

Transcript

Hello, I'm Terrence Lyons. I'm currently a professor at George Mason University at the Carter School for Peace and Conflict Resolution at George Mason University. I've done a lot of work on elections, particularly the relationship between elections and processes of war termination, particularly civil war termination.

What I'm going to talk today about is a very specific election that I think is an important and interesting election: the regional elections in Ethiopia in June 1992.

It was an important election because they came within a year, just after a year, after the civil war in Ethiopia ended. So, to make a very complicated context a bit more understandable, after a long period of war, a rebel group won the war, took over power in Ethiopia, and then almost immediately wanted to hold elections. And this is 1991, so this is at a time when the Cold War seemed to be over, there was new interest in whether or not at this, at this moment, after the collapse of communism, there were new opportunities to both end wars and promote democratization, and so the international community saw this election in that light, saw it as, this might be a chance to help Ethiopia make this transition from protracted civil war into something that was more... I don't know if they dreamed of democracy so fast, but at least a more stable, electorally-based form of government that would facilitate a reconstruction and peacebuilding. So it was going to be a kind of foundational election to consolidate peace.

That's, I think, why people at the time cared about these elections, certainly I did. [The] second thing to know about these elections is that these were regional elections. After the war ended, the victorious insurgent group, the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), or it was part of a coalition called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the EPRDF, they set up a transitional government of Ethiopia. So that was the central government. Parties outside of the EPRDF were in that transitional government, but these were elections to re-establish regional and local governing authorities. It was really as a result of this war, and famine, and military oppression. There was really nothing at the local level, and so the powers in the transitional government of Ethiopia made the decision that that's where we need to start. We don't start at the top, we start at the local, which is an interesting choice which isn't always made. One of the reasons why it's often not made that way is that the local and the regional then put in place political facts on the ground. There's incumbents on the ground who are relating to a very local political dynamic. And in Ethiopia, this was largely an ethnic dynamic. So it allowed local, ethnically-based political institutions to dig deep, or to root themselves, or to become embedded within the regional state, before we even got around to writing a constitution, or having the first elections for a central government.

This elections in 1992, it came relatively early in the kind of process of international election observing, or the practice, perhaps, I would say, of international election observing. There had been some prior elections, of course. NDI [the National Democratic Institute] and IRI [the International Republican Institute] had already worked in places like the Philippines. [The Carter

Center] had done some observations in Latin America and in Zambia on the African continent, of course.

There were Zambian elections in 1991 that were important. But the practice over time evolved a great deal. This was very early days, and very quick, looking for a rapid response to an opportunity that policymakers and analysts thought might be present in Ethiopia. So this was mostly very short-term observers, which, in contrast to the move towards longer-term observers, later on, as the field became more institutionalized.

There was an emphasis on the kind of very specific, very electoral processes, so rather than thinking larger about what is the meaning of this election, we spent a lot of time thinking about how was the process of registration going, were the materials in the polling places, was there enough indelible ink. Questions like that were on the checks, on the questionnaire that we took with us as we went to all these different polling places, rather than a more holistic, how do the Ethiopian people see this process.

There were few to none domestic observers. There were some civil society organizations that did some important work. The Inter-Africa Group did work on things like civic education and organizing debates, but the scale of Ethiopia, the devastation of the war, meant that a kind of coordinated domestic observer mission was beyond consideration. And there was nothing like a parallel vote tally. It was very...I won't say ad hoc, there were serious people thinking about this seriously, but it was done fast, in a very difficult circumstance, and in a kind of early phase of international organizations doing election observers.

The observer mission from the United States was organized by a group called the African American Institute, which had received money from USAID to do this work. The African American Institute had done a whole plethora of things relating to Africa and policy analysis, and they published a journal and so forth, but they were new to the observation space, as almost everybody was. But fortunately, they were able to benefit from collaborations with some of the folks at NDI. Larry Garber, most, importantly, who knew this area about as well as anybody at that time, knew this form of practice of international observation. The African American Institute had a lot of help from the USAID mission in Ethiopia, in Addis Ababa, which was run by Steve Morrison as the democracy and governance officer. Steve then went on to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and had previously worked for Congress, so he had a higher profile, perhaps, than some other officers at USAID.

