

## Election 2010: A Retrospective

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*The election victory of the ruling Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party in the May 2010 was a foregone conclusion. The victory margin of 99.6% percent of the parliamentary seats was not only incredible but deeply embarrassing to the leaders of the ruling party. The ruling party was able to achieve such an election outcome because its master plan for the elections went awry as a result of aggressive use of illegal and unethical election practices. The retrospective explains the widespread use of illegal and unfair electoral methods by the ruling party in one district in Tigrai, but the observations are equally applicable to elections held throughout Ethiopia.*

### Introduction

The most incredible fact about the May 2010 Ethiopian election is not that the ruling Ethiopian People Revolutionary Party (EPRDF) won; that was foreordained. What is astonishing is the fact that it won by 99.6% percent. Such victory is impossible to explain to the reasonable mind. Even members of the EPDRF bow their heads down in embarrassment as they proclaim their “victory”. The incredible margin of victory was no accident. It was the result of a master plan that had gone completely awry. It was the unintended result of a campaign and election strategy that blended the legal with the illegal and the ethical with the unethical.

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**Seeye Abraha** was one of the top leaders of the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). He served as Minister of Defense and Chief Executive Officer of the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray (EFFORT) from its founding in 1995 until 2000. Following the political split within the TPLF leadership, precipitated by differences in handling the 1998-2000 Ethio-Eritrean war, Seeye was forcefully removed from his positions in party and government, jailed, charged and “convicted” of public corruption charges, which he completely denied, and served 6 years in prison. He became a founding member of the Forum for Democratic Dialogue (FDD) [MEDREK], a new coalition of opposition parties and ran for a seat in parliament in May, 2010 as he documents in this piece. He is also vice chairman of the UDJ party, a member of the MEDREK coalition.

This retrospective is intended to serve the historical record and to inform those who desire to know little known facts about the 2010 election. The account is based on careful observations in Werqamba election district, which is also called K'olla Tembien Wereda (district) in Tigray region in Northern Ethiopia, where I competed for a parliamentary seat. The account is factually limited to my district of K'olla Tembien, but my observations writ large are instructive on the uniformity of EPDRF's election strategy and campaigning style throughout the country and the incredible outcome of the election nationally. In this analysis, I shall not dwell on the situation that prevailed within the various opposition camps. There are different perspectives on the opposition, but there is little disagreement in the opposition that the EPDRF won by a margin that defies reality and reason.

## **The Rural Organizational Structure of TPLF/EPDRF<sup>1</sup>**

In 2008, the EPDRF declared that it had won all of the 3.5 million regional seats in the by-elections. These elections had given the EPDRF a running start or a dry run for the 2010 parliamentary elections. The main strategy in 2008 was to strengthen the organization and control of the rural areas in a tightly-woven network of security and political structures. It emulates the kind of "machine politics" that has been practiced historically in certain places in the United States to deliver large numbers of votes for the party in power.

The structure at the wereda local government consists of the Wereda Council (legislative) and Wereda Cabinet (executive). Although the membership of the Wereda Council varies in size from place to place, it usually ranges between 150 to 200. In the K'olla Tembien Wereda, there were 159 council members whose duty was to legislate on local matters, but in practice the council serves as a local implementation mechanism for the policies of the national government. All council members are card-carrying TPLF/EPDRF members. A Wereda Cabinet has 15 to 17 members and is led by the Wereda Administrator who is the chief executive officer at the local level performing similar tasks as the prime minister or regional (kilil) president. The deputy administrator is effectively the head of propaganda for both the ruling party and the government. The third and fourth major players in the wereda structure are the Head of Security, who controls the local police and militia and the Head of Agriculture who is in charge of emergency assistance distribution and oversight of foreign aid under the PSNP ("Safety Net" or Productive Safety Net Program supported by the U.N. agencies, USAID, the World Bank, the EU, etc).

## **Party Politics and Political Administration at the Wereda Level**

The majority of wereda officials have paid deputies. The Administrator is paid 3,000 birr. Cabinet members are paid 2,650 birr each while their deputies are paid 2,417 birr. All of them are TPLF/EPDRF party members. Each official has the responsibility of coordinating the activities of the party members within the bureau that s/he heads. There is little likelihood of finding a wereda government employee who is not a member of the TPLF/EPDRF. For instance, in Tigray, the headmaster in the school is also the head of the TPLF; and there are no schools whose headmaster is not a member of TPLF. He has the responsibility of recruiting teachers and students to join the TPLF. There are also very few teachers who are not members of the TPLF. The headmaster, in his official capacity, directs teachers and students to perform particular political tasks. In the 2010 election, for instance, teachers and students who are members of the TPLF were assigned to canvass a designated number of homes seeking support for TPLF candidates.

In the rural areas, the headmaster usually stands out as the most educated person in the community, and is also the point man for the TPLF. He usually plays multiple roles. He could sit in the cabinet as the head of educational affairs. He could be the head of the party organization in the school. He could also be the head of the village's election executive committee. For example, in the village where I voted, the headmaster named Teshager Hagos served in these multiple official capacities.

For the TPLF, there is no separation or distinction between partisan political work and official service as a state employee. Party work is carried out using government office facilities, transportation, per diem, etc. along with government work. When the TPLF calls political meetings, they are given the cover of "government work" and are financed by the government mainly from funds allocated for Safety Net and Protection of Basic Services (PBS) programs. Kebele and village officials who are invited to participate in these meetings are paid per diem. Although the kebele chairman does not receive a fixed salary, he could earn substantial per diem if he participates in meetings, workshops, seminars and the like for at least fifteen days in a given month. As a result, being invited to such meetings involves intense competition and favoritism. A kebele chairman has a big role in choosing the people who are selected to attend such meetings, and it is said that the chairman receives a "commission" from each person selected. Furthermore, a kebele chairman has the power to decide who should receive public assistance and benefits. It is said that he receives "kickbacks" in the form of free labor from those he chooses to become beneficiaries. It is also said that the kebele administrator amasses a lot of wealth through illicit means by taking land from one farmer and giving it to

another and by giving land reserved for forest conservation to individuals who are willing to make “contributions” to the administrator. Through these and other means, the kebele administrator who is not salaried could obtain twice as much money as the salaried manager. Within TPLF, as long as individuals do what they are told, such corrupt practices are tolerated. As a result, local officials abuse their power and enrich themselves at the expense of the farmer.

