Contested Power in Ethiopia

Traditional Authorities and Multi-Party Elections

Kjetil Tronvoll
& Tobias Hagmann

(editors)

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AAPO	All Amhara People's Organisation Party
AEUP	All Ethiopian Unity Party
ANDM	Amhara National Democratic Movement
APDO	Anywaa People's Democratic Organisation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BESS	Bethel Evangelical Secondary School
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CSA	Central Statistical Agency
CUD	Coalition for Unity and Democracy
DAG	Development Assistance Group
DWPDM	Dil Wabi People's Democratic Movement
ECSC	Ethiopian Civil Service College
EHRCO	Ethiopian Human Rights Council
EIASC	Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defence Force
EPDM	Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
EPRDF	Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
ESDL	Ethiopian Somali Democratic League
ETB	Ethiopian Birr (*currency*)
EU	European Union
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
GLF	Gambella Liberation Front
GPDM	Gambella People's Democratic Movement
GPNRS	Gambella People's National Regional State
GSAP	Gadda System Advancement Party
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
HPR	House of Peoples' Representatives
ID	Identity card
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFES	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LPS	Laare polling station
MPDO	Majangir People's Democratic Organisation

NPDO	Nuer People's Democratic Organisation
NEBE	National Election Board of Ethiopia
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NPS	Nyinyang polling station
OALF	Oromo Abbo Liberation Front
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFDM	Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
OLNP	Oromo Liberation National Party
OLUP	Oromo Liberation Unity Front
ONC	Oromo National Congress
OPDC	Oromiya Pastoral Development Commission
OPDO	Oromo People's Democratic Organisation
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front
PBS	Protection of Basic Services
PCDP	Pastoral Community Development Project
PCI	Pastoralist Communication Initiative
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Programme
SALF	Somali Abbo Liberation Front
SEPDC	Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Coalition
SEPDFU	Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Forces' Unity
SEPDF	Southern Ethiopia's Peoples Democratic Front
SEPDM	Southern Ethiopian Peoples' Democratic Movement
SIM	Sudan Interior Mission
SNNPR	Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region
SODAF	Somali Democratic Alliance Forces
SPDP	Somali People's Democratic Party
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UDN	United Democratic Nationals
UEDF	United Ethiopian Democratic Forces
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States dollar (*currency*)

Wogagoda	Wolayta, Gamo, Gofa and Dawro
WPE	Workers' Party of Ethiopia
WSDP	Western Somali Democratic Party
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front
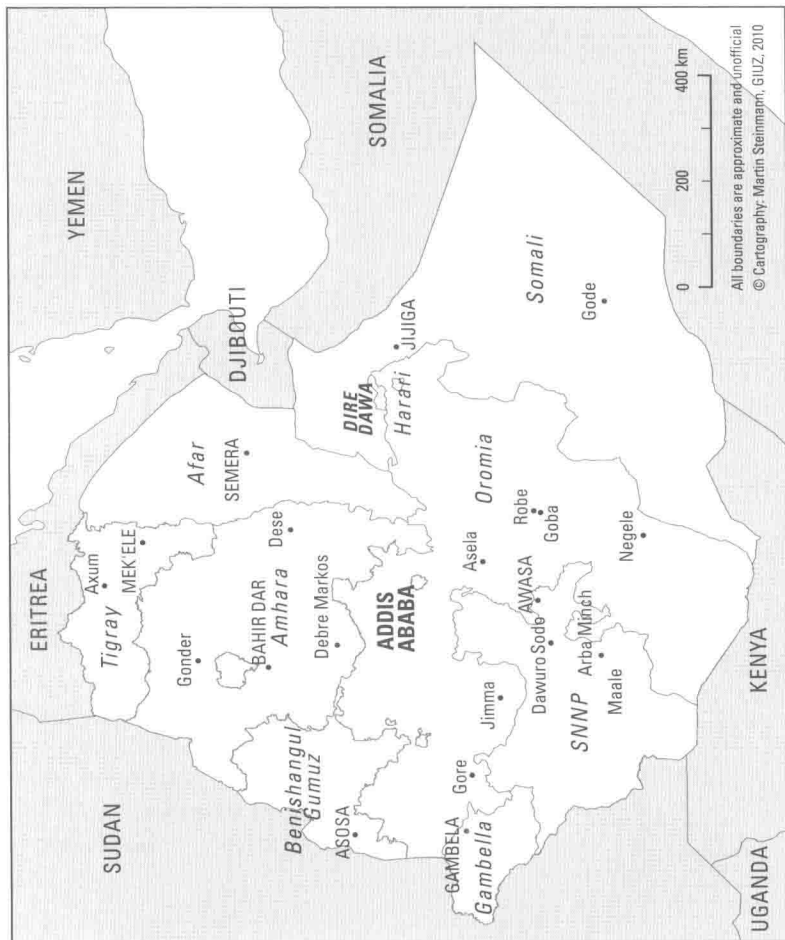
Map 1 Administrative map of Ethiopia with regional capitals and field research sites

