

Ensuring the Integrity of the Elections: A series of 23 articles that appeared in “A Week in the Horn”, on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, between Mid December 2009 and Election Day on May 23rd 2010.

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18.12.2009 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: is Addis Neger’s self-closure part of an anti-government campaign?*

The role of an independent media in the development of good governance and democratic political culture cannot be overstated. Since the promulgation in 1992 of the country’s first Press Law, Ethiopia has had a multiplicity of private newspapers, many, but not all, contributing to the development of democratic culture. At times, press freedom has been used as an excuse for freedom to sabotage the very political process some papers claimed to support. Some newspapers masqueraded as champions of media independence and other democratic values while riding roughshod over the Constitution which forms the basis for the entire process. There was an all-too-frequent lack of professionalism and some of the press failed to play the role that might have been expected in advancing the basic tenets of democracy and good governance. Some papers and magazines have folded, others have replaced them. The number of press products in the marketplace remains impressive.

Any real analysis of the situation of the press is complicated. Organizations like Reporters Without Borders and the International Press Institute make immediate assumptions that any government action in response to violations of the law by media bodies, however legitimate or legal, can only be seen as acts of persecution, intended to suppress dissent. Even self-exiled agents of the 'free press' are automatically presented to the international media with fanfare as champions of "press freedom". Whatever their real reasons for departure, newspaper editors and journalists who leave Ethiopia are immediately described as "victims of persecution", a description of course that automatically enhances their prospects of asylum and reinforces any claims that they might make on their own behalf.

The latest example of this has been the case of Addis Neger, a two-year old Amharic weekly. Its editors recently claimed to have closed the paper down and fled from Ethiopia because they "feared persecution and intimidation" by the Government. Addis Neger was certainly one of the most widely read newspapers in the country and was well known for its scathing criticisms of the Government, but as Reporters Without Borders knows well it has not been the only media outlet critical of the Government, nor the most outspoken. In fact, the assumption that allegations of persecution must be true, simply because the editors claim to have fled the country out of fear, does actually present some difficulties. Addis Neger, which has always claimed to be a hundred percent behind the truth, certainly called for a change of government, but this did not constitute a crime. Despite its political line, as the editors know well, Addis Neger never faced anything in the way of an official government complaint much less any sort of persecution that could give rise to the "flight" of its editors. Indeed, its editors actually said as much on TV only a few weeks earlier. In a TV documentary which included interviews with many other editors and journalists, from both government and independent media, they stated they had never been subject to any form of censorship by the government nor had the government ever tried to interfere in their press activities. There was no mention of any harassment. Surprisingly, too, for champions of the 'free press', the editors claim they finally decided to leave only after they heard that a TV documentary was about to portray them negatively. They also claimed that un-named but "reliable" sources said the Government was preparing charges against them. At least one of the editorial board actually left on a scholarship. Even after their departure, the paper continued to publish for another three weeks before it folded. Incidentally, the editors' "flight" took place a month before they made their statements to the international media. One might also wonder why a government apparently determined to devote so much time and energy to threatening the editors of Addis Neger should, when it came to the point, so easily allow the group to leave without difficulty.

All of this raises the question of exactly what might lie behind such a carefully orchestrated performance, besides the obvious aim of providing evidence for asylum claims. Given the critical politics of the Addis Neger editorial board, it seems likely that the forthcoming elections might have some relevance, and certainly this has been raised by Addis Neger's foreign supporters.

Addis Neger ceased publication at the end of November; and it was on December 8 that the National Electoral Board (a frequent target of Addis Neger criticisms) announced the start of the election campaign. Voting takes place next May. A US Embassy statement claimed that the closure might contribute to a perception that independent media space in Ethiopia was being constrained, and Reporters Without Borders said the decision by the editors of Addis Neger to close down and flee was evidence of “a climate of fear”. As Prime Minister Meles noted, it is difficult to take such claims seriously if only because Reporters Without Borders always assumes all such claims are true and never bothers to try and verify such claims.

There are roughly two schools of thought regarding the elections and the role the opposition should play. One holds that there is a lot that can and should be done to make the elections free and fair, and places much emphasis on the outcome of what will be a democratic exercise. The recent Code of Conduct signed by four parties and endorsed by almost all other parties, was one development pointing in the right direction. Addis Neger, it might be noted, was clearly unhappy about the recent inter-party dialogue which led to the signing of the Code of Conduct. The second approach sees the election in May as acceptable only if it results in the removal of the incumbent. Proponents believe that if they cannot have their own way, then they should do everything in their power to deny the electoral process a legitimacy which they apparently believe (quite wrongly) to be in their power to confer or withdraw at will. Their stated approach is to try to discredit any and all of the Government’s democratic credentials.

A perusal of Addis Neger’s output demonstrates a close similarity of tone. It can hardly have been a coincidence. It suggests the self-closure of Addis Neger might be part of a bigger game-plan by some interest groups designed to try and discredit the electoral process in advance, an element in a smear campaign against government action over the next few months. Prime Minister Meles suggested it might even be part of a wider effort to try and resurrect the idea of a “colour revolution” in Ethiopia. If so, similar allegations can be expected to be made in the next few months. Other journalists can be expected to appear to make similar unfounded allegations. The only surprise, then, about the closure of Addis Neger is the timing. It appears to have been premature. A greater impact might have been expected had the editors waited another couple of months or so.

1.1.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: Sweden’s unfounded allegations – is this the way to promote democracy?*

It has been a little over 15 years since the first ever press law was introduced in Ethiopia, a development which sparked off an unprecedented level of growth in the number of press and media outlets. These have, over the years, promoted a significant variety of views on a broad range of issues. They have provided full opportunities for people to exercise freedom of expression without fear of censorship or any form of government interference. They continue to provide the same opportunity today.

Certainly there were originally problems in the development of the private press. There was an all-too-frequent lack of professionalism, and some papers failed to play the role that might have been expected to advance the basic tenets of democracy and good governance, deliberately encouraging violence and illegal activity. Despite this, the Government's response towards these outlets was very careful. It made no effort to implement most of the legal measures it could have taken in these circumstances, and exercised considerable self-restraint towards even the most recalcitrant media outlets in order to encourage and support the concepts of freedom of speech and expression.

One of the newspapers to exercise its constitutional rights in connection with freedom of expression was Addis Neger, an Amharic weekly that first appeared on the 26th of October, 2007. The paper was well known for its scathing criticisms of the Government, but it was not the only media outlet critical of the Government, nor even the most outspoken. Despite its critical political line, Addis Neger never faced anything in the way of an official government complaint, much less any sort of persecution, though some of its articles and editorials were criticized by other papers. In fact, the Government did not even take any action after Addis Neger illegally attempted to solicit funds from various Western Embassies for its own private fellowships without informing the Ministry of Education. There was never any suggestion that the editors might face criminal charges on account of their work. Indeed, the editors of Addis Neger actually said as much on TV only a few weeks before they left the country. In a TV documentary which included interviews with many other editors and journalists, from both government and independent media, Addis Neger's Managing Editor, Mesfin Negash, said specifically: *"We have never been subject to any form of censorship by the government nor has the government ever tried to interfere in our press activities; no government official has ever instructed us what the content of our paper should or should not be."*

Another member of Addis Neger's editorial board, Tamrat Negera, in the same documentary corroborated his managing editor's remarks and underlined the prevailing atmosphere under which the press operated: *"Two of the greatest achievements of the new political order in the last 15 years [since 1993] are the freedom to form political parties and the press."*

It is, therefore, surprising to find these same editors claiming, one month after their 'flight' out of the country, that they had been forced to close their paper down and flee from Ethiopia because they "feared persecution and intimidation" by the Government. Immediately after the Addis Neger editors made these claims public, the Government launched an enquiry into the circumstances of their departure and the reasons for it. The investigation rapidly confirmed that the three editors, namely, Abiy Teklemariam, Tamrat Negera and Mesfin Negash, had left Ethiopia quite openly and legally from Bole International Airport on September 29, October 4 and November 12 respectively, and without difficulty. It might be noted that Abiy Teklemariam the first to leave has now enrolled at Green Templeton College, Oxford, UK on a scholarship. If, in fact, as they claim, the Government had really devoted so much time and energy to threatening them, and was planning to arrest the trio, it is hard to understand why immigration officials at the airport, when it came to the point, allowed the three to leave without difficulty.

Indeed, the investigation revealed that Addis Neger, far from being an ordinary, if highly opinionated, private newspaper, devoted to accuracy and truth as it claimed, was rather more involved in opposition politics than it had pretended to be and it was anything but an impartial and balanced paper. It could indeed be identified as a paper for the opposition as it made clear in claiming recent prison sentences as “political” rather than legal in its editorial of August 29th, 2009, indicating the nature of the campaign of which it was a part. This was underlined by the statements made during the recent media campaign launched by the editors after they left Ethiopia, in which they finally made clear their own political interests. The set of demands put forward as pre-conditions for a resumption of publication, including the release of “political prisoners”, the replacement of the electoral board and what amounted to a change of government, came straight from the more extreme elements in the opposition.

On December 16th, the story of Addis Neger’s self-closure took a new turn when Sweden’s Minister for International Cooperation, Gunilla Carlsson, issued a statement attacking the Government of Ethiopia, claiming that the closure of Addis Neger showed that freedom of expression was becoming increasingly limited in Ethiopia. She claimed it was a cause of great concern that journalists were being harassed, and one of the few independent newspapers in the country had been closed. Sweden went even further, using its position as the recent chair of the European Union presidency, to encourage the European Union to take up a similar position. Two days later, the European Union adopted a statement urging the Government of Ethiopia to ensure that allegations of harassment and intimidation were investigated and, if proven, those responsible should be held to account.

The Swedish statement is a serious indictment against the Government of Ethiopia, and one based, as already noted, on totally unfounded allegations. It’s no more than a smear campaign attacking the Government on fallacious grounds in connection with press freedom and democracy. The Swedish Minister clearly raised no question over the veracity of the claim made by the editors of Addis Neger. That the claim was made at all was apparently all the evidence Minister Carlsson needed to make her unsupported and groundless allegations. Such a position can only be described as hypocritical, coming as it does from people who have been encouraging the likes of Addis Neger to deliberately stage the closure of their papers, facilitating their travels abroad and financing their media campaign in recent weeks by helping them propagate their story as a rallying cry for anti-government elements.

This statement by the Swedish Minister must be rejected and condemned. In addition to being inaccurate, it is seriously misguided. There is no doubt, for instance, that the claim made is, to say the least, certainly unhelpful for the development of democracy in Ethiopia. It is extremely intrusive and appears indicative of a desire to try to micro-manage Ethiopia’s democratization process from Stockholm. It is, in fact, an extremely ill-advised attempt by Sweden to try to deny Ethiopia’s ownership of its own democratic processes. It cannot succeed. It cannot be allowed to succeed. We have made it clear time and again that non-citizens and nationals of other states are in no position to ensure the growth of a viable press in Ethiopia.

That is something that has to come from within, a natural growth from Ethiopia's own continuous process of press freedom and democratization. It might be added that although the Swedish Minister was quick to echo unconfirmed and gratuitous claims by Addis Neger's editors, she didn't acknowledge the electoral Code of Conduct signed by ruling and opposition parties with the aim of making next May's national elections competitive, peaceful, free and fair. This was in fact a development characterized as 'historic' by the majority of the independent press in Ethiopia, and it was a great pity that Sweden was apparently not prepared even to notice such a development. Some 65 political parties agreed to the Code, developed after extensive discussions, before it was submitted to Parliament and passed into law last week. By any standard it is a major step forward in helping the parties build healthy democratic relationships and resolve political differences through peaceful dialogue.

The recent utterance of the Swedish minister must in fact be seen as both reckless and intemperate. It is an unfortunate example of paternalism, out of place in this post-colonial world. In all frankness, the position taken, and the attack on Ethiopia, has no justification. The claim that freedom of expression is becoming increasingly limited in Ethiopia is purely polemical. Ethiopia continues to enjoy the presence of dozens of private newspapers which operate freely. The quality of the press overall may still leave a lot to be desired, but it is baffling that Sweden should attack Ethiopia's record.

But this approach does not appear to be accidental. A brief perusal of a recent Swedish policy paper entitled "Government Communication on Swedish Democracy Support" certainly suggests something more. This policy paper is full of details on how to "support democracy" across the developing world, under what it calls a "Global Agenda for Freedom". Its suggestions including allowing Sweden the right to meddle in the internal affairs of other sovereign countries by supporting opposition parties, individuals, "social movements" or exile groups, which might bring about changes in the governance of sovereign states. The idea of democracy, firmly founded on the free choice of people, or the concept of sustainable democracy as a home grown, organic structure, not something imposed from outside, seems in fact to be suspect as far as Sweden is concerned. The policy paper specifically states: "the assumption that democratic change will be initiated from within rather than from without should not serve as an argument for not supporting democratic forces outside the system" (p.50). This is both a condescending and a dangerous ambition. The policy paper also envisages using the EU as a vehicle to advance such an intrusive agenda: "the Government underlines the need for more effective communication by the EU of the content of its democracy support program which emphasizes support for local actors" (p. 69). This perhaps explains the EU Presidency statement issued only two days after the Swedish Minister's comments.

The decision of the Government of Sweden to engage Ethiopia through media polemics can only be described as thoughtless and injudicious, threatening to jeopardize the growing levels of constructive engagement that Ethiopia enjoys with the European Union. Indeed, it appears designed to sidetrack Ethiopia into recriminations over the issue of press freedom, diluting the present emphasis on constructive dialogue.

This is clearly detrimental to the mutual trust and understanding so essential for a healthy bilateral relationship between states. Sweden, and indeed other stakeholders, should recognize the danger of making such meddlesome and intrusive statements on the basis of fallacious and inaccurate information, particularly in the absence of any effort to investigate their reality. They should rather work to enhance relationships built upon the basis of mutual trust and interest. Positions taken without verification undermine the respect that states should have for each other, a respect normally based on the conviction that positions are taken up in good faith, even if they are not necessarily laudatory.

8.1.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: challenges within and without*

In five months, Ethiopians will go to the polls to cast their votes in the 4th national and regional elections to elect representatives to both the Federal and Regional Parliaments. Registration of candidates began on December 25th and carries on until February 2nd when financial subsidies will be allocated to the parties on the basis of numbers of registered candidates. Although election fever is so far muted, major developments have already shown the desire of all Ethiopians not to have any repeat of the aftermath of the 2005 elections. In an unprecedented move, the EPRDF and four other opposition parties reached a ground-breaking agreement, rightly called historic, especially when one looks back at the track record of Ethiopian political parties and their behaviour not so long ago, for an election Code of Conduct to be the guide to determine all aspects of the up-coming elections and to make these elections and their outcome, peaceful, fair and acceptable in the eyes of the electorate. That Code, subsequently supported by 60 other political parties, has now been promulgated into law by the House of Peoples Representatives. Only the Ethiopian Federalist Democratic Unity Forum has yet to sign up to the Code, though it is, of course, bound by its provisions now that the Code has become law.

Last week, the parties also agreed another controversial issue, the allocation of airtime for the contesting parties during the campaign. It took three days of intense negotiations to agree a formula for media usage. This is based on the size of current representation in Parliament and the number of candidates each party is putting forward, with a final 25% of time to be shared equally between all parties. There are still some details to be ironed out over the transmission of policy debates. Live transmissions dramatically changed the face of electoral politics at the last national and federal elections. They were, however, also characterized in part by unverified allegations and counter-allegations as well as highly personal attacks on the character of some participants. This time it can be expected that the Code of Conduct will deal with any concerns over the discipline and structure of the debates.