The observer team, I believe there were... I thought I had it here on my notes, but I believe there were something like maybe 60 of us, which is a pretty good-sized team, though Ethiopia's a very large country. And it was also a very well-educated, or a very knowledgeable team, I'll put it that way. There were a lot of academics, the field director, the sort of most immediate person trying to corral us, was Ed Keller, who had [been] a longtime professor at UCLA, past president of the African Studies Association, had been writing on Ethiopia for decades, so we had that kind of academic [expertise]... a lot of former Peace Corps volunteers. Ethiopia was a major destination for the Peace Corps, so people had a couple of years on the ground, spoke some Amharic or perhaps another Ethiopian language.

Given that this was, in some ways, not the first of its kind, but was early going, and the first of its kind in Ethiopia, that's for sure, I think the observers were very knowledgeable and very excited to be there, and many of them hadn't been there for years because of the nature of the regime and the war, and so some of them, it was like, 'I spent, you know, 5 years of my life as an anthropologist working in this region, but I haven't been here in 10 years, and now I'm able to come back at this moment of great excitement and at great possibilities.'

We were deployed, we had briefings in Addis Ababa, which I think the kind of standard briefings that these types of election international observer delegations received. We heard from political party officials, from civil society, from media, the Inter-Africa Group folks who I told you [were] doing civic education, I recall that they came, and spoke to us. And so, I think we felt relatively prepared, but it was an enormous task that was being organized really quite quickly.

There was something called the Joint International Observer Group, JIOG, that included the African American group. This was like an umbrella. The African American Institute group was one of the sort of members of this group. There were also a fairly large group of Germans who were observing. There were a number of other Europeans, Norwegians, and so on. And so, it wasn't that these, all these multiple groups were really being... they weren't being directed by, as a single, observer group, but they were being coordinated somehow on, by this joint, international observer group, although to my recollection, it was mostly on things like logistics to make sure we weren't overly concentrating on some areas and missing others. I don't recall us coordinating on our statements, for example.

We were deployed, I believe it was everybody as a team of two, with a translator, and I was assigned, very happily assigned, to the part of western Ethiopia that's called Welega. It's an area in the kind of heartland of the Oromo people in Oromo, what is now the Oromo regional state. It was a very exciting place to be. It was a place where the kind of contentions within Ethiopia were still very, very visible.

There was an Oromo party called the Oromo People's Democratic Organization that was part of the ruling coalition, this Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, but there was a rival organization called the Oromo Liberation Front that was active in the western Welega region, and so what you had in Welega were areas that were under the control of this party affiliated with what I'll call the ruling party, certainly the dominant party at that time, and there was a party that was very much not affiliated with that party, and there had been lots of clashes, there had been a kind of a rough-and-ready ceasefire where the Oromo Liberation Front put their forces in encampments, but it was still highly militarized, highly sensitive, but exciting, for somebody interested in Ethiopian politics like I was, a place to be.

To give you some idea of what I saw in Welega, but I think this was the experience of most of the other observers who had left Addis Adaba, at least, was the degree to which Ethiopia really was terribly torn apart by the war and famine and poverty. So we were going into an area where infrastructure was almost non-existent, you didn't have electricity, or running water for that matter. Very rudimentary government institutions.

And nothing [of the] things that you might expect if you were going to organize an election. Nothing like a recent census, nothing like a voting... a poll people had previously registered, so that you kind of knew how many people were where, and add to the poll, and correct the list, rather than creating it afresh. They had to create it afresh.

