



On the occasion of International Day of Democracy
Study entitled
The illusion of democracy in Ethiopia...
Violated Freedoms

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On the Occasion of the International Day of Democracy on September 15, 2021

Preamble

Democracy is defined as a form of government equally shared by all eligible citizens- either directly or through elected representatives- in order to propose, develop and introduce laws on the social, economic and cultural conditions that would allow the free and equal participation of citizens in political life. Accordingly, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights issued this study to shed some light on the concept of democracy and its index as well as the partial criteria under such index. The study takes Ethiopia as an applied case study on these criteria in order to assess the updates on the democratic environment in Ethiopia and to provide an evaluation vision of the current situation, in addition to a number of recommendations to stakeholders.

First: Application of partial criteria of the Democracy Index to Ethiopia

Ethiopia has been going through a tumultuous period since the appointment of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, who assumed office following the resignation of Former Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, in response to the mass protests during which the protesters demanded more political rights. Ahmed pledged to reform the authoritarian state of Ethiopia and supervised the review of some laws that were used by his predecessors to suppress the opposition. Nonetheless, the long-awaited general election of August 2020 was postponed due to the Coronavirus, which constituted an obstacle to the democratic transition in the country. Furthermore, the ruling Prosperity Party, which is a reconstitution of the ethno-regional alliance that has ruled Ethiopia since 1991- has partially returned to the use of authoritarian tactics, under the leadership of Abiy Ahmed. This ruling party has arrested the opposition leaders and restricted the freedom of the media in the face of the growing regional and sectarian violence. Notably, the Ethiopian army has also engaged in a long-standing conflict with the security forces in Tigray region in an attempt to arrest the ranking members of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

Given all these reasons, Ethiopia was chosen by Maat as a subject of assessment by the study in order to find out how Ethiopia has reached this point with regard to the absence of a democratic climate, despite the hopes for Ethiopia to overcome the tyranny of the former military systems during the reign of Abiy Ahmed.

A. The Ethiopian Constitution and democracy

This part of the study outlines the terms and articles of the Constitution of Ethiopia on democratization, including Article 38 on the right to vote and to be elected and Article 39 on the rights of nations, nationalities and peoples in Ethiopia. This is in addition to Article 29 on the right of opinion, thought and expression (civil liberties).

B. Ethiopia according to the rankings of the global Democracy Index

As pointed out, the global Democracy Index is based on four criteria, which will be outlined in some detail in this part of the study with application to Ethiopia.

1. The election process and multi-partyism in Ethiopia... An incomplete path

This criterion of the Democracy Index monitors the integrity and transparency of the elections inside the state, in addition to the degree of participation of the political parties in these elections and to what extent multi-partyism is allowed in political life in the first place.

2. The government performance... An ongoing repression

Upon the appointment of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister, he attempted to spread an environment of democracy in the country by releasing thousands of political prisoners and lifting the restrictions on independent media. He also invited all the opposition groups that were banned from the country to return from exile, raising positive international and domestic expectations that Ethiopia can go a long way towards achieving democracy. However, this optimistic picture presented by the government of Abiy Ahmed has quickly dissipated, revealing a different face to the Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Simmering tensions that began a long time ago and were kept under wraps have reached the boiling point¹.

3. Political participation... An ethnic persecution

After assuming office in April 2018, Abiy Ahmed adopted a number of reforms under international guidelines, including the increase of freedoms and the supervision of the trials of the officials accused of human rights violations as well as lifting the state of emergency, developing an ambitious program for economic development, restoring the diplomatic relations and putting an end to the conflict between Ethiopia and its neighbor Eritrea that has been going on for more than 20 years. The development of events during the last two years points out serious difficulties facing Abiy Ahmed's

¹ Abiy Ahmed on the threats to Ethiopia's democratic transition, Democracy in Africa, 2020, <https://econ.st/3tCrlvs>

government with regard to addressing the imbalances of the federal system and his ability to meet the demands of different nationalities.

4. Civil liberties... Infinite violations

This criterion is based on the governments' respect for civil liberties, which is a limit that a government shall respect when dealing with its people. The more these governments respect the civil liberties of their people, the stronger their democracy index will be.

Third: Analytical vision on the status of democracy and freedoms in Ethiopia

In 2017, the global index classified Ethiopia as an authoritarian country with a score of 3.42/10. It was hoped that when the 2020 Index was launched, that image of Ethiopia would change by raising its democratic standards. It was hoped that pluralism would become something governments advocated and supported and would leave the space for parties without restriction or domination over them under the banner of only one party. We also expected that the political participation of the ethnicities would increase, the participation that they were denied for years under the dictatorial military regimes. The democracy index decreased in 2020 from its level in 2017. That is Ethiopia's ranking for the global democracy index in the period from (2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020), respectively (3.42, 3.35, 3.44, 3.38).

Abiy Ahmed's democracy was unable to deal with other ethnicities. He cannot deal with their right to have parties to represent them and exercise their role in political life through it. That bothered him to set up a single party under his rule, which he calls prosperity and includes the majority of the most powerful political parties. Thus, he eliminated partisan pluralism, and soon Ethiopia will turn politically to a one-party system.

Also, at the level of government performance, it is far from democracy. The government does not respect the other opinion at all, but the government's decisions remain sacred and not discussed. It launched a heavy crackdown on the press and shutdown media outlets. It restricted access to the Internet in the country, which has become one of the basic human needs. Recent statistics have indicated that 14.5% of the population in Ethiopia can obtain good internet services. That is because the current government fears the power of social media in spreading and announcing the continuous violations practiced by the government. The government wants people who do not see, do not hear, and do not speak, to control them politically.

Finally, the Ethiopian government does not know how to practice democracy. So it is not blamed for what is happening inside its country of oppression and domination of other ethnicities.

The Ethiopian government does not know how to practice democracy. If we look at the government's diplomatic behavior in the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, we realize that the Ethiopian government still refuses to negotiate. It refuses what exposes it to hearing the voice of the other party. It only hears its opinion and voice and sees only its right, so it seems that dictatorship and authoritarianism are the worms of Abiy Ahmed's government and its approach.

Recommendations

Democracy is a right that people should not be deprived of because of its dire consequences. Peoples are not allowed to be deprived of their right to freedom and remain silent; even if they remain silent, this silence will not last forever, but one day they will revolt against those who have deprived them of this right. Therefore, governments must correct their course in proportion to giving people the freedom to build a national nation with the principles of citizenship.

Therefore, in the context of what was previously mentioned, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights presents these recommendations:

- a) Ethiopia should abolish laws that push towards more repression of freedoms the latest of these is the hate speech law, which has met with rejection among civil society organizations defending human rights.
- b) The one-party crisis in Ethiopia must be addressed, and the Prosperity Party should be restructured, which contravenes the principles of democracy and allows for pluralism.
- c) Maat recommends ending the war in Tigray, which extended to neighboring regions due to the elections, and negotiate to reach satisfactory solutions for all parties.
- d) Maat is concerned about the information received that the Ethiopian government receives funding from international organizations to improve the quality of the Internet. But this money does not go to the benefit of Internet quality. However, Internet freedom is not exercised in the required form in Ethiopia, whether in war or peace.
- e) We call on the Ethiopian government to allow the UN bodies, and local and international civil society organizations to carry out their work in all Ethiopian regions without any restrictions, including the promotion of human rights practices in the first place.