At the kebele level (consisting of two to four villages) in the woreda, there is a council as well as a cabinet. Members of the council number between 120 to 200. They can expand the council by increasing the number of members at will. In one kebele in Tigray, the number of council members started at 150 and expanded to 260. The kebele cabinet usually has 15 members. These officials (unless they happen to be teachers, health and agricultural extension workers) have no regular salary. But they have different ways of receiving benefits. In the kebele administration, there is a “Manager” who serves as an assistant to the kebele administrator. The manager, usually a high school graduate, is paid a salary of 800 birr a month while the kebele administrator could be an illiterate but devout party loyalist. Under the kebele administration is the village administration. During the recent election, there was more or less one polling station per village. Except for the manager, other officials in the kebele or in the village have no regular salaries. Yet, they generate incomes from at least three sources: their normal farming activities, from Safety Net and Emergency Assistance given to them under a variety of covers and from per diems whenever they are called to attend meetings, of which there are purposefully plenty throughout the year. Seminars, workshops, meetings and other similar events are common means of distributing money to favored people.

## **Safety Net and TPLF Structure**

It is to be noted here that when the former Disaster Prevention and Readiness Commission was dissolved, its tasks were given to the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (ARDB). The ARDB administers both the Safety Net and Emergency Assistance programs. Participants receive cash on the basis of their contributions in development activities carried out in their areas. From each rural family, two or three members who are capable of contributing labor participate in the Safety Net program. For each family in Tembien, for instance, being or not being embraced in Safety Net is a matter of life and death.

The Emergency Assistance Program, principally supported by U.S. AID distributes food grain and cooking oil to people under extreme food shortage conditions. When the harvest season is good, the number of people receiving emergency assistance decreases. When there is drought, their number goes up.

In Tigrai, there are always people who need emergency assistance. In Tembien Wereda, food aid is delivered by the Agriculture Bureau. In other weredas in Tigrai, REST (Relief Society of Tigrai)<sup>2</sup> is also partially involved in the actual distribution of food aid. Both Safety Net and Emergency Assistance are under complete government control. All foreign humanitarian assistance are administered through these two agencies. By surrendering the Safety Net program fully to the government, the international community has given EPRDF/TPLF a powerful weapon to establish one-party rule in Ethiopia. TPLF/EPRDF apparatchiks make the decision on which family should be embraced by or totally excluded from the Safety Net program; and of the particular family embraced, how many of its members should be made beneficiaries. These decisions are directly tied to party membership. To see this interconnection more clearly, let us look at the nature of the TPLF structure in a village and the system of distributing food aid.

## Village Level Structure

In the Tigrai Region, the TPLF has created two structures, at the village level, which serve as the basic building blocks for the tightly-woven network of security and political structure in the rural area: the Wahio and the Development Gujille (DG). In the structural hierarchy of TPLF, the lowest unit is called Wahio and consists of up to 20 TPLF party members. In one village, there can be up to twenty Wahios, depending on its size. The chairpersons of the Wahios in a village are in turn organized in a primary group called Primary Widdabe (PW). They choose their own chairpersons and control all government and party activities at the village level.

The DG is another kind of organization that operates at the village level. It could have up to thirty members. Presumably, it is created to serve local economic development activities. Within one village, there could be up to ten DGs. Except for the aged and infirm, every Safety Net beneficiary in the village is required to join one of the DGs. Each DG is organized into three squads of ten persons each. Each squad is again subdivided into two teams of five persons.

It is here where the entanglement begins. Within one DG, there is one TPLF Wahio. Of the thirty villagers in one DG, about twenty are members of the TPLF. The leader of the DG, the squad leaders and the team leaders are veteran members of TPLF appointed to places of responsibility on the basis of seniority and loyalty. In this manner, being a member of TPLF necessarily means being a beneficiary of aid.

The competition for Safety Net or Emergency Assistance is fierce. The amount of money to be allocated to a wereda or a kebele is determined by

higher authorities. The distribution of funds is decided by an assembly of all the TPLF members in the DGs, which includes all chairpersons of the DGs and the Wahios. The question is never who should get the assistance. It is always the TPLF members. The question is who, among the TPLF members, should get how much. The family that has more TPLF members gets more. The clan that has more TPLF members benefits more. As a result, a strong material incentive has been put in place to encourage each family or clan to produce more TPLF members within itself. Where TPLF members decide to distribute the limited aid, the competition among families to get as big a bigger share of the pie becomes intense. At the end of the day, it is the families and clans that manage to mobilize more TPLF members and bring them to the meeting place that become winners. As a result of this type of cut-throat competition, ill-feeling has been festering among TPLF members. The Safety Net program has been exploited not only by TPLF members who do not even need assistance but also by other members of powerful families entrenched in the bureaucratic hierarchy in the region.

## **The Implementation of the Safety Net and Emergency Assistance Programs**

When the international community launched the Safety Net and Emergency Assistance programs, it had set several objectives. On the one hand, it was envisaged that the farmer would carry out value-added development work in the locality. On the other hand it was hoped that the payment given to the farmer for his development work would help to increase the value of his household assets. When it came to implementation, that did not happen. For example, because the lion's share of the aid money was pocketed by TPLF party members, no one would hold them accountable. As a result, there is very little value-added development seen from the Safety Net and Emergency Assistance programs, and they have failed to produce any measurable economic development.

## **The Abuse and Misuse of Safety Net and Emergency Assistance Programs in the 2010 Election**

The mechanics of how the TPLF/EPDRF have abused and misused Safety Net and Emergency Assistance Programs can be demonstrated in the following episode. While voting day was scheduled for Sunday May 23, 2010, the TPLF began making Safety Net Program payments on Monday, May 17 and continued until Saturday, May 22, the very eve of voting day. (A month's pay for one person is fifty birr. There could be two or three beneficiaries in

each family). The recipient farmers were notified to come and collect their three months' back pay, i.e. 150 birr per person. Farmers turned up in droves. But as they waited eagerly to collect their payments, they were told: "Well folks, this time we are going to give you only one month's pay. We will give you the remaining two payments after we see the results of the election, i.e. when we see that you have made EPRDF victorious by denying Seeye your vote." Election observers dispatched on behalf of MEDREK to all villages in Werqamba election district have assured me that this was what had happened in their villages or in the areas where they were assigned to observe. The farmers were deeply disappointed but got the message loud and clear: If they did not do what is expected of them, they would lose their support payments.

