s state repression, since they have grown up under a government that has constantly propagated democratic rights. Particularly for urban youth, many of whom aspire to a job in the public sector (Serneels 2007), the 2005 elections were an opportunity to reject the EPRDF by either boycotting the poll, supporting the opposition and/or actively demonstrating against the regime. As Daniel Mains argues in his chapter on unemployed urban youth in Jimma, youth
emerged as a distinct social category in Ethiopia in 2005. By expressing their disinterest and cynicism towards the elections, young urban men signalled their refusal to enter into patron-client relations with the state who sought to engage with them through the party-run youth associations or mahabar. The important role of youth in the 2005 Ethiopian elections is illustrated by their prominent involvement in post-election demonstrations in Addis Ababa and cities in the Amhara and Oromiya regions and SNNPR. Derided by the government as adegegna bozeni or ‘dangerous hoodlums’, youthful opposition supporters and ‘trouble-makers’ became the prime target for federal police and other security forces during the November 2005 crackdown. In Oromiya region in particular, students and youth from the countryside have continued to protest against the government, leading to repeated clashes with security forces over recent years. As Charles Schaefer observes in his chapter on Oromiya region, it was in many ways a power struggle between elder elite rulers and youthful opposition that erupted during the 2005 elections.

The Ethiopian case demonstrates the complexities and subtleties of how formal politics and power projected through multi-party elections are unfolding, and how informal institutions of power as traditional authorities perceive and react to them. The role of traditional authorities in elections is an area of research deserving of greater attention in Ethiopia and in Africa in general, as elections are a major and much-contested discursive and symbolic moment of political interaction, in which both formal and informal actors clash over defining and defaming political legitimacy and the ‘content’ of elections. The study of traditional authorities in elections must thus be seen as complimentary to conventional elections and democracy research as it will help to develop a ‘multilayered’ methodological approach to election studies (Tronvoll 2009a).

The following chapters shed some light on the power of traditions and dynamics of identification that marked Ethiopia’s contested 2005 elections. The authors vividly demonstrate how institutions of traditional authority overlap with multi-party politics in Ethiopia’s post-1991 democratisation. Revealing how spheres of modern and customary politics influence, shape and even reconstitute one another in Ethiopia, this book provides a comparative ethnography of the contested powers of the 2005 elections, thereby contributing to an emergent anthropology of democracy (Paley 2002). It also highlights the contemporaneousness of traditional authorities as observed
in an era of multi-party elections, in which customary forms of authority complement modern party politics and – as in other African states – are intrinsically related to contemporary statehood and formal governance.

Bibliography

Following local usage, Ethiopian authors are referenced by their first name.


