

## ETHIOPIA: A landslide victory for the ruling party

The party in power has won the bet: it has not only annihilated its opposition and wiped off the memories of their bewildering upsurge in the previous general elections, but has also managed to achieve a high voter turnout (90% of the voters) and peaceful elections. Though the complete official results for the 547 seats of the National Assembly are to be declared only on 21 June, the partial results announced by the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) on 24 May are final:

- The eight-party coalition of the opposition, Medrek (Forum for Democratic Dialogue), has managed to win only one of the 536 constituencies where the results are known. The coalition in power, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) has won 499 seats while its allies have acquired 36.
- Even the traditional strongholds of the opposition, Addis Ababa and the Oromia region<sup>1</sup>, have not been able to withstand the "tidal wave". The EPRDF has won in at least 20 of the 23 constituencies in the capital, while in the Oromia region, the party in power secured 3,927,673 votes as against 117,790 for the Medrek;

The country has indeed been pushed once again into nearly a one-party dominant era. The ruling party celebrated its success by organising grand rallies in the main cities. On 25 May, more than 200,000 people gathered in the heart of Addis Ababa to listen to the speech of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who is now sure to retain his office.

Firstly, the opposition suffered the effects of the systematic suppression that it had been subjected to for the last five years. It was impaired by the absence of its most charismatic leaders, either imprisoned or in exile, and the division of others. The enthusiasm of the young, 36 year old president of the Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ), Birtukan Mideksa, who was imprisoned end of 2008, was lacking for mobilising the crowds; while the economist Berhanu Nega is still in exile in the United States.

A drastic withdrawal of the voters, convinced of the futility of voting for the opposition made matters worse. Since 2005, Ethiopians have learnt the hard way that to have access to land, grants and the administration in general, it is necessary to be members of the EPRDF or at least vote for it. The strenuous security climate of the electoral campaign has certainly succeeded in discouraging those who intended to vote for the opposition. The very controversial Oromia region was particularly affected by violence.

Refusing to admit its defeat, the opposition is making a final attempt to remain in the political game. In fact, the main opposition parties are in unison while demanding the revocation of the results and organisation of a new ballot. They denounce the attempts of intimidation and pressures exerted during the electoral campaign, the frauds and irregularities during the polls (rigging of votes, absence of polling booths) and maintain that their observers were stopped from entering several polling stations or were driven out. The opposition parties also plan to lodge a complaint with the NEBE and the courts in order to obtain the order for holding new elections. Their demand has very little chance of being accepted. Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has already condemned their criticism as "unjustified".

As expected, the international community showed itself to be conciliatory despite the irregularities. Since 09/11, the government is enjoying a real immunity in terms of Human Rights violation. The democratic flaws of the government are largely offset in the eyes of the Western world by its authoritative role in the Horn of Africa and its diplomatic involvement in the African as well as international authorities. The observers of the African Union refused to criticise the country where the organisation's headquarters is located, while the senior representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs, Catherine Ashton, was pleased with the "peaceful holding" of the polls. Even the United States have avoided hurting their ally country. On 26 May, the State Department declared that the future of US-Ethiopian relationship will depend on the democratic openness of the government; there has been no question of doubting the "extensive and deep relation with Ethiopia".

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005, it was in the Oromia region that the opposition had achieved its best result.