All this raises expectations that Ethiopian political parties have at last departed from their old habits of excessively rancorous relationships, and now understand and accept how political discourse should be handled. There is no doubt the country has come a long way from the earlier attitude of hard-line political parties effectively bent on destroying themselves.

We can realistically see the appearance of a flourishing democratic system dawning in Ethiopia, but that doesn't mean we can, or should, relax our vigilance. We need to remain prepared to respond quickly and decisively to any challenges to our efforts at democratization and to the building of a stable democratic system in this country. Some of these challenges have emanated from home-grown terrorist elements which have tried to change the course of events inside Ethiopia, refusing to be a part of the process of democratization. The most recent episodes of this kind were the attempts at a violent challenge posed by Ginbot 7, and other advocates of "colour revolutions."

The latest gambits by such groups, attempting to pose direct challenges to democratization and create a threat to a stable democracy, have been encouraged, supported, and even managed, by the Government of Eritrea which has been doing all it can to try to derail the democratization process in Ethiopia. The Eritrean leadership, of course, has resolutely set its face against any form of elections or democratic development, with President Issayas saying firmly that elections have nothing to do with democracy, that the people of Eritrea do not want elections or political parties and that he personally did not believe either of these were likely to appear in Eritrea for many years, possibly not even in his lifetime. Eritrean government involvement in efforts to destabilize Ethiopia's electoral process is no surprise to those who follow events in and around Ethiopia, and the Horn region in any detail. One only has to look back at what has transpired over the last decade and a half and at the wars of aggression unleashed by Eritrea against the countries of the Horn and indeed across the Red Sea, in Yemen.

Several of these previous attempts of the Eritrean regime to destabilize its neighbours ended with Eritrea being given some hard lessons, but it seemed to have learned little. It has continued with its old behaviour, forcing, IGAD, then the African Union and finally the United Nations Security Council to tell Eritrea's leaders, unambiguously, that they cannot be allowed to continue to wreak havoc in the countries of the Horn, and more especially in Somalia and Djibouti. This reaction by the international community towards the intransigence of Eritrea's President has taken far too long to evolve, but it has now culminated in the imposition of sanctions against Eritrea's leadership by the Security Council. It followed repeated calls by the international community requesting President Issayas to desist from activities that were a clear and present danger to the stability of the whole region.

The destabilization strategies of the Eritrean regime against Ethiopia, and other states, were summed up in paragraph 15 of the Security Council resolution: "...providing support from Eritrea to armed opposition groups which aim to destabilize the region; harbouring, financing, facilitating, supporting, organizing, training, or inciting individuals or groups to perpetrate acts of violence or terrorist acts against other States and their citizens in the region". These include former elements of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy, the most intransigent group of which, Ginbot 7, has committed itself to change the constitutional order in Ethiopia by violent means. There is credible evidence that there have been frequent contacts between the Eritrean regime and Ginbot 7 in recent months, and it now appears it is being used as a platform by the Eritrean regime to try to continue with destabilizing activities in the run-up to the elections. The Eritrean

Government has also made it clear that it is trying to bring together a number of the Ethiopian opposition groups which support armed struggle and terrorist activities.

While this Eritrean Government strategy is hardly new, it is inevitably of some concern as federal and regional elections approach. It makes it all the more important that the elections are held in a manner that does not give surrogate extremist groups any room or any opportunity to obstruct the holding of a peaceful, transparent and credible election. The Code of Conduct and the agreement over media access are an excellent start.

15.1.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: the wider implications of the Proclamation on the Code of Conduct for Political Parties*

The House of People's Representatives has adopted the Proclamation to Provide the Code of Conduct for the Political Parties. This is indeed a milestone in the democratization process in Ethiopia. For the first time in the history of Ethiopia, political parties negotiated, and agreed, a set of binding rules to govern their conduct, rules which are now codified as law of the land. It is a unique piece of legislation, and sets a far reaching precedent going well beyond the bounds of party politics in Ethiopia, and provides an example for the whole region. It is not just aimed at ensuring that the 2010 elections are free, fair, peaceful and credible. It also endows a legacy of a firmly and legally institutionalized system to govern all political parties in Ethiopia. It is particularly fitting that the ruling party and the three opposition parties, which jointly initiated, negotiated and agreed on the first draft of the Code of Conduct, have received much deserved accolades from Ethiopians from all walks of life and from members of the international community. To their credit, they strove to include all interested political parties to contribute to the further development of the code of conduct. They succeeded in attracting the support of over sixty political parties and it is fair to say that the final codification of the Code of Conduct by the legislature stamps it as a one of the major pillars of democracy in Ethiopia. The inclusive processes of the adoption of the law, and its highly innovative contents, have far reaching implications for democracy in Ethiopia. It promises to be a standard bearer for democracy well beyond the borders of Ethiopia.

The process and content of the new law follows a model instrument prepared by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). International IDEA's concept allows for a code of conduct to be part of the electoral law, or to be provided for in legislation to prescribe the conduct of parties, or to be agreed to by political parties, as an outcome of negotiations either among themselves or, more commonly, as a result of negotiations moderated by a third party. It may be agreed to by the parties, and then embodied in law, or it could be determined by a third party, such as an election administration body. In Ethiopia's case, the four parties chose to negotiate among themselves, and once they had agreed on the text, it was open to further improvement by other parties. It was this revised text, endorsed by almost all the remaining political parties, that was adopted into law by the national legislature.

Following this same International IDEA's model, the Proclamation to Provide the Code of Conduct for the Political Parties provides clear guidance and an institutional set-up to govern the conduct of political parties. Importantly, it demonstrates that lessons were learnt from the 2005 elections and a determination not to repeat the mistakes committed then. In this regard, the law binds political parties, candidates, members and supporters of political parties to ensure that this and all subsequent elections are guided by ethical rules of conduct and that they are transparent, free, legitimate, fair, peaceful, democratic and acceptable to the people. A central point is that it demonstrates full respect to the people as a source of state authority. This, indeed, is a cardinal principle of any democratic process, and it is closely linked to another critical element of the Proclamation: human and democratic rights have to be fully respected to foster a culture of civilized and peaceful struggle. The Proclamation lays down the cornerstones of the rule of law: respect for constitutional organs such as the National Electoral Board, the mass media and the judiciary; their ability to function independently and impartially, free from any political party pressures; the enabling of the National Defence Forces to discharge its responsibilities based on the Constitution and outside the influence of any political party.

In a clear departure from the past traditions of mutual distrust, the law emphasizes the need to work together on matters of common interest and delimits a determination to abide by the process and outcome of a legally conducted election as an expression of the will of the people. It provides for the promotion of tolerance and the conduct of political campaigns free of hatred and suspicion. It makes it clear it rejects any attempt to stay in power against the will of the people and emphasizes that any activity aimed at taking political power, through any means other than those provided by the Constitution, is not acceptable.

The Proclamation recognizes the imperative for political parties to work jointly for its implementation and thereby contribute to the freedom of the press, human rights, democracy, the rule of law and the over-all development of the peoples of Ethiopia. The environment thus created will enable all parties to enjoy free and open competition. It is about sharing responsibility for the nurturing of democracy in the country, about the growth of a culture of democracy enhancing mutual respect and tolerance. The Proclamation recognizes the need to ensure fairness in terms of guaranteeing fair and impartial utilization by all parties of the resources, property and services of the organs of government for election purposes. It underlines the responsibility of the political parties to ensure that exercising the right of any Ethiopian to elect, or be elected, is not impeded by any influence or obstacle. The parties are also responsible for creating awareness of democratic processes and for the carrying out of education and training. The need to institute procedures to investigate and rectify grievances submitted by political parties on election matters is another critical aspect of the Proclamation, which has also established a Joint Council of Political Parties to ensure the implementation of the Proclamation.

There is no doubt that the Proclamation, and the process of its adoption, has broken the pattern of mistrust and acrimony that has characterized party politics in the past. Political parties are, of course, the essential linchpin of a multiparty democracy. They alone make an organized and functioning democracy possible. Political parties allow for different

views and political options of governance to be channelled for debate for the electorate, empowering it to elect a government based on informed choice through peacefully conducted elections. And as political parties are central to a multiparty political system, it is imperative that their conduct is governed by a set of rules applicable to all. Such rules are designed to ensure a level playing field. The rules of conduct also comply with Ethiopia's international obligations. It is worth noting that Ethiopia is one of the only three African Union member states to have so far ratified the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance. It did so on 30 January 2007. Some of the most relevant objectives of this Charter include the promotion and enhancement of adherence to the principle of the rule of law premised upon the respect for, and the supremacy of, the Constitution and constitutional order; promoting the holding of regular free and fair elections to institutionalize the legitimate authority of representative government as well as democratic change of government; and the prohibition, rejection and condemnation of unconstitutional change of government. The Proclamation to Provide the Code of Conduct for the Political Parties implements these and other objectives and stipulations of the Charter in the most relevant way.

In the long term, the proper implementation of the Proclamation in good faith will help guarantee stability. It will prevent street violence, incitement or recriminations. The new law is, in fact, another instrument for the further entrenchment of democracy in Ethiopia, providing necessary safeguards against undemocratic tendencies. Implementation of the Proclamation on the Conduct of Conduct for the Political Parties will ensure that the upcoming elections are free from intimidation, instigation of violence, corrupt practices, and inflammatory or defamatory speech. It will help preserve the elections at all levels, and the entire electoral process, as celebrations of democracy and establish the primacy of the electorate with the exclusive prerogative to decide on which party can be entrusted with the honour and responsibility of running the country for the next five years.

22.1.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: a campaign to de-legitimize the election*

The basic and universally accepted tenet of any genuine democratic election is that it be free and fair, with well known ground rules which the contesting parties observed in their campaigns. This may sound obvious and straight forward but the actual operation may have problems if only because of the way political parties conduct themselves both before and after an election.

In this regard, political parties fall into two broad categories. In the first are those which have faith in the ground rules and conduct themselves accordingly, irrespective of the outcome of the election. In other words, they have full confidence in the integrity of the electoral process and accept that the election will be free and fair. By contrast there are political parties which engage in a campaign well before the election to invalidate its outcome even before any ballots are cast. Although perhaps paying lip-service to the ground rules and the electoral process as a whole, these groups claim the elections will not be free and fair.

For such political parties, the election can only be free and fair if they win. When they sense the outcome may not meet their expectations, they try to discredit the results in advance of the elections.

It is clear that some in Ethiopia fall into this latter category. For some months already, several opposition politicians have been involved in a propaganda campaign to try to invalidate the election results in advance by claiming, without any plausible evidence, the election will not be free and fair. In pursuit of this aim, they have employed numerous outright fabrications and wild allegations to deflect attention from their own internal weaknesses and policy failures. They are, in effect, already trying to portray themselves as victims, blaming the alleged activities of the ruling party or the Government for what they already believe will be their failure in a free and fair election next May. This is why they are trying to de-legitimize the results of the election several months before it is due to take place. They seem to have had some effect in misleading commentators, including the Economist, providing them with an excuse for disparaging Ethiopia's democratic process.

Their campaign will not succeed. It is doomed to fail for two main reasons. First, with the exception of the small group involved in this attempt at de-legitimizing the election, the determination of all other political parties which have a stake in a free and fair election is beyond question. These 'spoilers' should, therefore, be under no illusion that they can succeed in their intent despite the encouragement offered to them by the likes of Human Rights Watch. Secondly, the vast majority of stakeholders in the political process have demonstrated in no uncertain terms their commitment to a free and fair election by subscribing to the recent Code of Conduct for Political Parties. It is this that the 'spoilers' who cannot live up to its stringent standards have been trying, in vain, to disparage.

In fact, this Code of Conduct, now enshrined in law, is the most distinctive feature in the evolution of the Ethiopian electoral process, and indeed the legislation is unprecedented. It is designed to ensure that the forthcoming election, as well as all future elections, will be free, fair and credible. The result of an historic agreement by 65 political parties who have a genuine stake in the success of the upcoming election, it expresses the very clear determination by nearly all the main actors in the Ethiopian political process that the electoral process should succeed. In these circumstances we are confident it will be next to impossible to de-legitimize the election.

Nevertheless, complacency is never advisable however small the number of antagonists or 'spoilers'. It remains important to make sure that the activities of a few politicians do not mislead the electorate or any other target groups. We may be certain that the electorate itself will not be taken in by the machinations of these elements, but other target groups in or outside Ethiopia need to be aware that these efforts are the intrigues of a small coterie of politicians bent on derailing the current electoral process. Certainly, in their propaganda against the forthcoming election, these politicians have clearly been trying to influence foreign observers. As we enter the final phases in the electoral timetable, everyone should be aware of such efforts to undermine the validity of the

election. It is not uncommon, of course, for parties to cry foul after an election, however free and fair it may have been. Some in Ethiopia, however, are doing this, far in advance of the election, primarily in order to influence foreign third parties.

We believe it is important that such observers should be careful not to give any credence, wittingly or unwittingly, to the machinations of these opposition parties intended to nullify the election process. While we know nothing can prevent the electoral process from proceeding properly, we also believe the need for third parties to exercise extra caution is justified to avoid conveying the wrong messages about the integrity of the election. These parties, out of sheer desperation, can be expected to continue with all sorts of deceptive tactics and pretexts over the next four months to try to deprive the election of legitimacy. Acting as if any of their fabrications are valid, and giving spurious allegations credibility will be a disservice to the fast evolving democratic process in Ethiopia. We hope interested third parties, some of whom were involved in the elaboration of the legislation of the Code of Conduct, as well as all stakeholders, will continue to stand behind the new ground rules to provide for a free and fair election, and that they will reject any and all attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the vote in May.

29.1.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: Partisanship, loyal opposition and the Economist*

Political parties play a central role in the democratization process in any country. They provide the means through which different public interests are articulated, providing for the aspirations of various sections of society. They are the main actors in the market place of ideas, offering a menu of alternative political platforms on a range of areas, political, economic or social. Their role in building democracy is part of a continuum of activities in which free and fair elections are an integral part, allowing citizens to choose between various alternative platforms. To articulate the interests of their constituencies, parties need to identify, bring together and spell out issues to enhance the best interests of the people. They are, of course, expected to play by the rules laid down in the Constitution and subsequent legislation, even though by the nature of elections not all of a party's expectations will be met in one or two election terms. Free and fair elections are less about the outcome, winning or losing, than about the process.

We have mentioned before the difference between parties that insist that democracy depends upon their victory alone, and parties that are prepared to participate in the democratic process and play the role of a loyal opposition. The former largely focus on the outcome of the elections, on the need to have their own way. Most of the problems in previous elections in Ethiopia have arisen from such a disposition. The latter are prepared to abide by the rules, expose the weakness of governing parties, accept the electoral process whoever wins. Their presence raises the hope that the political process will benefit, no matter who wins or loses elections. Recent developments, notably the Code of Conduct recently signed between the ruling party and 65 opposition parties, suggests the lack of trust that has long characterized inter-party relations in Ethiopia has now been resolved.