The bait and switch strategy was not only to make EPRDF win the election. It was equally about denying me any vote so that it would appear that I had no popular support whatsoever in my district. In this regard, it is interesting to note that when the Chairman of the TPLF was asked to comment about the size of the vote the opposition had "received", his response was: "The vote they received was more than what I had expected." He added: "We expected to win from 50-75% but the people gave us more than what we had expected [99.6%]. By so doing, they have placed an additional burden upon us." If the small vote the opposition got in the election was bigger than what he had expected it should be quite rational of him to expect a 99.6% win in the election and not otherwise.

To recap the above chronology, the TPLF distributed food aid from Monday, 17 May – Saturday 22 May, 2010. The last food aid distribution in K'olla Tembien occurred in January 2010. Why the distribution was held back for months and then restarted on the eve of the election is a story unto itself. Beneficiaries of Emergency Assistance, though fewer in number, are said to be the most affected by poverty. The list of these people is well known in all the villages. However, what happened in the month of May was something different. It was the whole community that was made to receive food aid. Two members from every family were given food aid. No distinction was made between those that had food to eat and those that were truly needy. In principle, there is no problem for as many people as possible to receive food aid. The question is why this generosity was shown literally on the eve of elections.

## **Singling Out Opposition Party Supporters**

Many meetings and seminars were organized for TPLF members as the election date drew near. Some of the meetings were short. Participants were called to Abiy Addi and they returned to their villages loaded with their per diem. This is TPLF's way of distributing money to as many of its members as

possible. If a non-member is considered useful for the election, s/he is invited to participate in the meetings and seminars and made to benefit from the per diem bonus.

The TPLF had conducted a study on every person in every village suspected of being in any way related to me. There are many veteran TPLF members who had participated in the armed struggle against the Derg but they were pushed out of the party's fold during the TPLF split because they were suspected of siding with me or others like me. Moreover, there are many families that had sacrificed not one but two or three of their children during the armed struggle and who are now left without anyone to care for them. The tihadisso [renaissance] of Ato Meles marginalized these people and rewarded others who had made very little contribution to the armed struggle. Because all these people are suspected of having a feeling of resentment towards the TPLF leadership, they were placed under close surveillance during the election period. Various strategies were attempted to control them. At first, the TPLF tried to intimidate these people. When they became even more resentful and angry and openly expressed their support for me, and others threatened to cancel their party membership, the TPLF resorted to policy of appeasement. They invited these people as guests to Abiy Addi to meet with officials there and gave them money in the form of per diem. All along, these people were coming and telling me everything that had happened, including the payment of money. This way, the TPLF doled out a lot of money in Tembien to effectively buy votes. I have been told, for example, that as election day approached, the TPLF had paid its members between 300 to 800 birr, depending on their position in the hierarchy. It is these paid members who, beginning on the midnight of voting day, went to every village and urged the farmers to come out to the polling stations in quasi-military formation.

## **International Observers**

The opposition did not believe the 2010 election would be neither free nor fair. But we were willing to participate in good faith and see the outcome. That is why MEDREK chose to take part in the election. We also believed that the presence of independent observers could have a significant value in showing the international community whether the election was free and fair.

As for fairness and impartiality, the European Union Observer Team has a stellar reputation. The coming of this team to observe the 2010 election had significant value although the number of observers could have been increased substantially. Although I do not have a full picture of the observer team's distribution throughout the country, I had gone to the Team's office in the capital to inquire about its observation plans and locations. I was informed that my Tembein constituency would be assigned observers. Until

observers for my constituency arrived, I was advised to get in touch with its long term observers located in Mekele and Axum. Accordingly, I contacted these observers and maintained communication with them for some time. On May 8, 2010 this team came to Abiy Addi and had discussions with me and with officials of the Election Board. At the time, my team and I had lodged complaints in both the Election Board office and the Observer Team about the oppressive measures that had been taken against us by government and party officials. Our complaints were later submitted in writing. We had submitted other complaints to the Election Board, but were unable to provide copies to the Observer Team due to lack of communication. However, I managed to regularly brief Mr. Alessandro Gori, representative of the European Union Observer Team stationed in Axum, by telephone on the content of those complaints.

While I was waiting for an answer to my request for observers to come to my constituency, in the late morning hours of May 19, 2010, Mr. Alessandro Gori telephoned and told me that he would like to come the following Thursday morning to my location and explore the situation. We agreed and I waited eagerly for his arrival. To come to Tembien where I was, one has to cross Weri', the river valley boundary between Adwa and Tembien. On Wednesday night starting at approximately 8 p.m., there began what seemed to be a military exercise involving heavy artillery and anti-aircraft fire. It continued up to about 10 pm that night. Weri' is far from the Eritrean border and I could not understand why such terrifying fire power was being displayed at night, so close to the Election Day and while international election observers were in the vicinity. I could not help but suspect that it was aimed at psychologically influencing the local people.

On Thursday morning, when I telephoned Alessandro and told him that I was waiting for him, he apologized and told me he could not come because he had to take care of some urgent business. When I asked him if he could send some other people from his team, he told me that he could not because they had a shortage of manpower. I could not help but suspect that the sudden cancelation of his visit or reluctance to send observers was directly connected to the previous night's military exercises. It is worth noting that during this time, intensive distribution of Safety Net and Emergency Assistance food distribution was going on in the region. No doubt, TPLF/EPRDF will argue there was no connection between the military exercises and the other events, but history will judge that.

On May 21, 2010, while I was at my parents' house in a village called Adha, I heard the sound of fighter jets overhead. I called Mekele and I was told that fighter jets were flying there as well. I called the office of the European Observers Team in Addis to ascertain whether observers were coming to my

location. He told me that he would discuss my request with his colleagues and give me an answer that afternoon. He called back and told me that no observers would be coming. I expressed to him my disappointment and informed him that the decision to cancel was most likely politically motivated and influenced by the military exercises. The hope of any EU observers ever coming to my district ended at this point, but I continued to communicate with Mr. Alessandro by telephone.

## **African Union and Other Election Observers**

When African Union Observers arrived in Ethiopia in May, I was told that they had obtained my telephone number through other persons and that I would be contacted. I was never contacted by them and none came to my constituency to observe the election.

I was also told that the American Embassy would organize observation teams comprising of embassy employees and deploy them to various parts of the country to do unofficial observing. I was told that one team would come to my district. There were also hints that the British Embassy was thinking of doing the same thing. But because of the restriction imposed by the EPRDF government on the movement of embassy personnel outside of the capital, none of them could do any observations.

