

Reinforcing developmental efforts through Election

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In what could generally be taken as a progressive attempt by human kind to come up with a more accommodating model of administering social, economic and political affairs, there have been four or five social development stages. Those are the primitive society, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism, though it has not been adopted as an international system.

The first is characterized as a stateless society of hunters and gatherers. The society is noted for collective activities to fulfil daily demands. The discovery and use of agriculture and metallurgy that led to surplus production, however, gave rise to the formation of antagonistic classes. The power of those with better technology and thus surplus production grew while those who could not cope with the changes assumed inferior roles in societal decision making. The result was a state with slavery as a social system. The daunting task of administering societal affairs that includes passing decisions that would affect the lives of all members of society was left entirely for slave owners.

The same approach to the assumption of state power continued in the feudal system. Land lords and aristocrats predominantly made up the legislative, executive and judiciary branches of government. Peasants were almost entirely left out of the realm of state affairs.

The social systems of slavery and feudalism accorded the task of social administration to the nobility. The paradigm during those

days was such that not all people were considered equal. Therefore, the massive task of social administration could only be left for the socially superior.

With strong social movements and increased awareness, though, the paradigm that treated humans as unequal beings changed radically in the subsequent social systems. Though it was not easy coming and still a work in progress, in political elections mankind has come up with a much more accommodating system of involving the majority of people in a society in social decision making as direct representation proves impractical considering the population size and structure of states. Election is the formal process of selecting a person for public office or of accepting or rejecting a political proposition by voting.

In such a system people elect who is going to represent them in various local and national levels of government. In doing so, the people exercise their involvement in political decision making by declaring their allegiance to political parties or individuals through votes while governments derive their powers from the consent of the governed. Albeit very recently in historical terms, the one person one vote paradigm along with universal adult suffrage has become the order of the day. Though the principle has yet to take on the whole world, international political trends seem to be bound that way.

Elections make a fundamental contribution to democratic governance. Because direct democracy—a form of government in which political decisions are made directly by the entire body of qualified citizens—is impractical in most modern societies, democratic government must be conducted through representatives. Ethiopia, as a democratic developmental state, has been working towards the achievement of a strong such process.

Elections enable voters to select leaders and to hold them accountable for their performance in office. The possibility of controlling leaders by requiring them to submit to regular and periodic elections helps to solve the problem of succession in leadership and thus contributes to the continuation of democracy.

Moreover, where the electoral process in the country is competitive and forces candidates or parties to expose their records and future intentions to popular scrutiny, the people use the event to communicate with political parties so that they assess how every option might be adapted to their current lives and future fates. Additionally, as elections serve as forums for the discussion of public issues and facilitate the expression of public opinion they express their ideas, criticisms and expectations. As a result, elections help to facilitate social and political integration.

Upcoming local elections in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is preparing itself for local elections set to take place in April. In this election the inhabitants of Addis Ababa, Dire Dawa and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regions will participate. The electorate of Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa city administrations will have to vote for the councils of every level (woreda, sub-city and city) of local government where as those of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples will only do so for its kebele councils. The National Electoral Board of Ethiopia has declared it has made successful preparations to manage elections for local and city parliaments due to be held in April this year. As per the election schedule, 29 parties took their election signs while there are some that declined to do so stating some complaints for which the board

claimed it gave due responses. Chairman of the Board, Professor MergaBekana told ERTA recently that "the Complaints of the parties are partly issues that were resolved right after the 2009 elections and the rest are issues with no verifying evidences. The fact is, often political parties do not take proper interest in local and city administration elections." According to him, the preparation gave emphasis to build the capacities of political parties; the process, he believed, has left behind important lessons that will help shape future elections. He also welcomed all political parties to be involved in the elections as the board is independent enough to manage the process in the best of fostering democracy.

I. Importance of local elections

The current local election is not a grand new occasion for the country to experience democracy. Not to mention the four national and regional elections held every five years for the last 18 years, Ethiopians' first encounter with real electoral democracy was the local elections held in mid-1992 during the Transitional period, just a year after the downfall of the brutal military dictatorship. Woreda and Kebele administrations were organized through elections. Ethiopians exercised electoral democracy by determining the composition of local governments through the ballot box.

