

A Dream Defiled

The Betrayal of Ethiopia's Democracy

By Micha Odenheimer

The Washington Post

Sunday, December 18, 2005; Page B04

The Addis Ababa airport I used to know was shabby and neglected, an overgrown shack of wood, concrete and tin. It smelled of incense mingled with the dank, sweet odor of sewage. But the old airport had been torn down since my last visit; in its place was a sparkling, high-ceilinged structure of metal and glass into which light poured from every direction.

Now, as I rode into the city, traffic stopped for a herd of goats and beggars were sleeping on the traffic islands that divided the road. But people were also bustling around with cell phones stuck to their ears, and brightly lit Internet cafes were filled with young people. Things were changing for the better, it seemed when I arrived last month. There was no reason to suspect that Ethiopia was poised to plunge headlong into darkness -- that within a week, dozens of street protesters would be dead, and tens of thousands of young people arrested.

Like many in the West who follow Africa, I was prepared to think well of Meles Zenawi, Ethiopia's engaging prime minister. After all, in 1991 he had toppled Mengistu Haile Mariam, the communist dictator. Under Mengistu, fear used to be palpable. Hulking members of the secret police patrolled the streets at night, their weapons hidden under long dark coats. I had been in Addis Ababa 14 years ago when Zenawi's Tigrean People's Liberation Front had freed the city, ending 15 years of civil war. The young TPLF fighters, dressed in frayed, unmatched combat fatigues, had seemed incorruptible as they moved through the city, stealing nothing, as though still in the countryside where they had lived for years.

Zenawi, an avowed Marxist Leninist during the civil war, adroitly changed ideologies after taking charge of Ethiopia in May 1991. With the Soviet Union collapsing, Zenawi vowed to bring democracy and Western-style economic growth to Ethiopia. Since then, Ethiopian democracy had been far from perfect -- Zenawi's party had won suspiciously resounding victories in two consecutive elections and was suspected of fudging poll results in parliamentary races in May that were initially seen as fairer. But I was ready to give him the benefit of the doubt. Hadn't a free press been allowed to flourish in the capital? Hadn't I seen, in visits over the past decade, that people were no longer afraid to speak their minds? And didn't the cell phones and Internet cafes indicate that part of the population was emerging from poverty?

All too often encouraging signs of change have proven false in African nations, but Zenawi's mastery of the language and symbols of liberal democracy had raised hopes that Ethiopia would be an exception. Figures such as British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz praised Zenawi as a wise leader. Contributions from Western donor countries covered almost a third of Ethiopia's annual budget. And Jimmy Carter, whose Carter Center had sent hundreds of observers, declared the May campaign this year basically free and fair. Yet democracy, like beauty, is sometimes only skin-deep -- and elections are of only cosmetic value when the army, the media and the justice system are all controlled by the ruling party.

As I drove into Addis Ababa, the police were stopping buses, seemingly at random, and searching all male passengers. This was the first sign, for me, that something was amiss. The next day I sat in the attic of a small restaurant, with 20 young men, most well educated yet unemployed. They were chewing mildly narcotic leaves of qat and talking politics, green paste dripping occasionally from the corners of their mouths. All of them had been stopped and searched over the previous 24 hours, and all were angry.

The May 15 elections had been rigged, they told me. When the government realized it was losing in the rural areas, its traditional power base, as well as in the cities, it had stolen ballots and stuffed boxes in the swaths of countryside where no observers were posted. After the elections, Zenawi imposed a state of emergency, outlawing public protest and lambasting the opposition over state-controlled television and radio. In June, students at Addis Ababa University who had shouted protest slogans had been arrested. When a high school girl lay down in front of the trucks that came to take the students away, she was shot by a sniper. Then all hell broke loose and at least 35 people were shot dead when security forces opened fire.

Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, a leading intellectual and one of the architects of the main opposition party, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD), had championed human rights and been jailed by both Haile Selassie's and Mengistu's regimes. Now, at age 75, he was at odds with a new regime.

White-haired, frail and coughing as he chain-smoked Marlboros, Mesfin expressed both hope and outrage when I interviewed him in his cluttered apartment. "The opposition is engaged in peaceful political struggle, but the government is using brute force. Yesterday, the police entered the CUD offices, beat people and carted them off. Hundreds are in prison." Mesfin lit another cigarette. "For the Ethiopian people, the masses, there is a new awakening. They once believed that God gave you rulers. Now they are beginning to realize that they have sovereign rights."