## **Domestic Election Observers**

Following the Proclamation on Civil Societies, it was a foregone conclusion that there would no more be impartial domestic civic society observers. But some of the local organizations in the Coalition of Civil Societies that presented themselves as independent domestic observers had close links with the EPRDF, while some of the others were going along for the ride without any principled position on the election. I was told that one person from such an organization had been deployed as an observer in one polling station in my election district.

## **People's Observers**

The people's observers were nominated by the EPRDF without involving the people and operated outside the control of the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE). There were thousands of these "observers". The EPRDF did not even bother to pretend that these "observers" were elected by the people. These "observers" were a sore point for MEDREK which had requested that the election of the people's observers be redone according to the

law. NEBE rejected MEDREK's request, yet it allowed the election to be re-run in some localities. It must be noted here that opposition parties have been protesting all along that many EPRDF members have been assigned as election executives and people's observers and should be disqualified as partisans. These observers were either loyal EPRDF members or beneficiaries of Safety Net and/or Emergency Assistance. They were captive audiences who would do EPDRF's bidding to maintain their benefits and avoid TPLF retaliation.

In Werqamba election constituency, when observers representing MEDREK complained that there were violations of the law and guidelines and requested that the irregularities be recorded officially, almost all of the "observers" failed to support MEDREK's position. They even refused to support recording of our complaints in the minutes. The election executives and people's "observers" assigned to polling stations were clueless about election rules and guidelines. They followed mechanically the TPLF/EPDRF instructions and guidelines handed down to them. This structure was in name controlled by the NEBE, but in practice it was managed completely by the TPLF.

## **Observers of Political Parties**

In Werqamba election constituency, there were 72 polling stations. It was much more expanded than it was in 2005. In addition to assembling one observer for each polling station, MEDREK had to find extra people as standby observers. We managed to assemble a total of 92 observers.

Selecting and preparing observers was a difficult task. But what was even more difficult—and more expensive—was transporting them to and from their rural places of assignment, which in many cases were very far apart, and providing them food. With too few international observers present, the condition of domestic observers being what it was and in the absence of one's own trusted observers, it may have been better not to have participated in the election at all. The presence of one's own observers may not stop illegal election practices but it would at least testify as to what actually had happened. Knowing this, the TPLF/EPRDF made great efforts to prevent people from standing as our observers in the first place and by intimidating and scaring away those who dared to do so.

We had prepared our observers by giving them a one-day seminar. From the 92 observers we had invited, only 83 participated in the observation workshop. The rest did not show up because, as soon as their candidacy as observers was leaked out, TPLF sent parents, in-laws and religious fathers to dissuade them not to be observers. After participating in the workshop, our observers returned to their localities and waited for their assignments. Meanwhile, they

were subjected to a vicious campaign of intimidation by TPLF cadres, and as a result we lost some of the trained observers. Others asked us to assign them to places outside of their localities because family pressure on them was unbearable.

Election guidelines required that parties submit the list of their observers well ahead of voting day. As soon as the list was submitted to the local NEBE office, the TPLF would take a copy from the wereda election executives (and this has been done, for example, in Tanqua Abergelle and Dega Tembien weredas close to our constituency as well) and carry out a campaign of threats and intimidations against our observers.

On May 22, 2010, we assembled our observers at Abiy Addi. To do this, we sent a representative with two vehicles to gather and bring our observers in Werqamba to Abiy Addi. Our representative was arrested in Werqamba without any charge. The objective was to delay us from deploying our observers in a timely fashion. Because of his detention, some of our observers from Werqamba who had gathered there to come to Abiy Addi did not come. The vehicles returned to Abiy Addi with a few of our observers. While our representative was in custody, the police fired shots into the air on the pretext that there was some unrest in the town. The remaining observers were frightened by the gun fire and ran away. We managed to get our representative released after we lodged protests with European Union Observers and election executives by cellphone.

On the evening of May 22, we rented two more vehicles and managed to dispatch the observers that we had gathered to their respective places of assignment. At about 10 p.m. that evening, we heard that our observers sent to a place called Met'eqa had been detained by armed men in civilian clothes (militiamen sent by the security head of the kebele administration) and prevented from proceeding to their destinations. To have the observers released, we made a series of telephone calls to the European Union Observer Team and election executives. There were communication blackouts in between and we were worried about the well-being of our observers. It was at approximately 3 a.m. the next morning (voting day) that we heard they had been released and were on their way to their places of assignment. After going through this ordeal, the number of polling stations to which we were able to assign observers was reduced to 60 (out of 72). Including two mobile observers, we had mobilized 92 observers altogether, but we were able to assign 65 percent of these observers to polling stations. Assigning observers proved to be a very expensive and difficult task for us.

Our 60 observers were exposed to all kinds of harassment and intimidation. During the observation, because they persistently opposed the blatant and rampant violations of the law during the voting process and demanded that

the violations should at least be recorded in the minutes, they were thrown out of the polling stations, intimidated at gunpoint, prevented from leaving their seats or having food or drink or using their cell phones, and they were made to sign documents under duress. After the voting was over, when vehicles came to collect the ballot bags, other observers were given rides but our observers were left behind. They could not use public transport because the owners of such vehicles were ordered not to provide service to our observers. Some of our observers had to travel on foot for two days to reach Abiy Addi. I was not sure that all of our observers were all alive and well until May 25.

## **Campaigning**

During the last five years, EPRDF had done extensive and intensive organizational and political work. Because of the obstacles placed before them and their own internal problems, opposition parties could not “get their acts together” and come out strong fast enough. MEDREK made a good effort but it was not prepared adequately and lacked the necessary funding. The inaction and lack of preparation of opposition parties during the last five years also contributed significantly to their difficulties in the 2010 election.

## **MEDREK Public Gatherings**

In March 2010, MEDREK called town hall meetings in Mekele, Abiy Addi, Adwa and Axum. While we were allowed to use the municipal halls of the towns, the local TPLF/EPRDF party leaders did everything they could to prevent the people from coming to the meetings. For example, in Mekele, the authorities called three parallel public meetings and organized bicycle competitions to divert the attention of the youths from our meetings. They had earlier warned TPLF members, government employees and those embraced by micro- and small-scale enterprises not to take part in our public gatherings. Outside the meeting halls, wereda and kebele officials were seen lined up at the entrance busily writing down names and videotaping. The same thing was repeated at Abiy Addi. The public gathering was held on Saturday, a market day. Cadres were placed at the entrance of the hall to warn people who came to the market from the countryside not to attend the meetings. Those who were coming to the meeting from Werqamba by car were purposely delayed on the way so that they would be late and miss the meeting.