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TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES AND MULTI-PARTY ELECTIONS IN ETHIOPIA

Kjetil Tronvoll & Tobias Hagmann

Introduction[1]

This book addresses the intricate interrelationships between multi-party elections and traditional authorities in Ethiopia, as exemplified by nine case studies from the country's contested 2005 national and regional elections. Although multi-party elections in Africa have attracted considerable interest in recent years (see Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Nohlen *et al.* 1999; Villalón and VonDoepp 2005; Lindberg 2006), the role of traditional authorities in elections is severely under-studied. This holds particularly true if one considers the fact that over 300 multi-party elections have been held throughout Africa since the 'third democratisation wave' reached the continent between the late 1980s and 2008.[2] This volume addresses this lacuna by analysing how clan elders, customary leaders and indigenous political organisations – which we subsume under the broad heading of 'traditional authorities' – participated in and fashioned multi-party elections in Ethiopia, Africa's second most populous nation.

The vast body of scholarly work on democratisation and electioneering in Africa and other parts of the world has different emphases and approaches to understanding the phenomenon, and can be loosely grouped into five different strands of research.[3] One body of work focuses on the structural preconditions for successful or failed democratisation processes (see, for example, Bunce *et al.* 2009); another

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[1] We are indebted to Markus V. Hoehne, Staffan Lindberg, Judith Vorrath and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this introduction.

[2] Personal communication by Staffan Lindberg, 15 August 2008. For an overview of elections worldwide see also the IFES Election Guide, http://www.electionguide.org.

[3] This classification is used purely to illustrate the range of scholarly literature on the topic. One may obviously group research on democratisation and elections into other categories too.

strand tries to explain the particularities of post-conflict democratic
transition (Paris 2004; Lyons 2005; Jarstad and Sisk 2008), while yet
another assesses the pitfalls of democratisation and highlights, for
instance, how elections generate violence (Snyder 2000; Mann 2005;
Mansfield and Snyder 2005). More relevant to our particular study on
elections and traditional authorities in Ethiopia are two other bodies of
literature.

The first is dominated by political scientists and economists who
study the conditions under which some variant of liberal democracy
has gained a foothold in Africa.[4] Their predominant concern lies with
the formal aspects of democratic transitions such as electoral codes,
political parties, campaigning, judicial reforms or power sharing. For
proponents of this research strand democratisation and election stud-
ies in Africa have typically concentrated on understanding the capaci-
ties and constraints of 'modern' governance institutions with reference
to their own intrinsic objectives and standards. Democracy is assumed
to be a universally shared norm and characteristic of political moder-
nity, which is hoped to produce more participatory, representative and
accountable governments in Africa. Consequently, this group of schol-
ars measures democratisation as a function of a country's ability to pro-
duce formal political institutions that are broadly based on universal
principles and norms of liberal democracy. Formal institutions are,
indisputably, crucial attributes of both established and emergent
democracies; and the comprehensive Afrobarometer surveys show that
Africans do indeed have similar perceptions of modern democracy as
inhabitants of Western countries (Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi
2005).[5] Nevertheless, given their preoccupation with modern state and
party politics, this body of work often has little to say about the 'tradi-
tional' sector or sphere of society. The latter is seldom considered rele-
vant to understanding democratic transitions and is stereotyped as
non-political, non-democratic and a relic of the past.

The other approach to the study of democracy in Africa of relevance
to the Ethiopia case – and generally represented in this volume – is
dominated by anthropologists and historians. They seek to understand
contemporary political transitions through the prism of local actors'

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[4] Adherents of this research strand who specialise in the study of democratic transi-
tions are known as transitologists (see Schmitter 1995).
[5] http://www.afrobarometer.org/

practices and meanings. Focusing mainly on non-state actors, indige-
nous structures or customary organisations, these authors emphasise
cultural embeddedness, historical trajectories, and the geographical
context of popular representation at local level. In doing so, they
question liberal democracy's alleged universality and instead draw
attention to the empirically variegated forms of political representation
that exist in particular places and at particular times (Koelble and
LiPuma 2008). Unlike the former research strand, which is inter-
ested in the impacts of market, policy and constitutional reforms on
democracy, proponents of the latter research strand seek to compre-
hend democracy 'from below'.[6] This mission leads them to study
the actors, processes and institutions of local democracy, e.g. how kin-
ship groups define decision-making in village affairs along lines of
descent, gender and age. Many of them have underlined the resilience
of indigenous political structures, but little attention is paid to their
involvement in the modern state, party politics, and multi-party
elections.

Very few studies, however, try to combine these latter two approaches
to political transition in Africa as we do in this book. We use local insti-
tutions of authority and power in Ethiopia as an entry point to scruti-
nise the consolidation and understanding of democracy as exemplified
by the 2005 general elections. The 'local' and the 'national', the 'modern'
and the 'traditional' have therefore been researched and conceptualised
together, rather than artificially compartmentalised (Young 1993, 207).
Such an endeavour requires an ethnographic grasp of the various ways
in which the exercise of political power through modern democratic
institutions is interpreted, positioned and contextualised in relation to
local expressions of authority and power.