The CUD had called for a general strike to be held Nov. 4, but on Nov. 1, the day after I spoke to Mesfin, violence began. Several hundred high school students joined by children in the sprawling Merkato market confronted police and red-bereted army special forces, blocking streets, burning tires and throwing stones. Across the city, stores closed their metal gates; the minivan taxis disappeared, city buses were pelted with stones. By nightfall, eight people were dead, including two police officers, and most opposition leaders -- including Mesfin -- had been arrested and charged with treason, an offense punishable by death. Independent newspapers had been closed, and journalists were in prison or hiding.

There had been warning signs about the repressive nature of the Zenawi regime 14 years ago. Ethiopia has some 70 ethnic groups, including the Amhara, the Oromo and the Tigreans. The Amhara tribe, whose members included Haile Selassie and Mengistu, had ruled Ethiopia for a hundred years, conquering lands and creating a nation out of disparate parts. The Oromo, the largest ethnic group, were largely disempowered. The Tigreans, though fewer in number, were the Amhara's historic rivals.

The day after the Tigrean fighters ousted Mengistu, Amhara demonstrators carrying long green branches had protested Zenawi's plan to allow Eritrea, Ethiopia's northernmost region, which had

been fighting for independence for 30 years, to secede. "Ethiopia must stay united," the agitated demonstrators had cried. I was standing with Tigrean soldiers, who were still dressed in their ragtag rebel clothes, when they singled out one demonstrator and cornered him in front of the exterior brick wall of a church. He was a middle-aged man with a paunch and I watched him raise his hands in a gesture of submission before the soldiers shot him at close range -- once, twice, until he collapsed.

My natural sympathy was not with the protesters. I saw them as Amhara supremacists who did not appreciate that the Tigreans had liberated them from a brutal dictatorship. Because of this, perhaps, I didn't judge the incident harshly enough.

I thought of that shooting again as accounts of police and army excesses started pouring in last month. A French journalist I met on the street had seen army troops firing at the backs of retreating demonstrators. A young woman ran up to us breathlessly and said she had seen soldiers burst into a house a block away and start shooting. Soldiers roared through the now empty streets by the truckload. By afternoon, most of the shooting had subsided. But not all of it.

In the morning, in one of the thousands of dirt alleyways that form grids between Addis Ababa's broad avenues, I was led into a mud-brick home, where mourners wept and danced in a frenzy of sorrow. A 17-year-old named Tsegahun had been standing with friends in the alleyway at dusk the day before when soldiers arrived. One of the friends said, "They called him over, told him to kneel down, and shot him twice in the midsection."

After that, hundreds of young men had taken refuge in a nearby river gorge to escape soldiers who had come knocking on doors at midnight. I heard the same story in neighborhood after neighborhood. Arrests continued every night for a week, until thousands were taken, human rights groups said. Many were hauled 220 miles away, to the malaria-infected lowlands near Sudan.

After a week, Addis Ababa returned to a semblance of normalcy. Shops reopened -- though only after the government had begun to revoke the licenses of businesses that remained closed. Parents wandered from police station to police station, trying to get information about their arrested children. The opposition leaders, Mesfin among them, were shown on TV shuffling, handcuffed and bent, toward a courtroom.

Suspicion simmered, as though the Mengistu era had returned. People in cafes shot furtive glances at neighboring tables.

"We feel betrayed by democracy," said a journalist who said he has been in hiding since the Nov. 1 crackdown. "It's as if the government encouraged us to speak our minds so that it would know who to grab when the time came."

Yet many Ethiopians believe that the Western democracies could still help. The driver who took me to the airport, a friend from previous visits, had carefully avoided talking politics during my trip.

As we approached the terminal, he finally had his say. "The donor countries can twist Meles's arm and make him compromise -- release the prisoners, allow the newspapers to reopen," he said about Zenawi. "That's if they care about democracy as much as they say."

Democracy had been the focus of the people's disappointment -- yet that disappointment had not killed their desire for it. Zenawi, undoubtedly, already knows this.

Author's e-mail: mzo@netvision.net.il

Micha Odenheimer is a writer and rabbi based in Jerusalem.

© 2005 The Washington Post Company