In Adwa, in addition to using the hindrance tactics described above, the ruling party went to the extent of organizing hecklers to disrupt the meeting. When the audience asked the hecklers to be removed from the hall so that the meeting could proceed peacefully, the police stood by idly because the municipality administrators did not want the trouble makers to be removed.

The case in Axum was very similar to that of Mekele. However, despite all these hindrances all our meetings were concluded successfully.

At all the meetings, government televisions crews were on standby. We could not understand why the ruling party would allow us to use municipality halls and send TV camera crews but then use all means possible to prevent the people from coming to the meetings. We figured it out after a while. They hoped to film empty halls and show it on TV that we called public meetings and no one showed up. This ploy did not work. The people overcame their fears, defied the obstacles and flocked to our meeting halls much to the bewilderment and amazement of the ruling party officials.

The public meetings created a deep sense of awareness in Tigrai. It was believed that this awareness would make Tigrai a focal electoral battleground. Unfortunately, the ruling party chose not to compete fairly for votes but use anti-democratic means to claim electoral victory.

About a month and a half later we started to receive information that there was a propaganda campaign in Tigrai from the TPLF camp which suggested that “People like Seeye and Gebru should not be returned to the Parliament. If they came back to the national forum, it would mean the failure of TPLF’s ‘Renaissance’”. The message was that anything would be better than my election; and no effort should be spared to keep MEDREK candidates out of parliament. Following this, the ruling party abandoned the idea of courting the people and set out on a strategy of character assassination. Instead of challenging MEDREK on policy issues, it started a campaign of defamation and vilification. It labeled MEDREK as a “force of destruction” and categorized it not as a worthy competitor but as an enemy. MEDREK leaders and supporters were also characterized as “enemies”. Those suspected of supporting MEDREK were considered traitors who had betrayed the TPLF and sided with the enemy. There was a vicious campaign of “exposure” to force people to stand up at meetings, criticize themselves, express regret and come back to the fold. This campaign of intimidation was carried out not only by cadres and administrators but also security officials. They harassed people by calling them on the telephone and warning of bad consequences if they supported MEDREK. As a result, people started to fear for their well-being and kept their silence.

In Tembien, a vicious campaign was started against me alleging that I had sided with the Derg and of being a *banda* (a traitor, a turncoat). A veteran TPLF fighter who heard this wild accusation told the TPLF officials: “Correct your language. If there are real differences between you [and Seeye] that you wish to tell us, do so. Otherwise, if you call Seeye a *banda*, we will oppose you.” Realizing that it could not come up with any work that would challenge MEDREK on the basis of policies and positions, the TPLF resorted to a cheap

campaign of personal insults and defamation. The malicious speech made by the TPLF/EPRDF Chairman on February 18 in Mekele at the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the TPLF calling ex-TPLF in MEDREK like myself, Gebru and Aregash “dregs of history” (ye tarik atela) and “turncoats” serving the remnants of the defunct Derg regime was the mantra of the ruling party’s campaign. They even started a rumor campaign telling the people that if they did not vote for the ruling party, the oppressive Derg regime would return and I and my colleague Asrat Gebru of ARENA Party would join up and re-establish that regime.

Part of the vilification campaign included showings throughout the kebeles films such as “Teza”, produced by Professor Haile Gerima of Howard University depicting atrocities by the Derg regime. The underlying message in showing these films was that I and others like me were now working in alliance with the remnants of that regime. It was a calculated effort at demonizing me in the eyes of the people. By presenting MEDREK’s position on the issue of access to the sea as a dangerous position that could lead to a re-ignition of the war with Eritrea, they told the people not to vote for me or others like me. On the other hand, they assured the people that if they voted for the TPLF, they would receive plenty of Safety Net money; and nothing if they voted for MEDREK. The people were gripped in a state of fear and anxiety. Instead of being a competition of policy issues, the election campaign turned out to be a campaign of fear and loathing of MEDREK and intimidation of the people of Tembien.

By April 2010, TPLF cadres had devised a new strategy on political meetings for the rural areas and particularly for Tembien. They reasoned that if I or MEDREK called public meetings, we could quite likely convince the people and change their views. They decided to use all means to prevent the people from coming to any of our meetings. They also decided not to hold large meetings of their own but numerous smaller ones to keep the people always engaged in their localities so that they would not have time to attend MEDREK meetings. They managed to schedule meetings seven days a week. When I returned to Tembien in early May to launch the final phase of my campaign, I was keenly aware of this reality. I didn’t want to go throughout the kebeles and ask the people to come out to meetings. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t have had enough time. Instead, I hired a car, mounted a megaphone on it and criss-crossed the villages talking to the people. The people got my message wherever they were. There were times when, out of curiosity, people came to the place where I was speaking and formed crowds. This way, TPLF cadres could not hinder my campaign of reaching the people, and later they came to realize that they had been outplayed on this card.

In the last week of the election campaign, the newspaper called Ethio-Channel printed the following false report: “At a meeting of Ethiopians called

by MEDREK Delegation and held in Washington, D.C., Seeye said in his answer to a question posed to him regarding Welqayit, the land that was taken from Gonder and given to Tigrai: 'If we win, we will return it to Gonder.'" The TPLF photocopied this report in the thousands, distributed it throughout Tigrai and started accusing me of being a traitor. This was one aspect of the psychological campaign to confuse and discourage the people. The TPLF was not limited to a campaign of false information and defamation alone. It also engaged in direct action to disrupt and hinder our campaign activities. Here are some examples.

The police used various obstacles against foreign journalists to prevent them from reporting on my campaign. For instance, on May 8, 2010, the BBC reporter, Uduk Amino, who had come to report on the election campaign I conducted at Werqamba, was prevented by the police from recording the event on video and from interviewing the people to get their views. We reported this incident to the Werqamba election executives and to the European Union Observers in writing. On voting day, Addis Admas reporter, Tsion Girma, who had come to report on the voting and to videotape me while casting my ballot was detained in the police station at Abiy Addi on her way to Adiha for about two hours, despite the fact that she had all the required official documents in order.

Our posters and banners were also routinely removed and torn. In the rural areas they were torn so frequently that we found it pointless to replace them. Usually children were used for the job since they could not be prosecuted for the act. I personally went to Guyya Police Station to speak with Assistant Sergeant Tesfay Gebresillassie about this matter. He told me that posters have indeed been torn by children who had been apprehended but were later released after being reprimanded. We tried to place our posters and banners high enough not to be reached by children. When we asked workmen to lend us their ladders, they refused. They told us that if they lent it to us, they would be punished by the administrators after we left.