Local elections are very essential for the people in various ways. They are, actually, vital components of the democratic developmental state. First, citizens exercise the principles of democracy by directly participating in the local councils; as these councils are organized in kebele (woreda in Addis Ababa context) and zones (sub-cities in the case of Addis Ababa). Consequently, the people put into effect the democratic

principle of self-administration through directly electing and being elected in local councils. The constitution puts the idea of self-governance and direct participation in the following way:

"The sovereignty [of the Nations, Nationalities and Peoples of Ethiopia] shall be expressed through their representatives elected in accordance with this Constitution and through their direct, democratic participation." Article 8 (3)

Second, local elections provide citizens with the opportunity to equip their local councils with individuals who can make notable changes in solving local problems. As these problems could be associated with procedural and policy problems, the election of influential and energetic individual decision makers who can do something about them could prove to be remedial. Procedural problems of local governments such as kebeles and sub-cities that are closely linked with the provision and control of social services could see the light of day with the placement of capable people to address the problems. As the hierarchical lowest points of government, local governments play a great role in the implementation of national policies. Therefore, the active participation of people in local elections could help improve the implementation of these policies with a local twist to fit the local residents, helping them get the best out of those policies.

Third, local elections play a major role for the establishment of multi-party regional and zonal level governments. The culture and system of multi-party local governance flourishes in such elections. Under such a system, parties get the chance of working hand-in-hand with the government for the facilitation of the

democratic process. In addition, they can provide alternatives to voters by presenting their policies and strategies to the people at the root level.

Fourth, the principle of self-governance of each nation and nationality, which was a hope of the people of Ethiopia for a long period of time with numerous brave citizens sacrificing their lives for the cause, can be strengthened and the effective practicality of the historic constitution can be confirmed with such elections.

"Every nation, nationality and people in Ethiopia has the right to a full measure of self-government which includes the right to establish institutions of government in the territory that it inhabits and to equitable representation in state and federal government." Article 39 (3)

Local councils are also where citizens understand the merit of check and balance system. As these councils have the duty of controlling the progress made by local executive offices such as education and health offices, their strength could only be beneficial for the administration and local residents as well. Due attention should, therefore, be given by the electorate to the election of council members. Active participation in the upcoming local council elections would facilitate better effectiveness and efficiency of local executive offices.

Beside the democratic values elections promote, setting up a local government is a vital matter to the people on the lower level in various ways. The citizen can get access to governmental and public services through these administrations

straightforward - these administrations provide most of the essential services for the population and have big roles in facilitating citizen's access to various services provided by higher government organs. They are the venues for public deliberations, mobilizations and making the people's voice heard at higher levels.

Especially in a time of consistent economic growth like the one our country has witnessed in recent years, competitive and participatory elections contribute a great deal in facilitating and fostering development. In addition to ensuring the continuation and betterment of recent economic achievements, placing capable individuals in local government decision making positions would help the people become the major beneficiaries of them. It would also help combat rampant corruption that is widely associated with rapid economic growth as the collision of the private and public sectors expands in such situations. Ultimately, such improvements would promote good governance resulting in a better communication between the people and the administration.

II. Elections as positive reinforcements to development

In what has become quite a trend in recent years, especially in developing countries, elections have gone astray from their perceived goal of ensuring peaceful transition of political power. Kenya, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Thailand are just a few of the countries that undergone post-election violence as our country did in 2005.

Election-related violence is mainly characterized by bloody clashes between supporters of opposing political parties or supporters of parties against government forces. What ensues is

a period of protracted rioting that involves the loss of lives and property. Private and public service provision, education, production and other major national activities would be halted because of the violence. The interruption of these activities coupled with the loss of property and lives results in a big strain on efforts towards economic growth. The violence also negatively affects political stability which is a vital requisite for the in-flow of foreign investment not to mention jeopardizing national security.

Election-related violence is also very divisive as people align themselves with two opposing sides that, during the course of the violence, resort to lethal confrontation. By posing itself as an obstacle to social unity and cohesion, election-related violence draws popular attention away from the noble goals of prosperity, development, justice and the due process of law to the short lived fantasies of anarchy.

