

Brutal clampdown by Ethiopian regime

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Earlier this month at least 46 people in Ethiopia were shot dead, including women and children, and hundreds of others were wounded in a police crackdown on protests supporting the main opposition grouping, the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD).

The attacks on demonstrators took place in the capital, Addis Ababa, but there are also reports of police clashing with protesters in the towns of Awassa, Dessie, Debre Berhan and Bahar Dar. Thousands were rounded up and sent to detention centres. Although the police now claim to have released some 8,000 people, they have given no figure for the total being held. Several thousand more are believed still detained in harsh conditions.

The CUD had called for non-violent protests against the alleged rigging of the May elections. It is boycotting the newly formed parliament and the government has stripped its elected representatives of parliamentary immunity. Amnesty International is appealing for the release of 24 opposition leaders held for two weeks without charge. Other oppositionists are in hiding, with a total of 58 people now charged with treason. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists has reported that eight independent journalists have been imprisoned and are facing prosecution, with the government claiming they “violently undermine the constitutional order in the country.”

The events are a continuation of similar protests that took place in June over the rigging of the election, when at least 42 people were killed and hundreds wounded by the police. The ruling elite was clearly taken aback by the size of the opposition vote, especially in Addis Ababa and other urban areas. Because the opposition coalition CUD is based on parties that are divided among themselves, relying on largely on ethnic groupings opposed to the ruling Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), it was expected to attract limited support. According to *Africa Confidential*, “the CUD was just as startled [as the EPDRF] when it swept the board in Addis Ababa.”

After challenges over the election results dragged on for

weeks, the government finally announced that it had won 296 seats in the 547-member Parliament, with the opposition gaining 176 seats. The protests held by the CUD this month claimed that their share of seats should have been much higher. They were attempting to draw attention to their claims of election fraud at the African Union summit meeting that was taking place in the Ethiopian capital.

The CUD is a pro-imperialist formation that supports the imposition of International Monetary Fund and World Bank free market measures even more firmly than the EPRDF. However, what is reflected in the mass protests, despite the right-wing policies and fractious nature of the CUD, is a growing but confused opposition to the government and its own imposition of World Bank policies. The regime plunged the country into war with its erstwhile ally Eritrea between 1998 and 2000. Up to 100,000 people were killed and millions of dollars spent on armaments by both the impoverished nations before the United Nations imposed a ceasefire. Neither side made gains and both have refused to sign up to a proposed UN agreement. Ethiopia failed to win any economic advantage by gaining access to the coast—one of its key war aims.

Since the end of the war the Ethiopian regime has fully embraced free market policies and has received increased western backing and aid, with Prime Minister Meles Zenawi taking a key part in British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s Africa Commission. Privatisation policies have proved a disaster for the bulk of the population. The country’s key export, coffee, has fallen to half its volume over the last five years and income is down by \$830 million to \$165 million as world prices have plummeted. Farmers have been forced to produce khat (a local narcotic) in order to survive.

To replace coffee production the government has heavily invested, using western aid, in new roads and building up the horticulture and floriculture sector. But although such measures have produced a double digit growth rate—to the satisfaction of the World Bank—they

fail to provide anything more than cheap labour jobs for the impoverished population. Official government literature touting for investment boasts that “the cost of labor in Ethiopia is not only lower than some Asian nations, but also African countries such as Tunisia, Mauritius, Kenya, etc.”

Africa Confidential gives some indication of the impact on the population in the capital of the government’s investment and road building programme: “Unemployed and poor people saw their houses swept away for road-space and were rehoused in far-off parts of the city. When the authorities promised 40,000 new houses, the electoral benefit was cancelled out when more than 400,000 people applied.”

Some 80 percent of the 70 million population live in rural areas and it is there that the ruling EPRDF received most of its support in the election. An investigation by Human Rights Watch (HRW) explains that the government has control over the sale of fertilizer and other agricultural inputs, which it uses to help keep the rural population “under tight political control.” Farmers are forced to go into debt to buy fertilizer and HRW’s investigation showed that government representatives “punished political dissent by selectively imprisoning critics for unpaid debts and withholding vital agricultural inputs from them.”

Ethiopia has consistently kept up with its debt repayment schedule, spending \$100 million last year on debt servicing, more than it spends on healthcare. As well as indebtedness to the western banks and falling coffee prices it now faces an additional economic burden of a huge increase in the cost of oil imports, increasing from \$300 million two years ago to \$900 million this year.

This is in a country where more than half the population lives in extreme poverty. According to UNICEF on average, 500,000 Ethiopian children die every year from preventable diseases and malnourishment with seven million Ethiopian children suffering from some form of malnutrition every year.

The western governments, which are supportive of the Zenawi regime, largely turned a blind eye to ballot-rigging allegations and even to the police killings in June. Even the more critical European Union observer—Ethiopia is the largest recipient of EU development aid in Africa—considered the elections to be a “genuine if limited demonstration of democracy.” However, there is now clearly a growing concern in the west that continued repression and the threat of instability could damage Ethiopia’s investment prospects. The World Bank’s

representative in Ethiopia, Ishac Diwan, told IRIN: “We have tried to ring the alarm bells and will continue to do so.” He stressed that, “If governance declines, aid amounts would fall over time.”

As well as the clampdown on the opposition, Zenawi is now attempting to divert attention from the protests and the obvious decline in popularity of the ruling party by threatening to restart the war with Eritrea. According to Reuters both Ethiopia and Eritrea have moved troops and tanks to areas near the 16-mile wide Temporary Security Zone along the border between the countries and both sides have moved some troops into the buffer zone.

It may well be that Zenawi is also hoping to use the threat of a return to war as a negotiating ploy with western governments anxious to maintain stability in this area of strategic importance. A meeting of the UN Security Council this week is likely to press both sides to return to the positions they held last year, to insist that Eritrea allow UN helicopter flights in the border region and to urge Ethiopia to accept the binding ruling of an international commission on the border.

Comments in the western press have drawn attention to Ethiopia as only the worst example of countries in Africa where there have been problems with the democracy that western powers have attempted to impose. The *Washington Post* headlined “Trust in Elected Leaders and Democracy fades” (November 18) while Britain’s *Independent* opined “March of Democracy falters in Africa.” (November 15). As well as Ethiopia the articles refer to five people killed in election rallies in Kenya, and a senior opposition leader being locked up in Uganda.

Neither newspaper gives much of an explanation other than leaders refusing to accept democracy, or the growth of popular opposition to corrupt leaders clinging to power. In fact the growth of anger reflects a much deeper hostility toward government policies of the last two decades—driven by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—that have produced disastrous levels of poverty and unemployment as well as huge inequality between the masses and a tiny elite. Such social decay is incompatible with even the minimal level of democracy that western governments ask for.



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