Unfortunately, this idea that opposition parties can play a real role in strengthening the democratic process has never lacked detractors. Some opposition politicians have made no secret of their preference for the rough and tumble of “colour” revolutions to try to short-circuit their way to power. Their declared intentions may be outrageous, but they have never been without supporters among international media outlets or advocacy groups, including Human Rights Watch, and now the Economist. The latest article on Ethiopia in the Economist (“Anxious Ethiopia: Jangling Nerves”) is a classic piece of partisanship of the kind that the detractors of the democratization process have deployed in their campaign to de-legitimize the election in advance. It appears to be trying to undo whatever positive impact recent multi-party negotiations over the Code of Conduct and other issues have had on the democratic and electoral process. It is true the article does raise a number of issues purportedly attempting to shed light on economic and political developments in Ethiopia under the EPRDF. It even manages to put in a few kind words about successes in education and health. These, however, are merely the prelude to an unsparing indictment against the legitimacy of the political process in Ethiopia and the very notion of loyal opposition. The Economist finds it difficult to accept the legitimacy of the Code of Conduct. In a curious turn of phrase, it claims some of the opposition parties may indeed be “genuine”, but labels most of those who signed the Code as being “in hock to the EPRDF”, another surprising phrase to describe parties that are prepared to accept the Constitution. It is strange that any ‘neutral’ foreign media can so casually label opposition parties of another country as genuine or otherwise on grounds that have nothing to do with building democracy.

What all this highlights is the fact that the Economist is no friend to any loyal opposition in the developing world or in Ethiopia. Of course, any genuine democracy needs a loyal opposition; indeed, no real democracy can do without it. In a serious democratic electoral process, only parties with a real political platform, and a willingness to play by the rules, can be considered genuine contenders for power. Opposition elements that insist on trying to grab power by any means, fair or foul, will always remain just “spoilers”. No amount of sloganeering or media campaigning on their behalf will change that. The process of democratization in Ethiopia will not be affected by their efforts at de-legitimization or by unsavoury articles in the Economist.

5.2.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: undemocratic proclivities*

The government of Ethiopia has time and time again stated that democratization in Ethiopia is not a matter of choice but one of survival. Not only does democracy offer the peoples of Ethiopia the opportunity to administer themselves, it also ensures the fullest possible participation of citizens in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of the various political, economic and social policies needed to raise the country from poverty. Equally, ensuring the survival of the Ethiopian state also requires sustainable economic development which in turn needs a political environment that provides for the

creation and development of institutions allowing citizens to exercise the widest extent of rights and freedoms, political, economic and social.

The efforts of the last 18 or so years have gone a long way to put in place the institutions necessary to build a just and well ordered society and create a political space based on the principles to guide a representative democracy. Despite some setbacks, largely resulting from the lack of democratic culture and mistrust arising from historic legacies, most of the process has been promising. Thanks to the various institutional and policy measures introduced so far, the peoples of Ethiopia now realize how indispensable participation in the political process is in changing their lives for the better. Ethiopians from all parts of the country have now developed a sense of ownership towards the political process. The huge turnout in past elections and the extensive participation in grass root politics on a daily basis are clear indications that the process has taken on a momentum of its own. It was moved too far to be adversely affected by any acts of subversion.

Equally, there is no room yet for complacency. Democratization in Ethiopia is in an incipient stage and still needs careful nurturing. It requires that the activities of the various stakeholders in the political process should all contribute to the enhancement of the process not detract from it. While the success of the whole project ultimately rests on the extent to which the people of Ethiopia take their ownership of the process seriously, it is also true that many stakeholders can still play a pivotal role in ensuring the institutionalization of democratic culture and tolerance and the promotion of civilized discourse. Political parties, ruling and opposition alike, still have major responsibility to check any activities or tendencies that could interfere in the institutionalization of democracy and respect for the rule of law.

As we have stated before, the role of political parties in the strengthening of the democratization process in any country is central. Parties serve as the channels through which public interests are articulated, providing for the aspirations of the different sections of society. The EPRDF, and the government it leads, have demonstrated a firm conviction that plurality of ideas helps to further cement democracy and the ideals of good governance. The Government has in fact done its level best to widen the political space to allow as many contending ideas as possible to come to the fore. The agreement between the parties signing the Code of Conduct has been one such positive step transcending the petty squabbles that have so long characterized inter-party relations.

Nevertheless, the behaviour of some political actors still leaves a lot to be desired. The attitude of some towards the entire process and their negative response to the recent overtures by the EPRDF and the majority of the opposition parties is hardly reassuring. Some might even call it sinister. It appears no amount of goodwill from the ruling party can persuade them into giving it the benefit of the doubt, or exhibit the kind of trust required to ensure the peaceful conclusion of the elections. The major figures among these politicians place far too high a premium on the outcome of elections, ignoring the process by which they are conducted. They insist on an outcome that only vindicates their wishes. They have made it clear they will stop at nothing to try to de-legitimize any outcome in which they do not win.

Recent comments made by two opposition figures speak volumes about the counter-productive approach this group appears more than willing to employ. According to Dr. Merara Gudina, the ruling party has never had, either in the past or today, any intention to allow free and fair elections to take place. He characterizes the recent overtures of the ruling party as mere window-dressing aimed at hoodwinking the international community. In an extreme display of cynicism, he suggests that the EPRDF should dispense with what he calls its 'false pretences' and instead go for the kind of political system "the Communist Party has put in place in China", thus sparing everybody all election hassles. This is clearly part of a campaign to discredit the democratic political experience. Dr. Merara is not alone in his efforts. Another high-ranking politician from the same opposition bloc, Ato Siye Abraha, has been even blunter. He is certain the ruling party is going to rig the next elections. He doesn't think even for a moment that the EPRDF can legitimately win this election. He even suggests that none of the recent elections have come anywhere close to the level of freedom to be seen in elections in Haile Selassie's reign. This outlandish comparison is clearly not intended to heap praise on the Emperor's "democratic" record but rather to disparage the EPRDF's efforts as devoid of genuine intention. Despite this, he also manages to show pride in his own election to Parliament on two occasions before he fell out with his former party, the EPRDF.

There are interesting similarities between the arguments. Both, for example, refuse to believe the ruling party has ever been genuine about anything related to democracy in general or elections in particular. Both are quite certain the elections are going to be rigged. Both are extremely confident they would win if the elections are half as fair as the EPRDF claims. The corollary of all this is that if the National Electoral Board declares the ruling party victorious then they will take this as positive proof that the election has been rigged. The underlying assumption is that there is no chance that the peoples of Ethiopia would choose any other party or candidate than their own in a free election. It is symptomatic of their arrogance and their anti-democratic proclivity that they assume people must vote them into office before they will consider the process free and fair. It is an attitude that borders dangerously on contempt for the voters as well as for the whole electoral process.

The bottom line is that there are still some politicians who refuse to settle for an outcome less than that of victory no matter how free and fair the process, and they seem more than prepared to muddy the waters if their wishes are not met. This is both unfair and unhelpful. Unfair, because it discounts all positive developments registered so far as inconsequential. There has in fact never been a time in the history of this country in which so many people have been positively affected by the fundamental political changes that have taken place in the last two decades. People have a much more solid understanding of what constitutes their best interests and the resources to allow them to make choices on the basis of sound political judgment.

It is unhelpful because it threatens to render the entire political process hostage to the ambitions of politicians who have difficulty in thinking beyond a single election term.

Such an attitude can gather unchecked momentum that is not easily affected by rational discourse. Ethiopians deserve better.

12.2.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: Defending the Sanctity of the Rules of the Game*

Preparations for the upcoming elections are well underway, with formal election campaigns now started. Already it is clear that the number of voters will surpass the numbers registered for the previous election. According to the National Electoral Board an impressive 26.5 million people are now registered. The Board is expecting the total registrations to reach 32 million. The Board itself has been allocating funds for political parties, and the parties themselves have been negotiating the media rules and this week made the media allocations for campaigning. 25 percent of the total airtime and newspaper space was apportioned equally among all political parties; 55 percent has been allotted according to the number of seats parties have in the federal parliament and regional councils, and 20 per cent is being distributed in line with the number of candidates the parties have fielded. In all, some 495 hours of radio airtime, 76 hours of television and 849 newspaper columns have been set aside for political parties to publicize their policy options and programs in the mass media, starting from next Monday, February 15th.

The National Electoral Board has also announced that it is finalizing a Code of Conduct for international observers. It will be recalled that there was such a code in operation during the 2005 election, but regrettably it was blatantly violated by some of the international observers. It is believed that the new Code of Conduct for international observers will take into account this experience and it has come up with internationally accepted standards of conduct to be observed by all international election observers. The main objective is to ensure the neutrality, impartiality and independence of the observers.

It is now clear that the public is looking forward to the elections with growing enthusiasm. The number of voters already registered is the clearest indication yet that the upcoming elections will be another milestone in the democratization process in this country. As a periodic exercise of the will of the people, elections are an indispensable pillar of any democratic system. For Ethiopia, despite its long history, truly democratic elections are still a recent development, following the fall of the military regime less than twenty years ago. In fact, the upcoming elections are the fourth national democratic elections for the country. Previous elections have provided indications of the gradual maturing of the components of the process of democratization in the country. It reached a high point in 2005 when the entire election process was observed scrupulously until voting was complete. Unfortunately, with some direct incitement by foreign actors, some opposition elements then instigated violence, rejecting the clearly expressed will of the people. This cast an ominous shadow over an otherwise historic event in the political history of the county.

That is now in the past. The Government of Ethiopia has turned over the difficult pages of that unfortunate episode with determination. It has addressed the problems and

shortcomings that appeared in 2005 with full respect for the rule of law, taking deliberate and resolute steps to ensure that these will not be repeated.

The incidents in the 2005 election in one way certainly exposed some weaknesses in the elements of the system and among its participants. The country has taken stock of the root causes and consequences of the unfortunate violence that ensued and looked closely at areas for possible improvement and transformation. The Government has pursued a determined effort aimed at reforming the pillars of the democratic system where necessary. It has undertaken extensive dialogue with different political parties and engaged international consultants and used best international practices to enhance the political process. This has involved building up the institutions of democracy such as parliamentary procedures, passing new laws on freedom of expression and information, and revising the composition of the National Electoral Board and appointing its members with the full involvement and participation of opposition parties. Most recently, the Code of Conduct for Political Parties agreed by some 65 parties has been passed into law. After putting all these mechanisms and institutional structures in place, the critical task ahead is now to ensure their implementation fully and scrupulously. The Government has a particular responsibility to make sure that all participants of the democratic process faithfully follow the rules of the game of politics.

In fact, the responsibility to ensure the sanctity of the rules of the game also rests on all stakeholders. The electorate, the political parties, independent candidates, election officials, parliamentarians, law enforcement officials, and the judiciary, different government entities including the NEB, the media and civil society organizations: all have a direct stake in the peaceful, free and fair conduct of the upcoming elections. All, in fact, are duty bound to ensure that the rules of the democratic process are fully respected. The various mechanisms for pre- and post-election activities are all now being put in place. The Code of Conduct for Political Parties is particularly significant as it holds together the different aspects of the entire process. It defines the conduct of the main actors in the electoral process, the political parties and their members, and their need and agreement to abide by the rule of law. It is about the peaceful conduct of all aspects of the electoral process. It is about respect for the constitutionally-mandated organs of Government. It is about unflinching commitment to the rules, for both the process itself and the outcome, whatever it may be. Some of these mechanisms will start to become operational when required. Others, like the Joint Council for Political Parties, have already started to function.

The Code of Conduct is about advancing the country's political agenda in a meaningful and peaceful manner. It is about preventing and rectifying mistakes should they occur. Parties are expected to respect the Code themselves, and ensure its full respect by their members and others. The Code of Conduct makes it possible for the political parties themselves to jointly address any transgressions of the rules of the game through the Joint Council. This will encourage the practice of working together for the common objective rather than working at cross purposes as so often in the past. The new law, in fact, creates an enabling environment for the effective implementation of important provisions of the Constitution on human and democratic rights.

It has to be said that some political parties are very late in deciding to catch-up with the overwhelming majority of political parties, and indeed, the entire society, and give an unequivocal commitment to the political process or demonstrate their determination to respect the rules agreed by everybody else. These few appear to be trying to both use and similarly undermine the system at the same time. This is where the Code of Conduct is exactly needed to avoid such situations, where some feel that they might try normal, legal and peaceful avenues to win public confidence, but if that does not appear to advance their own particular objectives, then they will try to copy discredited colour opposition movements that attempt to incite street violence and force their way to power in defiance of the democratically expressed will of the people. This reprehensible conduct is unconstitutional and, as demonstrated in 2005, has been completely rejected by the electorate. All political parties are now expected to come on board. The system established by the new law provides an extensive mechanism to raise, investigate and resolve complaints. All the actors in this historic national process, of the 2010 elections, have an obligation to themselves, and to the people of Ethiopia, to respect and to ensure the respect of all, for the sanctity of the rules of the democratic electoral process. Both the ruling party and all opposition parties have the right to enjoy the democratic process, but they also have the responsibility to ensure that this process is both deepened and expanded, and is applicable to all. And this must begin with full respect for the process, for the rules of the game.

19.2.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: the Responsibility of Electoral Observer Missions*

Last week, an AU exploratory mission to assess deployment of an AU Election Observation Mission arrived in Addis Ababa. This week, it was the turn of an EU technical team to evaluate the political situation and make recommendations for an EU Election Observer Mission. They came in response to invitations from the Government to observe the national and federal elections in May. The National Electoral Board has now announced it has drawn up a code of conduct for international election observers following discussions with the political parties. Board Chairman, Professor Merga Bekana, said the directive lays out the procedures observers should follow and was prepared in order “to enable election observers to discharge their responsibilities in accordance with the rule of law [and Ethiopia’s] election law.”

Responsibility is the key word. In 2005, the Government was forced to make a formal complaint to the European Commission over the behaviour of the Head of the EU Electoral Observation Mission and her failure to follow the EU’s own code of conduct for observers. It is perhaps worth underlining the main elements of the guidelines that the EU provides for its election monitors. These include: the maintenance of strict impartiality in the conduct of their duties, and at no time expressing any bias or preference in relation to national authorities, parties, candidates, or with reference to any issues in contention in the election process; to undertake their duties in an unobtrusive manner, and not disrupt or interfere with the election process, polling day procedures, or the vote count; they may

bring irregularities to the attention of the election officials, but they cannot give instructions or countermand decisions of election officials; they must base all conclusions on well documented, factual, and verifiable evidence, and refrain from making any personal or premature comments about their observations to the media or any other interested persons; they must comply with all national laws and regulations. At all times during the mission “each election observer should behave blamelessly, exercise sound judgment, and observe the highest level of personal discretion”. These are excellent guidelines and full compliance with them will certainly deepen the mutual confidence and trust which is so important to both Ethiopia and the EU

Elections are a crucial element in any democratic process. Election observers have a significant role to play in increasing the available information about the process and in making it harder for either incumbent or opposition to commit fraud. They also have the responsibility of certification, an important element in providing support for the development of a country's democratic institutions and procedures, and assisting in the objective of holding elections of a high standard. The EU Commission has described the principles of election monitoring as based on full coverage, impartiality, transparency and professionalism, with the main goals being “the legitimization of an electoral process, where appropriate, and the enhancement of public confidence in the electoral process” as well as deterring fraud and strengthening respect for human rights. And indeed election monitoring can certainly help to build confidence in the electoral process, and provide conflicting parties with confidence that the election will be conducted fairly. At the same time, election observers need to remember that the electoral process remains in the ownership of the country holding the elections. If that is taken away then the whole process becomes meaningless.