Given its distinctly multi-ethnic character, Ethiopia is a perfect case
for studying the articulation between institutions of traditional author-
ity and the conduct of multi-party elections in Africa. The 2005 elec-
tions are particularly well suited to this task as they were the most
genuinely competitive elections held in Ethiopia so far, representing a
moment of intense political struggle. They provided large parts of soci-
ety with an opportunity to contest the existing political order estab-
lished by the ruling Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic

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[6] An allusion to the call of Bayart *et al.* (1992), among others, to study 'politics from
below'.

Front (EPRDF). This process involved complex strategies of co-optation, control and resistance between the incumbent government, political parties, ordinary citizens and traditional authorities, and went largely unnoticed by international observers. The notion of contested power captures these processes as both 'modern' and 'traditional' powers adopted ambiguous roles and positions to confront each other during election time.

Although there is a long scholarly tradition regarding the study of chiefs and customary authorities in colonial and post-colonial Africa, there is a glaring absence of empirical accounts of the roles of traditional authorities in multi-party elections.[7] This research gap also exists in Ethiopia, where most scholars interested in national politics have tended to concentrate on the institutional features of 'ethnic federalism' and its impacts on local conflict dynamics as the starting point of their analysis (Young 1998; Vaughan and Tronvoll 2003; Keller 2005; Aalen 2006; Abbink 2006b; Turton 2006; ICG 2009). One exception is the anthology *Ethiopia – The Challenge of Democracy from Below* (Bahru Zewde and Pausewang 2002), which offers comparative insights into local perceptions of state institutions.

The nine chapters in the present volume analyse the relationship between traditional authorities and multi-party elections from the viewpoint of a diverse set of Ethiopians. The traditional authority and multi-party elections nexus is examined in very different localities, with seven out of the nine studies located in the central regional states of Oromiya (Daniel Mains, Terje Østebø, Charles Schaefer, Marco Bassi) and Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (Data Dea Barata, Lovise Aalen, Donald L. Donham), while two studies are situated in the so-called peripheral Gambella (Dereje Feyissa) and Somali (Tobias Hagmann) regions. The contributions in this volume forcefully demonstrate that democratisation, institution building and elections in Africa are evolving in a context enmeshed with customary forms of political, cultural and religious authority and power.

It is necessary to flag up three particular findings from these complex case studies concerning the roles played by traditional authorities in the elections. Firstly, both government and opposition parties relied

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[7] Among the few noteworthy exceptions is Lehman's (2007, 315) study of chiefs' involvement in South Africa's 2000 and 2006 municipal elections, in which he concludes that 'traditional authorities may serve as a democratizing function in local politics'.

on traditional authorities to mobilise voters on election day; secondly, they gave legitimacy to political actors, namely party candidates and the elections; and thirdly, they were instrumental in (pre-)selecting candidates for the elections, particularly those of the ruling party. We also wondered whether traditional authorities might have played a role in resource distribution and allocation during the election process; but our cases do not support such a hypothesis.

These findings do not necessarily contradict the conclusions reached by other strands of democracy research; instead, they compliment and add nuance to more conventional election studies. This book is thus an important reminder that democratisation in Africa is best understood by making sense of how the adoption of new political practices and institutional procedures such as multi-party elections plays out and is perceived in local contexts.

Democratic transitions are by definition exceedingly political and so are the labels used to gauge multi-party elections. Whether an election is described as 'free and fair' or, conversely, as 'rigged' and marred by irregularities and political intimidation is not only a matter of objective measurement, but often of taking sides with a particular constituency (Bjornlund 2004; Hagmann 2006). While this book provides the most in-depth and comprehensive scrutiny of Ethiopia's 2005 elections thus far, it is not our ambition to provide an assessment of the elections' democratic fairness.[8] Nor do we strive to answer the question as to whether institutions of traditional authority are compatible with democratic principles or transitions to democracy. Rather, the aim is to account for how customary politics intersect with formal electoral politics in Ethiopia. The contributions in this book neither equate traditional authorities with backwardness, nor do they romanticise them. Instead, they emphasise that a variety of customary actors and institutions are important to electoral politics, both as opponents and facilitators of the incumbent regime. Moreover, this volume highlights that traditional authorities influence the perceptions of multi-party elections and the formal power wielded by the state and its representatives; and vice versa, multi-party elections have an impact on the role and positions of traditional authorities.

A brief note on terminology and methodology is in order before positioning Ethiopia in the broader literature on traditional authorities

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[8] For studies assessing the conduct of the Ethiopian 2005 elections, see Abbink (2006), Lyons (2006), Lefort (2007) and Tronvoll (2009).