People didn't have ID cards. People were not living in the place that they previously lived, because they, in the last 6 months or whatever, had come back from abroad or from Addis Ababa, and so it was really... it was a great challenge. To tell you the truth, I think most of the Ethiopians running the election met that challenge under great... with lack of resources and time pressures on top of that. The rapid training of the electoral workers, as you might expect, was done very, very quickly. Communications was not good. If I recall correctly, they did some of the training by radio, which is what you can do if you can't bring everybody into a single place in order to have that... to have the opportunity to do a more formal and iterative type of training.

The political circumstances were so polarized, maybe one step back. So I explained that there was this group, the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), and this group, the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), two competing Oromo-based, ethnically-based parties competing for Oromo local votes in the Welega region. There had been lots of harassment of the opposition, the OPDO, which was affiliated with the ruling party, was getting access to state resources. Their offices were in government buildings. The OLF was denied access to government buildings. There was a whole set of things to suggest that the playing field was very unlevel, and that OLF people were being OLF candidates and so forth, the observers were being harassed, and some of them were being arrested. The opposition party, the Oromo Liberation Front, along with a number of other parties, asked for a delay in the election. That request was denied, and then these parties boycotted the election, pulled their candidates out and did not participate in the election.

In Welega, this was particularly important because the OLF, which was a former insurgent group, had put their fighters into encampments during the lead-up to the election in order to try to cool down the temperature and avoid clashes. Well, as soon as they left, they began to boycott the election, they left the encampments as well. So all of a sudden, there's all these Oromo Liberation Front soldiers, on the move in the area where we were all, you know, Ethiopian security forces coming down to challenge them, and we had to get out of town in a hurry, which we did, by road. Some others who were further west were evacuated by air, but we were able to make it out by the road and get back to Addis Ababa. So I never actually saw the voting in Welega. We were out because of these security concerns, and I guess I must... if I recall, I did look at some voting in Addis Ababa, but that wasn't really relevant. It was... of course, it was relevant, but it was not emblematic of what was going on in the countryside, which is where, of course, most Ethiopians live.

The African American Institute, the group that I was affiliated with, began to write up a report of what their observations were, and it was an interesting process. I mean, I came in a little bit late, but at the start of the... it was just a group kind of debrief, slightly chaotic, people coming in and out, but what was most interesting in the process is those who had observed the election in Addis Ababa, or the immediate environs, came back to Addis Ababa... to where we were

meeting at the Hilton Hotel and said, well, it looked pretty good, you know, the people were prepared, they had all the materials that they needed, and so forth. And then when some of us came in from further afield, deeper into the countryside, we had very different impressions. We began to say, 'that's not what we saw at all. We saw an election that was not competitive, that was done under circumstances where most voters felt insecure, and that they didn't have a real choice, and that the statement should reflect that.'

In the end, we came up with a statement that I think most people accepted. I thought it was a fine statement. It was crafted by Ed Keller, this professor from UCLA.

It's a little unclear what happened next. What I do know is that Ed Keller was told to leave the country. He was PNG, persona non grata. Whether that was because the government got an advance copy of the statement, which is possible, I mean, it was just laying around on tables in the hotel when we were drafting it, or because he had met with the leader of the Oromo Liberation Front as part of his meetings to try to understand the temperature and what was going on in the elections, and this was, again, something that the Ethiopian government didn't care for at all.

And there was a general crackdown after the election, particularly in the Oromo area. The observers, as I said, were quite critical. The African American Institute report, which was written by the National Democratic Institute, actually, Larry Garber, along with others, Christopher Fomunyoh, who was with NDI, suggested, I think I have this correct in my notes, there was competitive participation, for the most part, did not occur. Acute administrative and logistical shortcomings seriously impaired the electoral process. So, you know, it didn't make the mark, even in these early years of trying to understand how to assess elections.

The Ethiopian government was very critical of the critical report, as you might imagine, and they framed it as an important step forward for the process of democracy in Ethiopia.