Democracy involves a number of factors, and one of the most important elements is the role of the loyal opposition. Any democracy needs a loyal opposition, and in a real democratic electoral process, parties with a real political platform can be genuine contenders for power. Most opposition parties have confidence in the overall integrity of the electoral process, and will accept electoral rules and are prepared to accept the results of the election and play the role of a loyal opposition should they lose. A minority, however, often resorts to a propaganda campaign, making wild allegations to deflect attention from its own political failure, and essentially demonstrating a lack of commitment to the principles of a loyal opposition. Parties of that type assume they must win before they will consider the process fair. That is contemptuous and arrogant, as well as anti-democratic. Any election must have losers as well as winners. For instance, the problems in previous elections in Ethiopia have largely come from the refusal of a small minority of politicians who are prepared to threaten a violent option rather than accept defeat. This applies to the first election in 1992 after the overthrow of the military dictatorship.

All opposition parties have an equally shared responsibility to deepen and expand democracy. It is not just a question of rights, as Election Observation Missions often seem to think. It is not only rights that opposition parties have. They also have responsibilities,

just as much as the government or any ruling party, to make the election free, fair and peaceful. And at the heart of this responsibility lies the necessity of respect for the rule of law. This is usually overlooked by election observers, by academics and human rights organizations and, most of all, by the media.

26.2.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: the regional context*

The Horn of Africa is widely seen as a region in crisis and as one of the most disturbed areas of the world today. This is certainly an exaggeration but almost all the regional states continue to face major political and socio-economic problems, including the threat of extremism and terrorism, as well as piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, and with the added danger of climate change looming over all and one of the regional states committing itself to regional destabilization as a central element of its foreign policy. This view of the region has been reinforced by the recent election problems in Kenya, the resonance of Sudan's upcoming Presidential election for the future of both north and south Sudan and for next year's referendum on the future of Southern Sudan, and the delays in holding Somaliland's overdue Presidential elections, now expected later this year. Eritrea, of course, has no plans to hold any national elections or presidential elections in the foreseeable future. Ethiopia is, of course, holding its national and federal state elections in May.

The establishment of democracy in any country in the region is all the harder in the face of widespread under-development, problems of unemployment and the lack of literacy. As important is the failure of politicians to demonstrate any clear or genuine commitment to democracy, to accept its values, its rules, procedures or ethics. This brings us back to something we have referred to before here in Ethiopia, the failure of members of the opposition to play their necessary role within any democratic system; that is the concept of the loyal opposition, opposition functioning within the democratic and constitutional framework. Opposition parties have as much responsibility as a government or a ruling party to make a democratic system work effectively. Multi-party democracy is difficult to root in societies which are largely rural, non-industrial, poor, under-developed or pastoral. Even producing an accurate voters' roll is in itself a problem. There can be difficulties in the provision of information, and here again responsibility is central to any understanding of the role of the press and the media. The need to educate party members, in or out of power, and the media, in their roles is central to the development of democracy. It is a lengthy process and one that requires hard work from all to encourage the embrace of democratic concepts, as well as democratic rules and procedures. Successful, non-violent elections are a vital part of this; they are the responsibility of all parties and of all politicians.

Ethiopia failed to achieve non-violent elections in 2005. Despite a successful election itself, a combination of circumstances including the failure of responsibility at all levels led to severe post-election problems. The result was that the 2005 national and federal state election was not the example for the region that the Government might have hoped for. This time around, the Government anticipates that it will go better. It has done its

best to ensure this will be the case with the Code of Conduct to regulate party behaviour and the agreements on media balance and usage and on campaigning.

All in all this should provide an impressive example for other states in the region, and one that will have particular resonance in neighbouring Eritrea where the Government has consistently refused to allow any manifestations of multi-party democracy. Genuine democracy, even if flawed, is anathema to dictators, and democracy in a neighbour is particularly unwelcome. Eritreans will be able to hear and (partially) see a democratic multi-party electoral process which President Isaias has made it clear he will never allow the Eritrean people to aspire to. Control, and indeed personal control, remains central to the mechanics of government in Eritrea. This is one reason why the example of a genuine multi-party vote in Ethiopia is so important, providing a real, visible and alternative option for the most militarized state in Africa, if not the world. The economic costs of Eritrea's long-term mobilization have been crippling but the continued insistence of national service does allow for a critical mechanism of control reinforced by a refusal to implement the Constitution or allow any national elections.

Given Eritrea's past record of efforts to destabilize Ethiopia it is no surprise that it is continuing its attempts to upset Ethiopia's democratic process, trying to take advantage of the relaxation in security which necessarily accompanies the operation of democratic procedures. Eritrea has already attempted to infiltrate members of some unregistered political opposition groups committed to armed struggle into Ethiopia. It has put considerable effort into support for Al-Shabaab in Somalia in order to try and impact on Ethiopia's policies, and in backing ONLF and OLF military and terrorist operations in southern Ethiopia. More can be expected.

None of this provides any excuse for not having a free and fair election (nothing can excuse that), but it does mean that President Isaias will continue to "fish in troubled waters". The combination of encouraging regional instability and Islamic radicalism in Somalia is a highly dangerous strategy with significant international implications; it resonates dangerously in the region even if it provides no serious threat to Ethiopia's stability. As Sally Healy notes the Eritrean Government may not have a stated policy to try to overthrow the Ethiopia Government, but "the main thrust of its regional action is building alliances with non-state rebel groups working against Ethiopia". There is no indication that Eritrea has any intention of suspending such activities during Ethiopia's elections.

Even the functioning of a mature consolidated democracy requires vigilance; how much more so in the case of an ongoing democratic process which is still fragile. Establishing a democracy in the absence of developed technology, socio-economic development, industrialism, universal education and other factors prevailing in Western Europe or North America will always be difficult. It requires knowledge and commitment – and responsibility – from all those involved, government and opposition alike. The result, however, should be an example that will reverberate beyond the confines of Ethiopia and provide a model and a precedent for the whole region.

With its aim of regional destabilization, and its own negation of democracy, Eritrea is currently the antithesis of Ethiopia, even if the latter's democratization process is still a matter in progress. The forthcoming elections among 80 million people, in the Horn of Africa's largest state, can and should provide a real and valuable alternative scenario and an example for the whole region. This didn't happen in 2005 when events conspired against it and a significant element of the opposition refused to accept the role of 'loyal opposition'. This time round the omens are more propitious; and the potential rewards, within a more advanced democratic process, considerable.

5.3.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: the dangers of the politics of 'incessant allegation'*

The momentum of the elections is steadily building up. Political parties are fiercely engaged in televised debates, publishing their political agendas and elections manifestoes in the country's various newspapers. They are doing all this according to the standards and criteria they have agreed to among themselves. This has included allocation of time slots for the debates. Even though some complaints on the fairness of the allocations have been raised in the debates themselves, both political parties and media organizations have been implementing their agreement to the letter. It has all been most encouraging.

One issue, however, still appears to require further consideration, and possible rectification or moderation. This is the concept of the politics of allegation, which has become almost ceaseless. Indeed, some of the opposition groups have for a long time adopted the idea of making allegations almost as a political platform in itself. They appear to consider that allegations against the Government can be seen as an end in itself, even as an acceptable political tool. That is hardly the case.

The electoral Code of Conduct for Political Parties Proclamation No. 662/2009 was aimed, among other things, to provide for procedures and a mechanism to investigate and rectify the grievances of any political parties in the electoral process at all levels, through a Joint Council of Political Parties. Political parties now have the choice of presenting their grievances either to this complaint-handling and dispute-resolution system under the electoral Code of Conduct for Political Parties or turning to election officials and the courts according to the Electoral Law of Ethiopia Amendment Proclamation No.532/2007. Under the Electoral Law the National Electoral Board has the responsibility to investigate or cancel election results, order a re-election or bring perpetrators of an offence before a court of law if it has received information about violations of the election process, or other offences. It can give administrative decisions over disputes that occur in the election process, rectify electoral irregularities and decide on complaints submitted to it. The Proclamation also defines other mechanisms to resolve disputes including grievance hearing committees in each constituency and a system of complaints and disputes arising from the electoral process and allowing appeal to the courts. These due processes of law have been fully detailed and entrenched through a variety of mechanisms and directives.

Some opposition parties use this system as required and present their cases in an appropriate fashion. Others, however, have intensified the pattern of their allegations against the Government, other parties and the entire electoral process. As we have emphasized before, ensuring that the upcoming elections are credible, peaceful, free and fair requires that all parties discharge their respective duties properly. Government bodies have to continue to deliver impartial and objective service to all those involved in the electoral process. Equally, opposition parties have the responsibility to respect the constitutional organs of the country and ensure that their members and followers fully respect these. It has to be said that this heavy responsibility does not always appear to be fully appreciated by some opposition parties. They appear bent on creating doubts and confusion in the process by their continuous litany of unsubstantiated, even fabricated, allegations against the Government and the political process.

Disappointingly, some third parties have even directly contributed to this dispiriting habit of opposition groups by giving them false hope and encouragement. In some cases this is done in full knowledge of the intent of the allegations. Others are perhaps gullible observers aiming to contribute to the democratic process. It would not be fair to question their intentions but they do bear some responsibility if they encourage the repetition of fallacious allegations without corroboration. They become complicit in the efforts of those who make no secret of the fact they are bent on undermining Ethiopia's process of democratization. One example of this was the investigations of irregularities alleged by one of the opposition parties. The recent announcement by the National Electoral Board and the Joint Council, on which both parties were represented, clearly demonstrated that most of the allegations were unsubstantiated and, indeed, mere inventions. This sort of allegation, deliberate perversion of fact, is simply irresponsible. The attempt to use the recent, and regretted, death of an opposition candidate, apparently in a bar brawl, as an example of deliberate intimidation efforts, is similarly misguided and injudicious.

Unfounded allegations by different actors are not new to Ethiopia. One can, no doubt, expect more such distortions to be produced. This, after all, has been the modus operandi of some groups: publishing reports compiling or listing allegations with an accompaniment of a carefully worded disclaimer that the allegations, or any Government response, cannot be independently confirmed. Even without this the allegations are produced and widely circulated as if they contain incontrovertible facts, and the qualifications are ignored or minimized. It is even a common technique to publish the allegations that a journalist knows to be wrong, and then add a denial, a method which allows the allegation to be repeated. Even the most prestigious of media organizations frequently use this approach, as the BBC demonstrated this week in raking up unfounded, and un-provable, allegations over 25 years old. Such an approach to reporting seems to have convinced some opposition groups that whatever they say about the government will get published by someone somewhere, at least as a claim.

Their objective is depressingly short-sighted. They are engaged in this nihilistic strategy despite the possibly far-reaching repercussions on the prospects for the long-term democratization process in the country. We should all be aware that this process requires building up confidence in our democratic institutions, and this can be achieved only with

active involvement of the opposition parties. Whether reliance on this sort of allegation to produce support from other parties even in the short-term is plausible or not, it is likely to have a corrosive effect on confidence-building efforts among the political parties. Unsubstantiated allegations may briefly attract the attention of some naïve and unsuspecting elements, among politicians or among the media as well as observers. In the long run, however, they eventually expose the perpetrators as people attempting to discredit the whole election process in case they lose the election.

By any standards, this is an entirely negative approach. It is high time for any such trend to be reversed and replaced by a proper utilization of existing procedures. It is only by using the legal system to its fullest extent that institutional capacity-building is assured. The politics of ‘incessant allegation’ must be replaced by the sort of mature and informed debate on policy options that all the parties should be capable of, to allow for a full choice to be available for the electorate. All relevant actors, including any third parties, have important roles in ensuring the integrity of the electoral process and of the election itself. Cutting out the cancer of incessant and baseless allegation as a political tool is surely one of the more important pre-requisites for a success.

12.3.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: media roles and responsibilities*

It has been a while since Ethiopia embarked on a process of democratization that has achieved remarkable results over the years. Considerable progress has so far been made in putting in place the institutional mechanisms that help anchor the process on a firm basis. Ethiopia’s democratization process, young though it is, has come a long way in ensuring the participation of the peoples of Ethiopia at all levels of self-governance.

Despite the significant progress made, the process has also faced a number of challenges both from within and without. On one hand, the lack of democratic culture and civilized discourse has certainly contributed to the often rancorous and chaotic relations between stakeholders which have further complicated the process. On the other, the reaction of the rest of the world towards the democratization process in Ethiopia has not always been constructive either. Detractors have never been in short supply. It is not uncommon to hear outrageous allegations by non-nationals in different capacities in the name of supporting democracy. Far from being helpful, such meddling has in fact contributed to the polarization of politics in the country by instilling a false hope among many in the opposition that change can be imposed from outside.

Among other institutions pivotal to ensuring the sustainability of the democratic process, the contribution of a free press and that of holding periodic, free and fair elections is all too palpable. It should not thus be surprising that freedom of the press and whether or not elections are free and fair have often been the centrepieces of most of the commentaries and criticisms in relation to the democratization process in Ethiopia. Both are instrumental in enabling citizens to express or make their choices of ideas or of leaders.

Both are also instrumental in shaping the behaviour of political leaders by subjecting them to a periodic review of their actions. That much is true.

While the overall outcome of the elections and the manner in which they are conducted ultimately depends on the extent to which citizens take the process seriously, the press's role can also be decidedly unhelpful if its behaviour falls short of the standard of fairness required of any responsible media. Ethiopia's experience in this regard has been a sobering one, indeed. Our recent history is replete with incidents of press being used in stoking crises of all sorts by disseminating unfounded allegations. Whipped up time and again, an allegation often takes on a life of its own, irrespective of its being inaccurate and can be readily used by detractors of the process, from within and without, as a positive proof for de-legitimizing it.

Ethiopia has carried out a series of successful multi-democratic elections at all levels, though not without dispute (what elections ever are). But the role that the private press has played throughout the last three elections has been far from reassuring. More often than not, the private press has operated on a strictly partisan basis with the government invariably being at the receiving end of lopsided criticisms. It has for the most part behaved in a manner far from responsible. Much energy and space has been expended to discredit and de-legitimize the democratic process rather than to help strengthen it. Allegations by the private media about electoral irregularities have all too often found their way into the assessments by external commentators about the state of democracy in the country. The disturbances in the previous elections were in some measure the result of the press's proclivities to stoke up violence.

Now that preparations for the next elections are well underway, the media has been covering election-related issues. It is worthwhile to ask how much of what we saw during the previous elections has improved and to what extent is the media involved in the process this time around. As far as the public media goes, the allocation of air time and space in the public media has been agreed upon by the council of parties and this is being implemented accordingly. There have also been indications that private broadcast media is gearing up to play a part in this. These surely are encouraging signs. With the private press how much of its coverage is fair and balanced? The answer is mixed. There have been improvements. Some private papers appear to be taking care to cut back on the sort of allegations they used to toss around all too liberally. Nevertheless some papers still try to try to discredit the entire process as illegitimate. Instances of irregularity are spun out of all proportion. Allegations of harassment by opposition parties are given incessant coverage while government efforts to address these allegations count for little. A single incident of violence is given ten times more coverage than any positive developments however important and relevant. In some papers the proclivity to highlight the negative over the positive, or street violence over peaceful demonstrations, so commonplace in the past, remain alive. The similarity of content and tone with some of the vocal Diaspora-based opposition is unmistakable.