Two youths went with me to a place called Guroro and began posting posters. A police officer named Sergeant Hilluf Temam told them to stop. When they told him that what they were doing was legal, he asked them to produce their IDs. One of the youngsters did not have an ID, so he was told to stop posting. I went to see the police officer and explained to him that the youths had come with me and that they were engaged in perfectly legal activity. He ignored my pleas. The rest of us continued posting. A while later, we went back to the places where we had put up the posters but none of them were there. Sergeant Temam, who was so determined to prevent us from posting had turned a blind eye to those tearing off our posters.

In the rural areas, posters were torn at night. We soon came to realize that there were organized, “poster eating hyenas.” In a village called Seqien, we had repeated episodes of our posters being “eaten” by such “hyenas”. Haleqa Gebrehiwet Hagos who is a resident of this village, a kebele chairman and a member of TPLF, often called my relatives and supporters who lived in this village to the Abiy Addi Wereda Administration where he begged and threatened them. Because we had suspicions that he had a role in the tearing up of posters, we discussed the matter with him. We made it clear to him that if people deployed by him were ever caught tearing posters, we would take him to court. We also made this known to the whole village. After this, there was a marked decrease in the tearing of posters.

At Werqamba, we stood watch and managed to apprehend one youth in the act of tearing posters. He ran off in to the rural area before our eyes and managed to elude capture. There was a court order for his arrest; and eventually he was apprehended and jailed. We knew that he was only a messenger who was sent to do a job. But he suffered the consequences. Later, he pleaded guilty saying that he was involved in a matter he knew nothing about and sent his family requesting to be forgiven. Since our aim was not to see someone being punished but to learn from his mistakes and not repeat them, we informed the court that we would not pursue the case any further.

When some TPLF members and children refused to participate in the tearing of posters and banners, there were times when the wereda officials themselves became involved in the act. On May 11, 2010, I went to a kebele called Menji and spent a good part of the morning campaigning. We also put up some posters and banners under the watchful eyes of the local security. Having finished our work at Menji, we proceeded to the kebeles called Gororo, Newi and Chamo. In the afternoon, on our way back, we found the banner we had posted in the morning had been brought down and scattered alongside the road some five kilometers outside of Menji. We found out from our supporters that the tearing down of the posters and banners was done by Asseffa Tegegn, the Wereda Administrator. The witnesses even told us the vehicle plate number of the administrator. They were not willing to testify in court and we dropped the matter.

We had other encounters with the Werqamba police. On Ginbot 9, farmers had gathered at a marketplace in Werqamba to receive food aid. To take advantage of the event, I arrived at Werqamba in the afternoon. I went into the market and began speaking using a loudspeaker mounted on a vehicle. The people wanted to see me in person and surrounded the vehicle. I came out of the car and started to address them. After finishing my speech, I got back into the car and we slowly started driving through the crowd. Suddenly, a young man wearing a T-shirt with a bee symbol (symbol of the ruling party) began

taking pictures using a very expensive mobile phone and recording what I was saying. He went as far as extending his hand inside the vehicle and resting it across the steering wheel as he tried to take pictures and record voices.

When we returned to Werqamba at about 4:30 pm that afternoon, a policeman stopped us. He told Woldesillassie, my brother, that he was arresting him for assault for pushing away the hand of the person who dropped his cell phone in his car earlier in the day. We all went to the police station. Woldesillassie was given the charge sheet and the police took his statement. Weldeselassie filed counter charges of his own against his accuser. The prosecutor ordered the release of Woldesillassie on bail. The policeman refused to obey orders and insisted that a judge had to decide the matter. Since a judge would not be available until the next day, Woldesillassie had to remain in custody overnight by order of the policeman. He was released the next morning on a 2,000 birr bail. Many of the realities described here have been presented to the Werqamba Election Constituency Office in the form of written complaints, and we have retained copies of each application.

## **Use of Election Symbols**

In my constituency, the only parties that competed were the ruling party and MEDREK. The symbols that could be used publicly were only those belonging to the two parties. TPLF started to introduce its own election symbol very early and continued to do so to the very last day of the election. Because our posters were torn up repeatedly, our ability to introduce our symbol was very limited. The best we could do was to introduce it as we moved along from place to place.

When May 16, 2010 was set aside by the NEBE as a day for introducing the election symbols of competing parties and for explaining the voting process in general, we had believed and hoped that the NEBE would explain all the symbols in a fair and non-partisan manner. It was at this event that I had the chance to meet Ato Kiros Woldemichael, the TPLF candidate against whom I was competing. He came and sat next to me. When I realized that he was the TPLF candidate, I extended my hand to greet him. He seemed confused. Then with a mixture of embarrassment and hesitation, he shook my extended hand and returned my greeting. When the people, who were following the situation, started to laugh, he seemed to feel even more embarrassed. I think my greeting to Ato Kiros sent a strong message to the TPLF cadres who were harassing the farmers and threatening to take measures against them for greeting me and even for talking or simply approaching me. Ato Gebru Desta, who was with Ato Kiros and who was running for a seat on the regional council had no problem greeting me.

After the election executives of the polling station finished introducing election symbols, they made the following two improper announcements. First, they said anyone who has lost his/her registration card should come to the Election Board office from Monday May 17 to Thursday May 20 and notify the election officials. The election guideline says that those who lost their registration cards should line up by themselves on the side during the voting day. It did not say that they should come and register. We asked the officials why they had to do that. Although they did not give it to us in writing, they told us that they had been instructed to do so. Their answer did not satisfy us but if they said that they were given oral instructions, there was nothing we could do about it. Second, the election officials told the farmers: "In order to finish our work quickly, please arrive here Sunday morning early and stand according to your formation." We asked the officials what "according to your formation" was supposed to mean. They told us that the farmers were organized in groups for the purpose of development activities and were being asked to come to the polling station in groups formed according to their structures. They seemed to feel that there was nothing wrong or irregular about it. For them, organizing the people into groups for purposes of controlling them was a normal and unquestionable practice.

We tried to explain to the officials that voting was a right—that people have the right to vote or not to vote. They come to the polling station freely and out of their own will. It is wrong to force people to come out of their houses, order them to "fall in into formation" and march them to the voting places. We tried to reason with them that voting was an individual and a private act, not a group exercise to be manipulated by the TPLF. Our pleas were ignored.