Now, I'm going to go take a step back from the election observing piece of this and speak a bit more about why I think these elections mattered, and therefore why the observation was important. I explained that these were elections after the end of a civil war, and we're gonna put in place, kind of, political structures that would then shape political competition in the years to come. And from 1992 up until today, I think the core dynamics of Ethiopian politics have been set, and they were set by the dynamics of the 1992 election. Let me explain that in maybe three points.

One is that 1992 put in place the kind of ethno-federal map. Every regional state in Ethiopia is an ethnically defined regional state. So there's an Oromo state, there's an Amhara state, there's a Somali state, there's a Tigray state, they're all ethnically defined, and that was put in place in 1992, not by the Constitution, the Constitution comes in 1994, but not by the Constitution, but once you do local elections on the basis of these ethnically defined regional states, you're putting in place actors who have a stake in keeping it that way, right?

This is how they built up their local political institutions. It's very difficult to undo something like that once you've done it. These things get rooted, they've got momentum, and this sort of path dependency dynamic. So that was one thing.

And the second thing that happened in 1992 that continued to happen in elections in 1995, in 2000, 2005 was a bit of an exception, but 2010, 2015, 2021, was that [the] opposition was systematically harassed, the ruling party systematically used resources, state resources, in terms of vehicles and offices and telephones and fax machines and all those kinds of things from the state that the opposition party couldn't use, and so the playing field was clearly, in the view of international observers at least, this is consistent across the reports of all of those elections, that the playing field was decidedly tilted.

And, I don't want to make causation here. Maybe my third point would be, is that the opposition typically boycotted. 2005 was an exception, but the other elections, the main political parties, did not participate, and so Ethiopia has largely not had competitive elections. They've had a lot of elections. They have elections every 5 years. They're very administratively skilled at organizing elections, but they're not competitive, and at the end of the day, non-competitive elections are, not, are not the goal of a process of democratization. You get kind of electoral authoritarianism, or elections used to consolidate party power in what is really an authoritarian circumstance.

So, let me recap some of my main points, if I got lost in too much language there. And the first is I want to emphasize that these elections were specifically important, maybe even unusually important, because they came at the end of a terrible period of Ethiopian history, and were seen to have the possibility that these elections could help nudge forward a transition away from war and turn towards a more stable, less violent political order.

These were also elections that were not the first in the international election observation list of elections that were observed by international observers, but it was still relatively early on. And the African American Institute, which organized the observers, the American observers, had very little time to get organized, to send out long-term observers, or to consider some of the things that now, I think, after this time had become kind of the standard operating procedures of international observers.

These elections took place in a very tense, even militarily fraught context. I explained how the Oromo Liberation Front left the government and ended up having its troops leave their encampments in a way that was of great concern.

And then finally, maybe the process of writing [an] Observer's report that I think reflected what we saw, but was rejected by the Ethiopian government, who were so angry that they kicked out the head of the delegation, a very senior American academic, Ed Keller.

And then my final point, just to reiterate, is that while local elections immediately after the war, before the Constitution was written, might seem like it was going to be, you know, it's a pretty obscure topic, right? I've just talked about it for a while, but most other people would say, why

are you going on and on about this election that was so long ago, and didn't really, you know, shape the future of Ethiopia?

My argument is, to the contrary, the patterns that were put in place, institutionalized in 1992, continue to shape Ethiopian politics, even to this day. These ethnic regional states, ethnically defined regional states, are still how Ethiopia is organized, because once you put institutions on the ground, you make facts on the ground, political power, you know, organizes itself around these institutions, and you it's costly to start over again. And so, it was an important experience for me. I went on from observing elections there in 1992 to further observing elections in Ethiopia in 1995, and in 2005, as well as elections in Ghana, Benin, Bangladesh, and the referendum in Eritrea. So this was really my entry point to a whole stream of opportunities and research.

Thank you very much for listening. I hope it was interesting for you. Thank you.