Unfortunately, foreign media have also developed a penchant for this type of sensational reporting. Attempts at external interference in the elections have not been confined to US

Senators, or international advocacy organizations. It really does begin to look as if the international media is determined to try and impact the results of the election with both the timing and content of its stories. The BBC has even dragged up something dating back 25 years, quoting claims by two former colleagues who broke with members of the current government while they were all involved in a guerrilla struggle in the mid 1980s, and who have been trying to bring down the present leadership of Ethiopia ever since. Recently, they found a gullible enough BBC reporter to publicize their story just in time to try to influence the election, despite the fact that all those involved in cross-border food aid in 1984/85, without exception, have insisted there is no truth in the extraordinary claim that 95% of aid funds were being diverted to buy arms for the struggle against the Mengistu military dictatorship. Prime Minister Meles described the accusation as a complete lie, pointing out there would have been no military logic in selling food to buy guns. “We captured large amounts of guns and tanks. We did not need to buy arms...It would have been completely suicidal to starve our own people. We would have had no movement if we had no people”.

Even without the plethora of evidence to the contrary, it is impossible to believe in any such diversion of aid, given the fact that the cross-border food aid program actually did save the lives of the hundreds of thousands in need in the guerrilla-held areas in those years. Given the paucity of the evidence produced by the BBC, and its origins, it is difficult to see this story, despite the denials of the journalists involved, as anything other than a deliberate attempt to affect the results of the forthcoming election. Certainly, we can be sure that those who supplied the alleged information, well-known and long-term critics of the EPRDF, did so in an attempt to affect the electoral support given to it. It is worth underlining that the suggestion that professional aid workers, even so long ago, allowed so much aid money to be misdirected into funding a rebel war is not only mischievous and unsubstantiated; it is also extremely threatening for those who work in the aid industry today.

Similarly, the timing of a recent story on VOA about the alleged jamming of the Amharic Services of Voice of America and of Germany’s Deutsche Welle, appears equally deliberate. To be fair the story does quote a denial from the spokesperson of the Government Communications Office, and it does also make clear that the VOA transmissions in Afan Oromo and Tigrinya which are broadcast on the same frequencies before and after the Amharic transmissions are heard normally. Nevertheless, the timing of the story, and the fact that VOA chose to raise the issue publicly rather than with the Government Communications Office directly, does suggest the intention was to have a political effect.

A recent statement by British Minister for Africa, Baroness Kinnock, given to the local media here in Addis Ababa shortly after she paid a visit here earlier in the year, also falls into the category of a deliberate effort to influence the election. Her comments make it clear that Baroness Kinnock apparently understood little of what she heard and saw on her visit concerning the Code of Conduct, the case against Ms. Birtukan Mideksa, or the independence of the National Electoral Board and other issues. Certainly, most of what she had to say appears to have been provided by rejectionist politicians in the Diaspora

who have been recently flaunting their links to the Government of Eritrea. In her youth, Baroness Kinnock was an ardent support of the EPLF, and she still seems prepared to see the Government of Ethiopia through the prism of her past, as some sort of enemy!

It might be an exaggeration to see all this, and Senator Feingold's remarks, as part of a concerted campaign against Ethiopia's current electoral process, but the effect of these stories, and of the way in which they have been reported in the media, does suggest deliberation and intent, amounting to an attempt to interfere.

The media provides an invaluable channel of information between candidates and the public. A free media is one of the basic conditions for a pluralistic and democratic society. Freedom of expression, including the right of the media to collect, report, and disseminate information, news, and opinions, is a fundamental human right. It also involves responsibilities to report accurately, and avoid abuse of what is in effect a privileged position in society. The media has a heavy responsibility. It does not always live up to it. That is why all stakeholders, candidates as well as voters, must realize the magnitude of the challenge and the need to protect the integrity of the process.

19.3.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: Eritrea and destabilization*

Democratization in Ethiopia has various dimensions. At one level it is about ensuring the empowerment of the people, putting in place political formulae to serve as a solid basis for a national unity. The Constitution is an embodiment of the resolve to enhance this objective on the basis of mutual benefit and popular sovereignty, and the last 15 years have seen the development of various institutions to ensure the fullest possible participation of the peoples of Ethiopia in managing their own affairs and cementing their unity while respecting their diversity. The Constitution also envisages a government that must remain focused on putting in place policies that will realize these objectives while at the same time protecting the Ethiopian state and its peoples from undue interference from within or without. The pro-poor policies that have been implemented and the consistent focus of the Government's Foreign and Security policy in the fight against poverty are a case in point. Ethiopia has consistently worked towards good relations, based on mutual interest and respect for international law, with all its neighbours. The positive progress made in both respects is a testament to the success of the democratization process.

Equally, the process has not always been smooth. There have been challenges from inside and outside. One such has come from the leadership in Asmara, once in the form of naked aggression, and after that failed in the form of attempts at destabilization using all sorts of rejectionist elements willing to run Eritrea's errands. It's been more than a decade now since President Isaias began to focus on what now appears to be a life-long quest: wreaking havoc in Ethiopia through any means. Long detached from its social base, the preservation of the leadership of the Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice has become an end in itself, perpetuation of President Isaias' Eritrea. And this, according to PFDJ logic, can only be assured by bringing about collapse in Ethiopia. Hardly a day

passes without the PFDJ government concocting one scheme after another intended to sabotage Ethiopia's peace and stability. President Isaias consistently goes out of his way to welcome any and all parties prepared to oppose the Ethiopian Government, no matter how disparate their ideologies or their objectives.

The obsession President Isaias appears to have with what he calls Ethiopia's worsening domestic political and economic situation is extraordinary. He invariably describes it as a crisis that has reached an irreversible stage. Indeed, according to him, Ethiopia's political, economic and military position long ago reached boiling point and should be irreversibly descending into chaos and disintegration. Eritrean propaganda describes the army as in total disarray and on the verge of collapse; economic hardships have become so harsh and disheartening that people will be tearing each other apart out of sheer desperation; armed movements of every type have been stepping up highly effective anti-government campaigns everywhere; the violent demise of the regime is all but imminent. Whether or not these allegations have any reality on the ground doesn't seem to bother the government in Asmara very much. Eritrean leaders and their flatterers, at home and abroad, continue to create a fictional universe, an alternate reality based on the advertising principle: repeat something over and over again, and you'll end up believing it. So Eritrea's (official) media endlessly repeats itself. And now Ethiopia's elections provide Asmara with an easy opportunity to encourage destabilization.

Indeed, the government in Asmara has used every means imaginable to try to create chaos in Ethiopia short of an all-out invasion. President Isaias is too well aware of the consequences to try that again. Nevertheless, the intensity of his resolve to achieve his aims nowhere more evident than in the curious mix of organizations he has managed to bring together in his search for anti-Ethiopian groups. They promote mutually exclusive political platforms, some even arguing that Ethiopia should take back Assab and re-acquire a coastline. Nothing seems to worry the regime in Asmara as long as all of the groups have some quarrel with the Ethiopian Government. In Eritrea's campaign to sabotage Ethiopia's peace and stability as well as its economic progress, a veritable alphabet soup of self-styled patriotic organizations, fringe Diaspora elements, the much divided Oromo Liberation Front, and the split Ogaden National Liberation Front, as well as Ginbot 7 and others have made it all-too-clear they are prepared to join any anti-Ethiopian government bandwagon, whatever the stakes. The logic holding these strange bedfellows together is no more than the fact that the PFDJ has some use for them, whether planting bombs along a road, attacking local officials or merely spreading anti-government propaganda. It all helps Asmara's aims; and they all get some benefit from it.

However bizarre this mix may be, they are linked by a common thread - ill-will towards the incumbent Ethiopian Government. They cheerfully take orders from Isaias to do his bidding. Despite the support given by Asmara, none of these 'Ethiopian' groups have the strength even to temporarily seize control of any military post or village from government forces. They are no more than a nuisance to the security of the country. President Isaias has repeatedly urged these groups to unite. His deadline for the many 'Ethiopian' organizations to form a united alliance before December 2009 wasn't met, but a new round of feverish efforts has been going on to cobble up some semblance of

unity among this motley crew. In fact, they have little or no semblance of any organizational structure either at home or abroad. All they can manage is an occasional bomb here and there, minor disturbances here, disturbances there. If one attempt fails another follows. If one group is detained, another is immediately dispatched. It is a cascade of efforts to sow the seeds of violence. Despite his frustration at the complete failure of many OLF and ONLF efforts at destruction, the peaceful completion of another election is apparently too much for President Isaias. He is unprepared to relax his efforts as long as he has at his disposal such a collection of errand boys satisfied to take his orders.

Eritrea's latest efforts are predicated on the assumption that there are forces within and without Ethiopia - ostensibly Ethiopian - willing to join hands in an anti-government campaign. The leadership in Asmara is merely counting on the zero-sum politics of many in the violent sections of the Ethiopian opposition to achieve its own objectives at little or no cost to itself. While the people and the security forces will certainly foil any of the measures that President Isaias and these dubious allies may concoct, we should remain vigilant to minimize any continuing security threats, however small. Equally, we should work to make certain the election is as successful as possible, to give the lie to the aims and claims of Asmara and its renegade allies. The most effective way, of course, will be to carry on with the very processes that have elicited their anger in the first place: democratization and economic development.

Talking of interference in the electoral process, Ms. Ana Gomes has reappeared, not unexpectedly. She was the highly controversial head of the EU Electoral Observer Mission to Ethiopia in 2005 whose behaviour and less than balanced relationship with opposition leaders and parties led to a formal complaint by the Government. Ms. Gomes has been active on a number of occasions in recent years on behalf of violent opposition movements in the Diaspora, particularly Ginbot 7. Now with the election coming up she is looking for the limelight again. This week, as a European Member of Parliament, she was hosting and opening a "hearing" on "Human Rights and the Security Situation in the Ogaden", in collaboration with the Organization of Unrepresented Nations and Peoples, a collaboration which, by definition, demonstrates Ms. Gomes' ignorance of the political situation in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State where Ogaden Somalis are represented and participate in government. This week Ms. Gomes has been in London where she addressed a meeting organized by Third World Solidarity. It appears that Ms. Gomes and the Eritrean Government have something of a common agenda. Whether they are working together as some allege, is beside the point. Most of those at the meeting were former Derg members or supporters guilty of crimes against the people of Ethiopia. The organizers claimed the meeting would be attended by MPs but none of those listed actually attended. One person who did attend was a lady who is *persona non grata* in Ethiopia because of the dubious disposal of property from the Russian Embassy in Ethiopia in the early nineties. In a few weeks time, in early April, Ms. Gomes apparently plans to be in Washington to deliver a "keynote speech" at an opposition organized conference on Governance, Peace and Security and Development. No doubt Ms. Gomes

will also surface at other meetings before the election on May 23rd. It would be difficult enough to accept this sort of deliberate effort to interfere in the electoral process by an outsider even if Ms. Gomes actually knew anything about the reality of politics in Ethiopia. Ms. Gomes, however, does not as she comprehensively demonstrated by her naïve, and frankly stupid, performance as head of the EU Electoral Observation Mission in 2005. Her recent efforts show she has not become any more sensible, or knowledgeable.

26.3.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: the anti-government campaign in full swing*

Ethiopia embarked upon the process of democratization nearly two decades ago in the firm conviction that this was the only path to provide for the survival of the Ethiopian state and achieve the betterment of peoples' lives. The process was undertaken not because this is what the developed world preaches but as a result of the Government's commitment to upholding the fundamental principles of democracy and its understanding that this is the only way to extricate people from the trap of poverty and its attendant violence. Aside from giving full credit to the universal values of political freedom, equality and social liberty, the Government has been equally vigorous in investing in the promotion of social justice and good governance without which these freedoms would mean little. Much has been achieved through the Government's pro-poor policies, but there have also been many hurdles to overcome. As we have seen repeatedly, the democratization process in Ethiopia has had to endure a whole series of challenges, mostly from without. Some policies have not always earned plaudits for the Government despite their success. Criticism has often come in the form of concern for human rights and democracy, particularly at the time of elections, orchestrated by the media but often originating various self-styled pundits, so-called human rights watchdogs, a very few US congressmen, one or two brazen European parliamentarians, and others.

For these self-appointed experts, whatever has been achieved is automatically discredited. No amount of progress in governance can be genuine. It is always no more than window dressing to offer a semblance of commitment to democratic ideals to donors, but is in reality geared to maintaining one-party domination. The destructive nature of this sort of campaign has been particularly apparent since the 2005 elections. No other recent development has drawn more media interest, and it still gets widespread coverage. The pattern is unmistakable. Every positive development in Ethiopia is drowned out by media's noise about 'post-election clampdown'. Media outlets and human rights' groups have been consistent in their support for this caricature of political developments in Ethiopia. Today, with the fourth elections around the corner, the campaign of vilification is back in full swing. HRW has come up with yet another report recycling its usual litany of allegations and the timing indicates it has made a conscious decision to take the opportunity to try to muddy the electoral waters. With HRW setting the tone, the Economist and other publications have been following suit. Not to be outdone, US Congressman Donald Payne not only seized the opportunity of a recent hearing on

democracy in Africa to emphasize his membership of the anti-Ethiopian government bandwagon, he went out of his way to openly support the Government of Eritrea, despite being widely seen today as a rogue state, as part of his campaign to vilify the Government of Ethiopia. Frankly speaking, this particular Congressman has almost become a laughing stock because of his emotional outbursts against the Ethiopian Government

Again and again, the line is that what promised to be a watershed in Ethiopia's history, the 2005 elections, was reversed by a Government clampdown. Details sometimes vary, but it is this so-called 'squandered opportunity' which provides the basis on which these groups, in defiance of actual facts, argue. While it is difficult to understand what exactly these disparate individuals and groups are really after, one or two points about this frenzy of concocting negative stories do spring to mind.

The first is that this has little if anything to do with democracy and human rights. If at all these critics are even remotely interested in democracy, their concern is less about the strength of democratic institutions in the country, or their lack, and more about the extent to which certain groups should have carte blanche to do what they want in Ethiopia. The opportunity that was squandered was that of victory for the opposition. The kind of democracy they are preaching has little to do with reality. Rather than being an expression of genuine concern for democratic ideals, it has been symptomatic of a dangerously arrogant tendency among these to try to lord it over poor countries however significant their progress might be. The obsession with the 'squandered opportunity' is consistently repeated; the claim is that there is no chance of an opposition victory because the EPRDF has put in place since 2005 a structural framework to make any opposition victory impossible no matter how strong the opposition might be. Human Rights Watch version is: "consolidating control of the local government structures was the EPRDF's first step to controlling the environment in which the 2010 elections would take place". It claims the EPRDF has pursued a vigorous strategy of shutting down opposition parties, purging dissent and used all possible means to recruit the population at large into the EPRDF. The way HRW interprets government actions, the lower levels of administration, kebeles and sub-kebeles, have no other purpose than to make life difficult for the opposition and ensure government/EPRDF control. For HRW kebeles "constitute the Ethiopian government's structural weapons in suppressing dissent."

The argument is ridiculous in more ways than one. In the first place these structures provide not a mechanism of control but a means for the fullest possible participation of the population in the political process. They also provide for co-ordination of development activities while taking account of local concerns. They may not exactly be congruent with the experiences of western academics but this does not mean they are any less democratic than similar structures elsewhere. They do serve to provide a forum for meetings; they also provide an important, even pivotal medium of communication, and a basis as functional units of administration and development closely linked to the realities of day to day existence.