The TPLF cadres, including Ato Kiros himself, opposed our position. They argued that the organizational structure had no purpose other than facilitating matters. It had no negative pressure or influence. We agreed to disagree. The election executives were in a dilemma. We understood their dilemma because they realized that the instructions that came down through the TPLF structure were piped down the government structure. They did understand that our opposition was a fundamental one. There was not the slightest doubt in our minds that this system of voting in organized teams was something long practiced by TPLF and handed down as an instruction to be implemented strictly in all polling stations. In fact, as I learned later, this was a system replicated in every part of the country on election day.

The interchange between the official election executives and the TPLF is interesting to note. When the officials had finished their work for the day, the TPLF cadres stepped up immediately saying: "If you have finished your meeting, it is time for ours to begin" and promptly took over the meeting place. We argued that a day reserved solely for the Election Board to explaining the

use of election symbols should not be overtaken by TPLF members, but our pleas were ignored again. Including Ato Kiros, the officials who were present at the meeting argued that it was their right to meet and there was nothing that would prevent from doing so. We told them that we would not take part in an illegal meeting and that we would not carry out campaign activities on that day and left the meeting. They continued their meeting.

I have tried to find out the process of familiarizing election symbols conducted in other places. In Tembien, all the meetings turned out to be TPLF campaign meetings. At all these meetings, the only symbol that was introduced to the people was the bee. May 16 was the last and most valuable campaign day. The Election Board took this Sunday away from the opposition parties and gave it to EPRDF which used it not only to introduce its election symbol but also to conduct its campaign. What made my village different was that EPRDF took the stage after both symbols were introduced.

The Election Board requires that when people came to vote, they should be given an orientation on the symbols used by the competing parties and on the process of voting. This was not done on voting day, although our representatives insisted that it be done. The election executives ignored our demands and explained that it was not necessary as it has been done previously. What they failed to say was that the earlier explanations dealt with the ruling party's symbols only. In many locations, there was no evidence that the MEDREK symbol was introduced. In the few places it was presented, it was to tell people to reject it.

## Voting Day

The voting was done not according to the guidelines set down by the Election Board but according to the voting strategy worked out by TPLF. The whole election became an activity of TPLF by TPLF for TPLF. It is proper to encourage people to come out and vote. But in principle, just as much as they have the right to vote, they also have the right not to vote or even go to the polling station. Interference, exerting pressure or lobbying in a matter as serious and private as voting is illegal according to the laws of the country.

In the election that was conducted on May 23 in Tembien, these principles were blatantly violated. At 2 a.m. in the morning that day, farmers were called out of their houses. When they came out, they were organized in familiar groupings, squads and gujilles and taken to the vicinity of the polling station in quasi-formation. They were subjected to intense campaigning throughout the morning and the bee symbol was drilled into their head, and warned that if they voted for me they would be in a lot of trouble. Of course, the threat

intensified the people's fear, namely the denial of food assistance, on which the survival of the farmers depended.

MEDREK's observers assigned to the polling station named Wihdet had arrived at their places at 2 a.m. They arrived while the farmers were being subjected to TPLF campaign on the very day of voting. A goat was slaughtered for the campaign organizing officials. They were doing the campaigning while the food was being prepared on the side. When our observers told them that the campaigning was illegal, they were ignored. As I was told by our observers, the farmers were brought to the campaigning place at midnight. This is only one example. According to information gathered from our observers the same thing was done throughout all the polling stations.

## Voter Queuing

According to the guidelines issued by the Election Board, a police officer is assigned to each polling station to maintain security. The guideline also says that there shall be, in addition, two militiamen or their assistants to be assigned by the election executives. That did not happen. Voters entered the polling stations according to their earlier formations—in familiar teams, squads and gujilles. There was strict regimentation to make sure the formations were kept. No person was allowed to change group. There were young people who did not want to join any one of those formations. They were not allowed to get in-between the groups. They were made to line up in the back and made to vote last. This was how the voting was conducted.

When I arrived at the polling station to vote, I found the people gathered at the entrance of the school. Team leaders were wearing badges which identified them as "Security/Coordinators". Woldesillassie told me that they were all TPLF members. The chairman of the election executives himself told me that neither the badges nor the tasks of maintaining security and coordination was given to them by the Election Board.

We pleaded with the election officials that things be done according to the law. There was only one policeman at the place. Soon two militiamen wearing badges joined him. Voters were made to stand at a proper distance and to maintain law and order. TPLF cadres showed some uneasiness and confusion for a while but soon they went back to business as usual.

My brother Fisseha Abraha was going around polling stations to observe how the voting was going. He found the same situation at all stations. The voting place, that was supposed to be a secret booth, was in open view for everyone to see. They were doing the actual voting in queue. When the one in front was making his on the ballot, the one behind him could see. This was the case in most of the polling stations. In some other places (in Werqamba,

for example) two people went to the voting place, sat side by side and did their marking. When the election officials were asked why this was being done, they said it was done “to speed up” the voting process. At some polling stations we found that the ballot-bag key was broken. Despite this, the voting was allowed to proceed (for example at Wetqa, Kiazba polling stations). Assuming that this was a common practice in many polling stations, we tried to communicate with our observers who had cell phone access, to prevent it from happening. We were not successful. The next morning they told us that they were forced to shut off their phones while TPLF cadres were free to use theirs.

Ato Taddesse Tesfay, a MEDREK observer at the Santa Gelebeda at Haddish Addi, was one of the very few observers who had refused to turn off his phone and managed to maintain contact. He told us that at his polling station, the voters who came to the polling station from the early hours of the morning until mid-day were all women and all this time, one TPLF cadre led five women at a time into the voting place. Cadres would go back and forth bringing groups of five persons to vote. When Taddesse complained against what was being done, they replaced the male cadre by a female one and she continued to do exactly the same thing. Taddesse told me that the people were made to gather at a distance. From there, a teacher formed the groups of five from the pool of people, told them how to look for the bee symbol and how to make their mark and then handed them over to the cadre who shuttled back and forth between the crowd and the polling station and led them into the voting place (which could not be called a voting “booth” because it was out in the open.)

In a village called Betro, people were voting in a very calm manner. The TPLF people did not like the situation. For some reason, they felt uncomfortable. The chairman of Santa Gelebeda Kebele was called on a mobile phone to come over urgently. He came over, fully armed. With his weapon in full view, he went into the middle of the crowd and shouted on the people: “We have come to know that you are voting for the thorn. Don’t think that we have no way of knowing which ones of you are doing that. We have no problem identifying you. We will make you suffer for that. Don’t waste your time. Thorns will in no way be elected.” Some people tried to oppose him but the general fear prevailing over the people could not be removed.