In general, election-related violence strips people off the benefits of peaceful elections mentioned in the first section. They block people's rights to elect and be elected, deny people the opportunity to place capable individuals who can tackle problems in local and national councils, dwindle the development of a multi-party system at local and national stages while promoting adverse conditions for the promotion of peace and democracy. Although various nation states have different mechanisms of contesting elections results, post-election violence gives no room for handling grievances through the institutionalized route. Consequently, the ever present questions of development, democracy and good governance that the rioters claim to be raising get side-lined by one big brawl.

Therefore, it is our duty as citizens to vigilantly stay guard for the peaceful completion of the upcoming local election. We should make sure that we would be the beneficiaries of a free, fair and peaceful competitive election which would positively reinforce our on-going democratic and economic strides.

One major way of ensuring a peaceful election in our country is the careful follow through of the electoral code of conduct. As a proclamation that should be adhered by all political parties, the electoral code of conduct provides detailed guidelines on how political parties and their members should behave during election periods. Therefore, let's go through the provisions of the electoral code of conduct as a reminder of what these guidelines are.

As a basic point of conduct, section two number eight of the proclamation dealing with campaign management stipulates that:

1/ Any Political party shall;

- a) Respect the right and freedom of all other parties to campaign, and to disseminate
- b) Conduct itself in a manner that respects the rights of other parties, and respect the rights of voters and other members of the community;
- c) Respect the freedom of the mass media;
- d) Use its good offices to seek to ensure reasonable freedom of access by all parties to all potential voters; and
- e) Seek to ensure that potential voters wishing to participate in related political activities have freedom to do so.

2/ Any political party may not;

- a) Harass or obstruct private or Government journalists who are engaged in their professional Activities, disrupt, destroy or frustrate the campaign efforts of any other party;
- b) Prevent the distribution of handbills and leaflets, and the display of posters, of other parties and candidates;
- c) Deface or destroy the posters of other parties and candidates;
- d) Prevent or in any way hamper any other party from holding rallies, meetings, marches or demonstrations;
- e) Seek to prevent any person from attending the political rallies of another party; or
- f) Permit supporters to do anything prohibited by this section.

Section two number ten of the proclamation dealing with accepting the outcome of a free and fair election in its part clearly denotes:

- 1/ Any political party shall accept the outcome of an election that has been certified by the appropriate authorities.
- 2/ Any party shall submit grievances only to the joint council, the Board or to the courts of law.
- 3/ Any party shall accept and comply with the final decisions of organs that are authorized by law to render final decisions.

Section two number thirteen of the proclamation dealing with intimidation and violence stipulates that:

- 1/ Any political party shall accept that intimidation, in any form, is unacceptable, and shall;
 - a) Issue directives expressly forbidding its officials, candidates, members and supporters any act to intimidate any person at any time;

- b) Stand against act that incites violence;
- c) Campaign against violence or threats of violence, and against any acts of vandalism or public disorder committed or threatened by their officials, candidates, members or supporters; and
- d) Respect the rights and propriety interests of other persons and parties ;

2/ The leader of any political party shall instruct the party's officials candidates, members and supporters that any weapon of including any traditional weapon, shallot be brought to any political rally, meeting, march or demonstration.

3/ Any political party that shall:

- a) Not be engaged in or permit any kind of violent activity to demonstrate party strength or to prove supremacy;
- b) Seek to prevent damage to any public or private property; or
- c) Not allow its supporters to do anything prohibited by this section;

Now that we understand and appreciate the long struggle of human kind to arrive at the principle of one-man one-vote election system after centuries of systems promoting inequality between individuals, I hope not using our rights to vote would come as a hefty decision to pursue. Especially when we consider the importance of local elections we dealt with earlier, the gravity of exercising one's right to participate in elections is only going to grow.

As the importance of keeping elections peaceful is firmly entwined with reaping their benefits, it is also our duty to stand guard of the process. Towards that end, it is absolutely

important to know and adhere to the electoral code of conduct whose provisions lay the basis for peaceful and fair elections.