Similarly, mass associations of youth or women, in which millions participate, are cited as further evidence that the EPRDF is consolidating its monopoly on power. That these are voluntary associations is something HRW and others refuse to accept. They claim these are part of EPRDF's "brave new world of human robots" who cannot speak out for themselves during elections! The consistent attack on the Charities and Societies Proclamation gives the game away here. Democracy cannot be realized unless NGOs are given more freedom to contribute to enhancing democracy. The more NGOs there are, the more freely they are able to operate regardless of their composition or their aims, the more democratic the Government. NGOs, we are told, are the hallmark of democracy, the guardians of freedom, par excellence. Mass associations, however, are not. The belief embedded in this assumption is that NGOs are inherently democratic no matter what they do, how they do it or who organizes them. Mass associations, however, which depend for finances upon their members, not on donors, that have a large-scale local base, and which are deeply involved in policies of poverty reduction, cannot be trusted. NGOs, a designation that includes HRW, must be the central part of any democratic process.

This campaign is clearly now in full swing. The 'recommendations' of HRW are outspoken. Forget any interest in democracy. Use humanitarian aid to squeeze concessions for the opposition. Peddle the politics and forget about human rights. "Encouraging democracy" is after all no more than the quest by some interest groups for the space from which they can launch whatever projects they may have, to influence the direction and momentum of Ethiopia's political process. This is the space for which HRW and its partners appear to be recruiting and organizing, to try to create an alternative political reality that would lend itself to intervention. It is this that explains the timing of the latest HRW report and the attached media fanfare. And this exactly expresses some of the challenges we face in ensuring the integrity of the upcoming elections.

2.4 .2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: the need to realize Ethiopians' ownership of the democratic process*

To say that building democracy, as the most effective and most representative form of governance, is a process, is to state the obvious. Most of the countries that we generally consider to be full-fledged democracies had to go through a labyrinth of historical and political processes before they achieved the level of mature democratic culture that they take for granted today. Their development of democracy was indeed the function of the interplay between a myriad of political, social and economic factors which evolved within the context of an historical continuum. Nor was this process uniform or universal. The unique historical context of each individual country meant different paths were necessary to meet the aspirations of their respective citizens in a manner that contributed to the further enhancement of their sustainable democratic experience. Of course, this doesn't mean that there are no common threads running through the democratic experience of different countries. One common feature, for example, is that building democracy is, first and foremost, an organic political process, and the citizens of any given country have to shoulder the ultimate responsibility for its nurture and success. If

history is any guide, a sustainable democratic culture is not something that can be vicariously built by others. The role of any third party, friends or otherwise, in observing, encouraging or supporting, can only be marginal at best. A full measure of devotion from domestic political actors and from citizens to democratic ideals and the basic principles of democracy is an absolute necessity to ensure the success of any democratization process. This is as valid today as it was in the past. There is no reason to doubt that it applies equally to all societies across the globe, north or south.

This basic understanding inevitably underpins the process of democratization that Ethiopia started to undertake nearly a decade and a half ago. Even today, it informs our resolve to continue to exert more effort to continue to enhance the process. Democracy essentially is the business of the people whose aspirations and choices that it is intended to meet. The very institutions that are put in place to ensure the fullest possible participation of Ethiopians at all levels of government have already begun to achieve a promising level of vibrancy. This is in large part due to the unstinting efforts of the government and the peoples of Ethiopia to own and protect them fully. It is this ever-growing sense of ownership of these institutions on the part of the people that has not only helped Ethiopia weather all kinds of campaign by the forces of reaction, attempting to commandeer the democratization process, but has also gone a long way towards moving this nascent democratic experience far beyond the expectations of its detractors.

The government of Ethiopia firmly believes that building democracy is an organic process best left to the peoples of Ethiopia themselves. What is more, the government has always maintained that no matter how well-intentioned, any amount of external support, whatever form it may take, can never be a substitute for popular commitment to the cause of democracy. This does not contradict the government's belief that third parties may be able to make some constructive contribution, however marginal, to enhance the process. In fact, the government has time and time again shown real interest in drawing lessons from the experiences of others. It has demonstrated a willingness to listen to and act upon criticisms - as long as they are made constructively and on the basis of mutual respect. It has, for example, always welcomed the support of partners in programs that constructively contribute to building of peace and stability in the country. It has worked with donors and partners in the furtherance of basic services such as education and healthcare without which citizens cannot meaningfully exercise their basic democratic and human rights. Most importantly, it has been willing to accept criticisms and respond to them when these were found to be based on accurate information and informed by genuine motives.

This has provided a good deal of rewarding outcome over the years but the government's genuine overtures have not always been received with sympathetic gestures. There have been challenges in the form of campaigns by some third parties to bring pressure to bear on the direction and momentum of the democratization process. Some of this has been, and still is, being waged by elements with entrenched ideological motives against the very nature of the process. Their campaigns often involve a series of arm-twisting efforts to force change in policies, economic or political, they consider are antagonistic to the pre-packaged political frameworks they insist on trying to impose. They offer little in the

way of respect for the sensitivities of the government in its sovereign capacity, much less any genuine consideration for the needs and aspirations of the people. Instances of shameless meddling in the domestic political process of the country have been all-too-frequent. They have varied from seemingly benign efforts to get unfavourable legislation overturned to attempts to try to effect a change of government through extra-legal means. Manipulation is the name of the game.

The events of the 2005 elections go a long way towards explaining the insidious nature of such efforts. They also shed some light on the caution needed to avoid any repetition of those tragic events. The government did everything possible at the time to ensure the elections would be conducted without blemish. The impressive turnout and the almost passionate popular embrace of voting rights was largely the result of the government's efforts. It was testament to the efficacy of the institutional framework put in place by the constitution. One of the things the government did to ensure the integrity of the elections was to invite third parties from abroad to observe the elections. The government was under no illusion that the observers were there to accord it legitimacy by declaring the elections free and fair, though with the single exception of one observer mission, they commended the conduct of the process. The government believed then, as it believes now, that the final and ultimate source of legitimacy for the democratic process are the peoples of Ethiopia, not observers from around the world.

Unfortunately, however, the actions of the leader of the EU Observer Mission have haunted us ever since. Mrs. Anna Gomes, the head of the mission, wasn't content to observe the elections and report accordingly. She believed, and she was not alone in this, that she had the right to determine who should lead the country, to dictate democracy to "the natives". She did not succeed but the agitation she caused led to the opposition's attempt to wrest power from the real winner. Five years after her unsuccessful attempt at king-making, Mrs. Gomes is still at it. In a recent letter to the EU commission, she urged no EU observer mission be sent to Ethiopia for these elections because, she claimed, "sending such a mission would be used by the Ethiopian government to legitimize an electoral farce that will certainly not respect basic conditions for democratic elections." Those basic conditions she is referring to are of course those that she tried to use to manipulate the outcome of the last election. More surprisingly, she is suggesting that the mere fact of an observer mission being present, whatever its verdict might be, is what provides legitimacy to the election. In other words, however free and fair the elections, "the natives" can never be trusted with democracy.

Her position may be exaggerated, but academics, and others in the international media, who believe themselves understanding and intelligent, often share an underlying assumption with Anna Gomes. They simply don't believe the government means what it says when it talks about democracy. They think it is running a democratic process and organizing elections simply to satisfy the expectations of donors. So the process needs to be closely controlled and dictated. Now that we are going to have another election, it is only fitting that we should make it totally clear that Ethiopia fully owns the democratic process in this country. No amount of ill-will, or indeed good will, can add or detract

from the legitimacy of the peoples' free expression of democracy in the vote in May. And let us reiterate once again that democracy is here to stay in Ethiopia.

9.4.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: the Regional Context revisited*

It has been quite some time since the ideals of multi-party democracy, good governance and human rights spread around the world. Today, there's a growing consensus that democracy, far from being a matter of choice, is indeed the most effective form of government better-suited to create a well-ordered, just and stable society, ensuring the fullest possible representation and the protection of interests of the disparate sectors of society. The indispensability of these ideals for a region bedevilled by recurrent conflicts between and among various diverse peoples and groups, the result of a lack of good governance, cannot be overstated. Our sub-region is certainly no exception to the increasing realization of the necessary role of good governance and democracy, but the level of progress achieved so far has been modest. There are numerous challenges that have played havoc with the democratization processes of particular countries. There are also clear fault lines among the major players, state or non-state alike, regarding the relevance of, and the commitment to, ideals of democracy and good governance. Indeed, two major competing trends can be seen in the region, and their interplay has significance far beyond the sub-region and indeed Africa.

Despite the growing consensus among the international community for the need to embrace the ideals of democracy and good governance, there are still some who continue to hold to time-honoured practices of governing that fly full in the face of these imperatives. It is a view that often finds expression in the form of a stubborn refusal to abide by the notions of democracy and toleration, open disdain for the rule of law in both domestic and international contexts, and by an unbridled insistence on belligerency as a means of settling differences. According to proponents of this rejectionist approach, democracy is no more than a mere cliché, elections are a sham, political opposition intolerable, good neighbourly relations anachronistic, and the rule of law no more than an irritant to be dispensed with. Instead, citizens are subject to appalling treatment, dissenting voices suppressed, constitutions suspended or not implemented, elections deferred or totally dispensed with, and the rule of law scorned. Even more, the international rules and norms governing inter-state relations are sacrificed on the altar of expediency and deliberately generated crises are exported throughout the region. Many of the region's conflicts result from these attitudes, and there appears to be no immediate end in sight to this trend, personified as it is by the Government of Eritrea. Eritrea may be the most vigorous of rejectionist of state actors in this context, but it is hardly alone. The region has more than its fair share of elements, both state and non-state which thrive on fratricidal conflict or terrorist atrocities, or even the sort of open aggression carried out by Eritrea against its neighbours.

At the same time, there are developments that stand in marked contrast to these dangerous trends. There is a growing realization by many in the region that democratic

ideals are a matter of survival and must therefore be encouraged wholeheartedly whatever the odds. Nurturing multi-party democracy, the promotion of good governance and the protection of human rights are choices that are not only unavoidable but vital in ensuring that the interests of the peoples, of individual countries or of the whole region, are better served in a political environment of democratic governance. Followers of this trend put a high premium on respect for international law and on the promotion of good neighbourly relations as well as meaningful regional cooperation and dialogue. These are the best mechanisms of protecting peoples' interests on the basis of mutual respect and benefit. A lot of energy and political goodwill has already been expended to stem the tide of pessimism, to ensure this path will triumph over the insanity and nihilism of rejectionism.

In this respect we can confidently assert that Ethiopia has been steadily leading this campaign for good governance through the number of measures it has taken both in the domestic political sphere as well as in the context of activities to strengthen cooperation among the countries of the region in the pursuit of peace and stability. In this context, Ethiopia has taken a highly significant and affirmative role in seeking peaceful solutions to the regional conflicts. It has frequently gone that extra mile to resolve its differences with others in a civilized and constructive manner. Its role, as part of the efforts of IGAD and the AU to find solutions for conflicts throughout Africa, has been commendable. It remains the most significant partner of the Somalis and the Sudanese in their efforts to resolve their conflicts amicably. It has time and time again displayed its full support for peace. Its participation in peace-keeping operations in various problem areas has been widely welcomed.

In the domestic sphere, the various political, economic and social policies that have been implemented by the government have provided growing empowerment of the peoples of Ethiopia, in political and economic growth, affecting millions. Ethiopia is currently growing at an impressive speed largely due to the full participation of people in the political process made possible by the political reform undertaken nearly two decades ago. The protection of human rights, the building of democratic institutions and a multi-party system, the provision of public services and the strengthening of unity as well as the building of peace and stability have been gathering momentum year by year. Despite some setbacks, unavoidable given the original lack of democratic culture, and the efforts of the competing trend of rejection, there's been very significant progress. There can be more. With the right support from partners, the political stability and economic development that the government has produced in Ethiopia could go a long way to strengthen those in the region and throughout the continent who believe in the efficacy of democratic institutions in resolving conflicts between and among peoples. Ethiopia's role in regional efforts to seek peaceful solutions to conflicts reinforces optimism and provides an excellent example.

It isn't yet possible today to say with mathematical certainty which of these trends will finally dominate, but the result will determine whether democracy is indeed viable in a conflict-ridden region such as ours still is. It will, of course, largely depend upon the determination of regional actors themselves, for which there is no substitute. Equally, there are those who consider it their business to lend support to the cause of democracy

and good governance. These may be development partners or other international actors who claim to have a stake in the development of democratic institutions in the region, but whose contributions can sometimes demonstrate an entrenched bias that seems to reinforce, perhaps inadvertently, the continuation of rejection. The contribution of these partners and self-professed promoters of democratic ideals do not always appear to provide the right incentive for the right cause. The ambivalence, even open antagonism, of some actors towards positive developments in the region and an almost messianic resolve to impose their own orthodoxy root and branch, have all-too-often vindicated the claims of rejectionists and spoilers in the region. The experiences have been sobering indeed.

Much of the support Ethiopia has received from such actors for its democratization efforts and for its role in the region has been lukewarm at best. Relations with self-appointed 'democracy promoters' have often been punctuated by acrimonious allegations. Most of these criticisms come from elements which, constrained by their own prejudices and misguided assumptions, are unwilling to accept that the basis of democracy might be local rather than foreign. By trying to insist on a political orthodoxy far removed from the reality on the ground, they distract attention from questions that really matter, and in the process dilute the significance that such positive developments could have on others making similar efforts in the region. Ethiopia's encouraging advances in the process of democratization, despite the efforts of rejectionist forces, go unnoticed. As we saw during and after the May 2005 elections, a smear campaign denigrating the election and its results, emboldened rejectionist elements in the region and within Ethiopia. These were led by Eritrea, the least democratic state in the region, if not Africa, in a campaign to try to bring about the collapse of Ethiopia's democratization process. What might have been a real watershed, promoting the ideals of democracy and good governance in the region and throughout the continent, was nearly swallowed up by a cacophony of accusations that came close to seriously compromising the gains Ethiopia has made in development, peace, stability and democracy. It was an opportunity lost to those who might have drawn a lesson from the experience.

This time around, we can expect the election will rekindle such possibilities. There is every reason to believe, given Ethiopia's regional and wider involvement, that the election will provide a highly successful impetus for the region and the continent. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that the forces that did everything they could to tarnish Ethiopia's image five years ago, won't try it again this time. Indeed, some have already begun to do so; more can be expected. The failure to appreciate the significance of such positive developments, reinforcing the faith of the peoples of the region in democratic ideals, can only assist elements of rejectionism and extremism. The success of the electoral process will not only benefit the peoples of Ethiopia but will represent a major step forward for democracy in the Horn of Africa and in Africa.