In many polling stations, despite the fact that there were policemen, the task of maintaining security was carried out by the kebele’s security chief and by militiamen handpicked by him. Their responsibility was to make sure that the people voted according to the system set up by the TPLF. I have come to realize that if the security head did not like the way the voting was going, he overruled the guidelines set by the election executives and went to the extent of threatening them to have his way. In many places, it was the so-called security

men who selected and brought in people to vote more than once. They ordered the election executives to allow the people to vote more than once. When our observers complained, they were told to shut up or accused of making trouble and disrupting the election process. The team, squad and gujille leaders, after they led their people into the voting place, waited close by to receive a report on how their people voted.

## The Not-So-Secret Ballot

I have received reports on how TPLF cadres were manipulating the process to undermine the secret ballot. Voters were told that the TPLF had installed cameras in secret places that showed who voted for TPLF and who did not. In order to counter the psychological insecurity this propaganda was creating, I tried to assure the people wherever I campaigned by telling them that the camera story was a false one designed to scare them and that no one else would be able to see or know their choice. It is remarkable that the TPLF people, with all the intricate structural mechanism they had worked out to control the people, the Safety Net wheat bribes and campaign of intimidation, remained in a state of high anxiety over the election results. The extent of the blatant violation of the sacred principle of secrecy in voting needs further discussion.

More than one person at one time has been allowed to go into the voting booth. At one polling station, one woman had gone into the supposedly secret voting place unseen and was there almost throughout the day telling and showing people how to vote. She was not discovered and removed until 4 p.m. (Dembela, Itan Zere polling station). In many polling stations, when one person sat down and voted, the other person standing behind him and waiting for his turn could see how the voter marked his ballot. (Example: Newi, Serizba polling stations; Arrena, Humer (a)). In Adha, voters were videotaped by a Tigray-TV journalist as they voted. Despite protests from our observers, the videotaping continued. At the Awet Biqalsi Addi Tsire polling station, a TPLF representative came with his video camera and spent the whole morning recording people making their marks. Voters took this action as a proof for the warning that TPLF officials would know who voted for whom through camera recordings.

Elderly men and women who had come to the polling station by themselves were told to cover their eyes with pieces of cloth and to pretend they could not see. TPLF members were assigned to lead them to the voting place and to do the marking for them. There have been multiple cases where a person claimed that his father/mother/brother/sister etc. could not come to vote and was given ballot papers so that he could cast votes at one go in the name of two or three persons. There were voters who returned to the polling station and voted more than one time. Election executives themselves were found making

people put their marks on the bee symbol. There were many other cases where militiamen were made to stand very close to the voting places under the pretext of guarding it. When voters came close to them with their unmarked ballot papers, the militiamen took the papers from them and did the marking for them. Our observer protested against this act but nobody listened.

## **Abuse of Rights of Our Observers**

In a given polling station, there is one accredited representative of an opposition party and another for the ruling party. Others present are people's representatives and election executives. The Election Board guideline says that no one else is allowed to go into the polling place. This guideline has been violated repeatedly by TPLF. The kebele security head and the militiamen that came with him sat together in the voting place with their weapons in full display. They decided what should or should not be done. The security chief gave instructions not only to the militiamen but also to the election executives. It was only the MEDREK representative who opposed these irregularities.

Although opposition representative have a right to request that anything done outside the law be recorded or corrected, they were denied this right repeatedly. Our representatives were often told that our request for recording of our protest in the minutes had been voted down. Therefore, few of our objections have been recorded. Our observers could not report all these irregularities because they were forced to turn off their mobile phones, although other TPLF officials and members had unrestricted use of their phones and could communicate freely up and down their system. Our observers were prevented from leaving their seats in the room so that they would not know what was going on outside. Those who wanted to go outside and see what was going on were forced to stay in their seats under the threat of armed force. There was one observer who was forced to leave the polling station on the pretext that he was disturbing the "peaceful" voting process.

## **Counting the Votes**

According to the election guidelines, the counting of votes is carried out by election executives. Even the observers should not have any hand in the counting. In this election, the security head and his militiamen were made to count the votes. They created all kinds of reasons to cancel the votes given to MEDREK and to increase the votes given to the TPLF. Let me cite some examples. The "X" mark could have different shapes. It could look like an addition or a multiplication sign. When it comes to MEDREK, they said the mark looked like an addition mark and not an "X" and cancelled it. The

final decision is made by a majority vote of the executives and they casually disqualified MEDREK votes. When the vote given to MEDREK appeared to be a majority, the ballot bag is taken away and another ballot bag full of ballot papers is brought in. After all the ballots have been counted, they said they had found uncounted ballots and added them. Because of these and other irregularities, our observers refused to sign saying that the results were inaccurate. Many of our observers were held as hostages and denied food and drink for refusing to sign. There were others where guns were pointed at them to force them to sign. Still others who were assigned at places they did not know feared for their lives. In the end, many of our observers were forced to sign as a result of these pressures. But there were others who refused to sign telling the TPLF officials that they would rather be killed than sign. They came back without signing.

## Conclusion

The election of 2010 was a travesty of democracy carefully organized and managed by the TPLF for the TPLF. Putting aside the claim of the Election Board as being neutral, the elections were under the strict control and supervision of the TPLF's kebele and wereda administrators. The majority of the farmers in the rural kebeles and villages have been forced to become TPLF members. Wherever one goes TPLF members are everywhere. Practically every avenue of benefit is closed to those who are not members. Those who are not members are labeled as enemies and their lives turned into a living hell. The chains binding the people are Safety Net and Emergency Assistance programs. These programs are used to manipulate and intimidate the people into total submission to the ruling party.

Election 2010 has clearly demonstrated that where the citizens are not free, there cannot be a free, fair and democratic election. Unless citizens struggle in unison and succeed in regaining their freedom that has been snatched away from them and is now under TPLF lock and key, we shall never have free, fair and democratic elections in Ethiopia. Opposition parties will have to be ready to meet this daunting challenge. They can succeed only if they stick together, but will fail if they stand alone.

## Notes

1 EPRDF is a coalition of four regional parties. The TPLF wing represents the coalition in Tigray. The former acronym will be used in the

National (Ethiopian) context while TPLF/EPRDF will be used in the regional (Tigray) context.

2 REST is the humanitarian arm of the TPLF founded in the late 1970s for the purpose of mobilizing humanitarian assistance in areas under the control of the then insurgent TPLF. It is under the full and exclusive control of the TPLF and is led by a central committee member of the party.