16.4.2010: *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: party loyalty to rules of the game*

Strengthening of democracy in any country must largely depend upon the extent to which citizens take the process, and the institutions underpinning it, seriously. In a word, the success of a democracy building project depends on whether or not the citizens own the process. In the absence of a sense of ownership among various stakeholders, whether government or opposition parties, civic associations, individual citizens, achieving a meaningful level of democratization with no more than a declared embrace of lofty ideals can only be wishful thinking. In order to succeed in the process of building democracy, it is more than anything else necessary for stakeholders to be willing to remain true to their avowed beliefs, but even more to give their all to the further strengthening of the various institutions pivotal for democracy to take deeper root. At the very minimum, all stakeholders should be willing to abide by the fundamental rules of the game, ensuring the reliability and predictability of their own actions in a manner to help sustain a healthy regulation of the relations between and among each other. In fact, any regression to authoritarianism, as sometimes witnessed in Africa as elsewhere, can be attributed less to a lack of commitment to the ideals of democracy than to the reluctance by some stakeholders to properly observe the rules of the game in their efforts to achieve their intended alternative outcome to the process.

This particular challenge to the process of building democracy is nowhere more pronounced than the manner in which these stakeholders conduct themselves before, during and after elections. Otherwise latent but undemocratic proclivities often start to rear their head just as electoral processes begin in earnest. This challenge can be particularly troubling as the gains made in building democratic institutions between elections are often suspect after election-related recriminations and counter-recriminations. The integrity of the entire process is rendered doubtful. In a context where some stakeholders place a higher premium on the outcome of elections rather than the integrity of the process, and third parties are all-too-ready to denigrate the conduct of the election, elections can fall short of engendering democratic ideals. Indeed, they can degenerate into circuses putting the sustainability of the process into question. As circumstances in May 2005 made very clear, the propensity of some stakeholders to try to short-circuit the way to power, the failure to show loyalty to the rules of the game, can certainly cause major challenges that can outlive their original context.

The campaign for the elections is now gathering pace by the day. It is, therefore, worthwhile to reiterate the need for a hard and serious look at the way various stakeholders in the Ethiopian body politic are behaving. Political parties are putting forward their political platforms in various media. The allocation of air time in the public media has clearly helped parties to access supporters and potential supporters across the country. The six televised debates among political parties have attracted a huge audience (the seventh debate is being held this evening). They have produced a significantly heightened interest in the content of the debates. Inter-party councils, as envisaged in the code of conduct, have been operating both at Federal and regional levels. Allegations of misconduct are therefore being handled in accordance with agreed procedures. There is a widespread sense of anticipation that the conduct of the election and the results will be as flawless as both government and opposition parties who are genuinely interested in the fairness of the whole procedure hope it will be. There does appear to be a much clearer

understanding that the integrity of the elections are really crucial in ensuring the democratization process in the country can survive the gloomy predictions of its detractors abroad and the drab mimicry of their rejectionist elements within Ethiopia. As much as there is room for optimism, there are also indications that a lot more is still required both from government and opposition alike to hold undemocratic proclivities that might potentially stand in the way of conducting free and fair elections, in check.

Here, the idea of the loyalty of parties to the constitutional order cannot be overstressed. In fact, this is the centre-piece of any viable multi-party democracy. The most minimal knowledge of how democracy operates underlines the fact that the presence or absence of a loyal opposition, loyal that is to the constitutional order, is the difference between a functioning democracy and virtual anarchy. All parties should refrain from activities that undermine the rule of law or other democratic institutions for these are what will ultimately determine the viability of the entire democratization process. In the past, a major political undercurrent of the opposition in Ethiopia has been rejection of the concept of a loyal opposition. Opposition politics were often exemplified by debates full of sloganeering with a refusal to offer any hostages to fortune. Even today, the effect of this can be seen by a tendency of some in the opposition to consider anyone who expresses loyalty to the constitution as mere stooges of the government, however critical they may also be of government policies. The destructive effect of this mentality was very clear in the missed opportunities of May 2005. It is still far from clear whether all opposition learnt sufficient lessons from that episode. Some members of the opposition have been recently publicly declaring they are 'the rightful successors of the CUD of 2005', implying that problems of 2005 have not entirely disappeared. Ironically, proponents of this rejectionist tendency actually draw their main support from actors hailing from political systems that thrive on the existence of loyal opposition.

All genuine Ethiopian political parties, of whatever political persuasions, must repudiate this rejectionist tendency and the insulting stance of its foreign benefactors. Temptations to relapse into old habits of incessant allegations at every opportunity should be avoided as much as possible. Whatever complaints there may be, real or perceived, are better left to the inter-party councils. This will progressively encourage a sense of confidence in the institutions among all the parties which should also bear in mind that only strict adherence to the rule of law and continued tolerance and mutual respect towards each other can bring the desired benefits to the peoples of Ethiopia. The responsibility for the integrity of the electoral process carries a lot more weight than merely the specific outcome of the voting. As a party contending for power, the ruling party is, of course, duty bound to abide by the rules governing all parties. On a more fundamental level, its sense of ownership of the entire process should, as always, inform its relations with other parties. Its willingness to accommodate the demands of opposition parties during the series of negotiations on the code of conduct was exemplary. But negotiations among parties must always enhance the rule of law and never erode it. The ruling party should continue to hold itself as much accountable to the rules of the game as all other parties. It is commendable that it is continuing the training of its cadres on the code of conduct and other relevant laws. No one is above the law, and as Prime Minister Meles reiterated in his address to parliament this week, the ruling party is more than willing to co-operate

with all parties loyal to the constitution irrespective of their political differences. The Prime Minister made it clear the EPRDF would have no qualms whatsoever about removing from its ranks members that display any undemocratic proclivities or any found interfering in the activities of opposition parties. His party, he said, would rather get rid of any recalcitrant members in order to ensure the integrity of elections than ignore any unbecoming behaviour. Reassuring to those who are able to back up allegations with evidence but they will also need to demonstrate any element of reciprocity, and stick to the rules of the game throughout.

The government is under no illusion that there is room for complacency. It will continue to do its level best to encourage all parties to come to terms with the need to respect the rule of law. It will also continue to insist that the integrity of the elections cannot be held hostage by rejectionist elements with a penchant for the dramatic. It must continue to insist that anything that falls short of affirming the rules of the game is out. The democratization process can never be allowed to degenerate into an exercise in cynicism. The election cannot be allowed to serve as the forum for rejectionist politicians with divided loyalty and external sponsors dictating alien demands. The peoples of Ethiopia deserve, and will get, better.

23.4.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: progress impressive, but vigilance needed*

It's been quite some time now since we began the countdown to election 2010. Developments so far have largely fostered a sense of positive expectation for the election, and the ramifications for the future of democratic governance and economic development. Registration of voters was conducted without a hitch and the numbers registered surpassed that of 2005. Enthusiasm has been just as palpable. The signing of the code of conduct, and its subsequent promulgation into law by parliament, has created a wider opportunity for parties to address any irregularities and helped instil the sense of trust and confidence conspicuously missing in previous elections. The inter-party councils set up at federal, regional and local levels have carried out a number of investigations and decided numerous complaints and allegations from all parties. The incidence of recrimination, and counter-recrimination, has not been excessive, and this is largely due to the complaint handling mechanisms now in place. The preparations made by the National Electoral Board, covering logistics and human resources, and the Board's continued engagement with all stakeholders on a regular basis, has even drawn praise, and, at worst, no more than perfunctory criticism even from those normally unsparing in their comments.

The media debates among the contending parties have also been instrumental in raising the level of peoples' expectations of the conduct and outcome of the election. Despite a few anomalies here and there, the overall conduct of the electoral process has really been about as good as it can get in fledgling democratic experiences like that of Ethiopia. Indeed, there is widespread optimism in the air that, whatever the outcome, the petty squabbles of the previous election and the unchecked momentum that caused the bloody

riots in its aftermath, are not after all natural corollaries of any electoral exercise in this country, as some have claimed. Irrespective of who wins, there is every reason to believe and expect that this election will indeed be the watershed that all stakeholders genuinely interested in the further enhancement of the democratic process in Ethiopia, believe it will be. That is good, but there are other reasons feeding this sense of optimism.

Most important, there is an ever greater awareness on the part of the peoples of Ethiopia of the indispensability of the democratic process to safeguard their hard-won rights and the budding economic opportunities that are now in full display. The continued economic success registered in recent years, and the visible impact it has had on the lives of millions of hitherto destitute peasants living on the brink, has raised hopes for the peoples of Ethiopia that, given the right policies and the fullest possible measure of participation in the political process, poverty can indeed be relegated to the backwaters of history. The enthusiasm shown at all levels of the political process is only matched by the resolution of the people to overcome poverty and backwardness. Nor is this commitment to democracy merely skin-deep. It is being progressively woven into the socio-political fabric for the peoples of Ethiopia who own the process.

Equally important, there is a growing willingness among increasing numbers of key stakeholders, including political parties, civic associations, and partners, to give the process the benefit of the doubt. The readiness of many political parties to sign the code of conduct was one reassuring sign. There are still some rough elements to be rounded out, but there is no doubt that the dominant undercurrent is essentially positive. The deployment of observer missions by the AU and EU has also contributed to the sense of optimism, and the head of the EU Observer Mission has expressed their readiness to do everything to maintain impartiality and neutrality and, most importantly, avoid any repetition of the unacceptable behaviour which led to the disturbances in 2005. There's no reason to doubt this will indeed be the case and there is no denying it will be important. In this connection, the recent decision by 10 Ethiopian civic associations, boasting hundreds of thousands of members among them, to form a network to participate in election monitoring activities is another indication that stakeholders are taking the process seriously. This will make an excellent contribution to electoral integrity if only because of the sheer number of observers the associations are capable of deploying and the wider coverage they propose to offer. The associations represent highly diverse interest groups, including for example, the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions, and the Employers' Federation, underlining the importance of their participation in providing for the credibility of the process.

Of course, the democratic process continues to face a number of challenges, from within and without. There are those to whom the success of the democratization process in Ethiopia is a constant reminder of their own failures. The government of Eritrea is top in this category, apparently determined to fight any sign of progress in Ethiopia, tooth and nail. This has been the single most consistent pattern along the northern borders. Numerous "opposition groups", armed, unarmed, secessionist, rejectionist or assimilationist, have been nurtured in the training camps of Eritrea and sent across the border on terrorist missions. The media in Eritrea have concentrated on how to scuttle the

elections by any means, fair or foul. They have not had any success but it remains necessary to stay vigilant.

In this category are also to be found the more virulent elements of the largely Diaspora-based opposition whose declared objectives are the other side of the PFDJ's anti-Ethiopia manifesto. Largely discredited in Ethiopia by their gospel of destruction and the all-or-nothing tactics that they preach, they can still apparently appeal to some elements of rejection and reaction, as in the recent conference in Crystal City, Virginia, where a conference ostensibly to discuss peace and security in the Horn of Africa concentrated on looking for strategies to remove the Ethiopian government by all means. As their declaration made clear, these people are prepared to use anyone, even some in the ranks of legal opposition, to carry out their aims. And the government of Eritrea is a strong supporter of any and all such efforts. There is a similarity of tone between the leadership in Asmara, the doom-sayers in Virginia and even members of legislatures in some countries, that is far from reassuring. It is hardly a coincidence.

There are also a few others whose behaviour helps to reinforce the dangerous tendencies represented by these activities. Some are merely taken for a ride by the extremists. Others are in the business of giving political advice ostensibly in the interest of democracy and good governance but often inadvertently ending up by dignifying totally illegitimate activity. Some even appear to lose their capacity to distinguish between what is acceptable and unacceptable. To be frank, what Ambassador David Shinn did recently, despite his disclaimer, was to give his blessing to people prepared to destroy the government of Ethiopia at whatever cost to the people and the country. We must reiterate: ensuring the integrity of the elections depends more on what we do, not on what desperate elements of reaction may try to do. The importance of vigilance by the genuine stakeholders of this process, the government and the peoples of Ethiopia, cannot therefore be overstressed.

30.4.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: keeping the lessons of 2005 in mind*

As we inch closer to the May 23rd general elections, the election fever that is gripping the whole nation is becoming all the more palpable, and the enthusiasm contagious. Parties are feverishly canvassing throughout the country using all the mechanisms at their disposal. In addition to the televised debates and the use of time slots allocated in the public media to all parties, leaflets and posters of candidates representing the numerous parties are in full display in various cities and localities all over the country. Parties have been holding town hall meetings and discussions with their supporters and other potential voters. The institutions already in place are operating at full pressure, and complaints are being handled in a manner that fosters mutual trust and confidence. Parties have been enjoying, and continue to enjoy, unfettered access to public media outlets in putting forward their platforms. The level of participation of the public in all these has been largely enthusiastic, a witness to the increasing seriousness with which citizens are taking part in the political process. The government has also been doing its level best to see to it

that the electoral process goes ahead without a hitch. It is exerting every effort possible to ensure the integrity and credibility of the upcoming elections, in the sincere belief that doing so will go a long way towards further cementing the democratic process in Ethiopia. As we mentioned last week, there is indeed a lot to be optimistic about.

But the extent to which this widespread optimism will be met by an equal measure of success in the conduct of the elections remains a question for many people. More specifically, foremost in peoples' minds is whether the conduct of the elections will take place without the kind of recriminations prevalent in 2005. It's worth looking again at the factors that muddied the waters five years ago. Indeed, it's all the more important if we are to avoid succumbing to similar pitfalls this time round. One of the most troubling trends in the previous election was the brazen contempt of the opposition to the rules of the game. Their commitment to the ideals of democracy appeared to be no more than skin deep at best; there was a declared intention to wrest power away from the incumbents by any means, fair or foul. Televised debates, intended to be used to put forward election platforms, were used instead to foment discontent and street violence. Some opposition elements were calling for out and out violence with little or no regard for the constitution or any laws governing electoral conduct. From the outset, many institutions including the constitution were subject to open ridicule. These elements showed no willingness either to tone down their rhetoric or heed voices of moderation. Committed to their all-or-nothing tactics, leaders of the opposition repeatedly called on their supporters to engage in street violence as a means of getting their way at any costs. It was clear that these groups had no use for the ordinary notions of the rule of law or of playing by the rules of the game. They were fixated by a chance of getting into the corridors of power, come hell or high water. The result was that an election that had promised to be a major turning point in Ethiopia's democratization process ended up being taken hostage by the unbridled demands of opposition leaders who considered power their birthright without any regard for the institutions that made the process possible. The outcome inevitably left scars on the entire electoral process.

It must be admitted that the opposition's unwholesome behaviour in the 2005 elections was not entirely without support. There was a concerted media campaign both within and outside the country, to describe the electoral process in the most unflattering light possible. There were numerous instances where outsiders, who believed it was their business to dictate terms regarding the pace and outcome of the democratization process, openly drew parallels of colour revolution in Georgia or Kyrgyzstan, even insinuating that this approach could well be used in Ethiopia. The democratic process was deemed beyond the pale well before the results of the election; it was clear that, for some, the outcome would only be acceptable if it put the opposition in power, or at least in a position to share power. One particularly egregious case was, of course, the role that the leader of the EU Electoral Observer Mission, Anna Gomes, played. Her behaviour, more than anything else, helped embolden the opposition to make irrational and false claims of victory. The EU-EOM leader clearly overstepped her mandate when she took it upon herself to commission an exit poll in Addis Ababa and a few other urban centres which apparently indicated that the opposition would win a majority. Indeed, the opposition did win, and not just by a majority but by a landslide, in those areas. The poll, supposedly

taken for the EU-EOM's internal consumption as it were, was however 'leaked' to the opposition who immediately proceeded to insist that they should be declared the winners of the election on this basis. The facts provided a totally different story but there was no stopping opposition leaders from making shrill accusations of massive fraud.

The impact that this uncalled for meddling by the EU-EOM leader in 2005 had on subsequent developments cannot be overstated. Indeed, it's not just a question of old forgotten history; the problems are still with us. As the leader of the current EU-EOM in this election recently reiterated in an interview with the English weekly *Capital*, whether or not the EU Observer Mission can be considered a success will depend on the extent to which it carries out its activities neutrally and impartially. We have no reason to doubt that he is indeed sincere, but this will also depend in no small measure on whether or not the lessons of 2005 have been taken on board. Understandably, Mr. Berman said he would rather focus on the present elections, and not dwell on the past. Relations, after all, run deeper than transient missions, and there is no need for him to share fully the government's assessment of the role played by the previous mission. Equally, there is no doubt some mistakes were made, not least the 'leak' of an unwarranted poll which certainly, despite Mr. Berman's emphatic denial in his interview, came out of the EU Mission. It is important that any actions meant for the EU-EOM's internal purposes should not be 'leaked' by anyone; the bottom line must be that any such mistakes will be avoided this time around.

As far as the learning of lessons is involved, there have been one or two worrying signs of a relapse among some in the opposition. Professor Beyene Petros, leader of the opposition United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF), and current chair of the Ethiopian Federal Democratic Unity Forum (MEDREK), a loose coalition of eight opposition parties, recently suggested in a public forum that people could always remove governments without having to wait for elections. He was drawing parallels with the recent extra-constitutional removal of government in Kyrgyzstan. It was a clear indication that, for some members of the opposition, such options are never off the table, raising the question of whether they have drawn the proper lessons from the past election. Professor Beyene also recently rejected AU Election Observer Missions as "totally untrustworthy" and castigated the EU Election Observer Mission as inadequate for deploying "only 150 observers to over 43 thousand polling stations." His remarks appear to suggest he is already trying to lay the groundwork for subsequent rejection of the outcome of the election, or at the very least trying to bring pressure in advance on election observers to pay heed to blanket allegations of fraud. This is being coupled with oft-repeated claims of harassment of their members, carried to the extent, recently, of claiming a deceased member of another party as one of their own. It would be naïve to consider these as just isolated cases.

At the end of the day, the actual conduct of the elections is what really matters. All stakeholders, without exception, must give everything for its success. Parties should reiterate their commitment to abide by the rules. All stakeholders must remain consistently true to the ideals of democracy. Partners must be wary of being hoodwinked into repeating unsubstantiated claims. Nor, most importantly, should the peoples and

Government of Ethiopia relax and let down their guard until the process is over and complete. Moreover, the lessons of the 2005 elections are still relevant.

7.5.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: a constructive role for the Diaspora*

With only two weeks to go before polling day, election day, 2010, promises to be historic in more ways than one. The campaign of the contending parties is getting warmer by the day, and there are clear indications that the momentum will continue. Citizens are gearing up for polling day to cast their ballots for favoured candidates. Observer missions, both from abroad and within, are either fully deployed or in the process of being deployed to various parts of the country. The preparations made so far and the feeling in the air seems to suggest that this is indeed going to be an election to remember. In contrast to the last national election, the conduct of most of the contending parties is encouraging. The role of other stakeholders is equally promising. The Electoral Board appears to be a lot more organized in terms of human resource and logistics than previously.

This positive assessment of the electoral process is not shared by everyone. In what has become an almost obsessive campaign to sabotage the elections, the Eritrean government has more than doubled its subversive activities by deploying terrorists to try to scuttle the process by any means. The who's who of 'Ethiopian' terrorist groups have been busy trying to carry out Asmara's cross-border attacks. The rejectionist elements among the Ethiopian Diaspora have also been trying to rally behind the Government of Eritrea as part of the effort to undermine the credibility of the election. They seem prepared to stop at nothing to create a semblance of chaos in the country. They won't succeed. The vigilance of the people and the security forces have already nipped many of these plots in the bud. There is even less likelihood that the noisy campaign by the rejectionist elements of the Diaspora-based opposition will have any impact. These particular elements have been in even more disarray than ever. In fact, it appears, at long last, that the silent majority in the Diaspora has begun to prevail over the prophets of doom who have so long dominated opposition Diaspora politics.

We have again and again reiterated that the building of democracy is a domestic affair, the success or failure of which largely depends upon the commitment of the peoples of the country and the extent to which they take the process seriously. The democratization process in Ethiopia is no exception. This doesn't mean that others cannot play a role. Ethiopians in the Diaspora and foreign nationals of Ethiopian origin are among those who can, and should, be involved. Under normal circumstances, the participation of any Diaspora-based groups will be largely economic, whether in the form of investing in their home country or helping to create networks that facilitate trade between their host country and their country of origin. Ethiopia's experience in this regard has been somewhat mixed. On the positive side, the number of Ethiopians residing abroad who have been willing to play a constructive role in the economic endeavours of the country has been steadily increasing. Equally, a lot more remains to be done both by the

Government and by Ethiopians in the Diaspora. All-too-often for the wrong reasons, the political activities of a minority have proved more prominent than the economic role of Ethiopians in the Diaspora. The last eighteen years have seen an unhealthy plethora of Diaspora-based opposition groups with undemocratic proclivities which have steadily tried to undermine the democratization process in the country. These groups have been characterized largely by a rejectionist tendency long on rhetoric and short on substance. They have done everything they can to nip the democratization process in the bud. Campaigns have been waged to lobby development partners to deny development aid to Ethiopia. Demonstrations have been staged to demand cuts in humanitarian aid for the needy or even the starving in Ethiopia. Western politicians and parliamentarians have been lobbied to enact bills that aim to punish the Government and peoples of Ethiopia for not submitting to the irrational demands of rejectionists and their benefactors and supporters. Even worse, these groups have often sought support and partnership with sworn enemies of the country, to synchronize their destructive campaigns against democratization in Ethiopia. The numerous alliances and fronts concocted together with the Government of Eritrea, and the terrorist campaigns they have financed, indicate just how sinister these elements have become.

Apart from these directly subversive activities, rejectionist elements in the Diaspora have also contributed to stirring up politics in a number of more insidious ways. They frequently prey on financial needs of domestic opposition elements trying to use legally registered groups as Trojan horses. Far from recognizing the independence of such organizations, they insist on dictating terms as to what they should do or not do in respect of domestic political activities. The role that these groups played during the last election vividly illustrated the extent to which such deals between Diaspora-based rejectionists and their internal contacts could threaten the political foundations. Unable to carry out their mission last time round, these groups have continued to dream up scheme after scheme to try and discredit the Government of Ethiopia by any means. They have become even more determined now the election is just around the corner, but there is little they can do to derail the process now. The failure of recent efforts to drum up support for their cause clearly shows that the previously silent majority in the Diaspora has said enough is enough. The turn-out for their latest series of meetings has been so low as to suggest that even their once hardcore supporters have given up. Their dalliance with the Eritrean government can hardly go further. Opposition calls to previously generous supporters for financial support has been falling on deaf ears.

By contrast, the level of participation by Ethiopians in the Diaspora in meetings with government officials in recent weeks has demonstrated that the great majority are not interested in the kind of violence preached by rejectionists and are even less inclined to offer to bank-roll their destructive activities. There is a growing readiness on the part of many Ethiopians abroad to organize themselves and work in cooperation with the government on projects covering various areas. There's a real understanding that greater dialogue and more constructive engagement is the way that Ethiopians in the Diaspora can play a meaningful role in the ongoing democratization process and growing economic development in the country. It all suggests that the upcoming election is indeed going to see the triumph of reason and moderation over that of rejection and violence,

and that it will indeed provide a demonstration that the ‘silent majority’ have prevailed over the ‘rowdy elements’.

14.5.2010 *Ensuring the Integrity of the Upcoming Elections: the case for continuing vigilance*

Election Day is only a week away and electoral campaigns of the parties are already drawing to a close. The electoral process has generated a level of enthusiasm among various stakeholders and the process so far has proved its versatility and a level of maturity that has become a source of confidence for the people. The experience has for the most part been a rewarding one. Even some parties that were recently involved in the zero-sum politics of violence now appear to have come to terms with the changing times. The decision by the UWSLF to lay down its arms and join the peaceful democratic process at this time is a case in point and very welcome news, testifying to the growing level of confidence among parties that were previously opposed to the political system. There are clear indications that the politics of rejectionism are waning, giving way to tolerance and moderation.

However, there still remain lingering issues of concern. There have recently been several reports of incidents of electoral malpractice, and actual as well as attempted terrorist activities in different parts of the country. In addition to a fatal bomb attack in the northern area of the country, a number of terrorist plots orchestrated by the agents of the government of Eritrea have also been foiled by the Ethiopian security forces, largely thanks to the people’s vigilance. Some sections of the legally registered opposition also seem to have been engaged in an apparent campaign to discredit the legitimacy of the elections by way of incessantly making unverifiable allegations, in a manner reminiscent of the deplorable developments of 2005. In another more alarming development, security officials have recently reported a bombing incident involving members of one opposition party targeting members of another party. The result was the death of a few civilians and one police officer. The brazenness of these attacks has left little doubt as to how murky the electoral process can get and the extent to which undemocratic proclivities of the past can materialize even when least expected.

It all demonstrates that however widespread the sense of optimism may be, the successful completion of the election can never be taken for granted. There are a host of reasons that make holding elections in this part of the world a very tricky business. Certainly, the regional context has hardly been amenable to the successful and smooth holding of elections. The existence of actors in the region, state and non-state alike, who are disinclined to embrace the ideals of democracy or the peaceful settlement of differences, has all too often proved problematic in the face of attempts to build viable democratic culture and effective good governance. The government of Eritrea may be a text book personification of this trend, and it’s certainly the most vigorous of such actors, but it is hardly alone. The region does actually have more than its fair share of rejectionist elements. Equally, despite these long odds, Ethiopia has managed to register impressive results even though it has continued to be taunted by rejectionist forces. The results often

go unnoticed or are even denigrated. This emboldens these elements led by the Eritrean regime in its campaign to try to bring about the collapse of Ethiopia's democratization process.

This brings us to the other challenge that continues to be posed against the successful completion of the electoral process, and against the democratization process and development endeavours. Ethiopia has, in fact, achieved numerous positive developments fostering confidence in the democratic process. The government has been doing a lot to bolster institutions entrusted with promoting and developing democratic culture. There are, however, those to whom no amount of goodwill is likely to persuade giving the ruling party the benefit of the doubt. Leaders of some opposition parties have left little doubt as to how small is the regard they have for the rules of the game. The pattern of behaviour of these parties has been consistent to a fault. They have flaunted in public their contempt for the constitution and institutions established under it, particularly the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia. They have repeatedly shunned the overtures of the ruling and other opposition parties for negotiation and constructive engagement. They leave no doubt they have little use for the precepts of civilized discourse. They have made no secret of their disdain for the electoral process. They have repeatedly used whatever media access they have been given, courtesy of the law, to pile up allegation after allegation against the very institutions that made the process possible. They are all but certain the ruling party will rig the next elections; they claim the ruling party has never been genuine about anything related to democracy or elections. They have even openly declared their opposition to the deployment of AU observers and their distrust of the efficacy of the EU's observer mission.

It all indicates that rejectionism, despite its growing marginalization by the peoples of Ethiopia, is still near enough to rear its head whenever an opportunity presents itself. This becomes even more dangerous in the context of the feverish efforts of the government of Eritrea to unleash every kind of violence to try to scuttle the process by whatever means. These are challenges that need close attention and vigilance by the public.

The bottom line is that the success or otherwise of the democratic process depends upon the commitment of the peoples of Ethiopia. Developments so far have shown unequivocally that the process is indeed taking deeper root by the day. No amount of cynicism is going to set the clock back. Equally, with only a week to go before polling day, none of the negative developments of the past few weeks should be allowed to stand in the way of the success of the elections. People should continue to remain vigilant against destructive tendencies whether within Ethiopia or from threats from outside. As Prime Minister Meles emphatically stated last weekend, Ethiopia's patience towards regional spoilers has its limits. It is good to remind the likes of Eritrea not to be oblivious to this. More importantly, it is incumbent upon the peoples and government of Ethiopia to redouble their efforts to see that the country's progress along the path of democratization and rapid economic development are unhindered by the duplicitous campaigns of the sworn enemies of the process. Doing this will help to ensure that Election Day will successfully frustrate the forces of rejection and usher in the next chapter of Ethiopia's Renaissance.

Everyone should vote on Sunday 23.5.2010

Sunday is polling day and all eyes are fixed on it. All the parties have concluded their campaigns and the mood among them is that they have given the campaign their all. The process so far has been remarkably successful and underlined the overall optimism of the democratic process. Despite a few allegations, largely from expected quarters, the vast majority of the political parties and their members appear to have been content with the way the campaigns went. The final days before the official closure of campaigning on Thursday saw particularly enthusiastic rallies by supporters of the parties with most conducted without a hitch. There is a widespread feeling that this really is going to be a watershed moment in Ethiopia's democratization process in more ways than one.

To begin with, the level of participation of the public both in terms of the number of registered voters and the level of activism has been very impressive. It points to the growing sense of ownership of the democratization process by Ethiopians of all regions and of all walks of life. There is a clear realization that this is indeed a totally Ethiopian affair in which citizens are duty bound to contribute.

Equally, the role taken by the various stake holders has also been exceptionally impressive. Political parties, ruling and opposition alike, have largely been for the most part fully aware of the need to respect the rules of the game and to conduct themselves in a manner that fosters trust and confidence in the political institutions. The Code of Conduct has clearly contributed to the more or less smooth conduct of campaigning. It will hopefully continue to do so even after polling day. Leaders of all the major parties including that of the incumbent have concluded their campaign remarks on a very positive note, all emphasizing that they will respect the outcome of the election whoever wins.

The successful deployment of observer missions has also been another successful factor. Apart from the observer missions deployed by the EU and AU, Ethiopian civic associations have managed to deploy more than forty thousand observers in different parts of the country. This will certainly go a long way in ensuring the credibility of the election.

Nor should the preparations by both the government and in particular by the National Electoral Board be forgotten. These have been another major factor contributing to the more or less smooth process in the run-up to polling day. The National Electoral Board has introduced a number of reforms that have helped build its capacity to carry out the entire process effectively and efficiently. The training and number of its employees was also increased in a manner that enabled it to address the shortfalls of previous elections. The fact that the selection of election officials was carried out with the full and open participation of all stakeholders has gone a long way in enhancing the effectiveness of the Electoral Board.

As far as the government is concerned, it has made every preparation necessary to ensure the credibility and legitimacy of this election. Apart from reiterating its resolve to avoid a repeat of the post-election problems of 2005 , it has also conducted the necessary sensitization campaigns among various stakeholders to underline the ethical as well as logistical requirements for conducting free and fair elections. Campaign funds were disbursed among contending parties for the first time since the beginning of the democratization process in the country. Equally important, the police have made the necessary preparations to ensure the peaceful conduct of the election.

Of course, a few voices of rejection remain. They will not significantly affect the essentially free and peaceful conduct of the elections. The peoples of Ethiopia now realize more than ever before just how important Sunday will be for further cementing the country's political institutions. There is little chance that spoilers will be able or allowed to disrupt what is in fact a remarkable and impressive process. Sunday will be a historic day for Ethiopians, at home or abroad. We hope everyone will make the effort to participate. Whatever the outcome of the vote, the winner is Ethiopia's democratization process.