

Bahru Zewde and Siegfried Pausewang (editors):
Ethiopia: The Challenge of Democracy from Below
Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala and Forum for Social
Studies, Addis Ababa. 2002. 215p.

While we know that popular participation is one of the essential criteria for assessing the state of democracy, often political analysis fails to account for or characterize the extent of participation occurring in a given state. This is in part because of the focus on political institutions in much scholarly work to date. Ethiopia is no exception to this general pattern, where historical, political and even development literature tends to see the evolution of the state in terms of what is happening in the political center at a given time. And with the fall of the socialist dictatorship of the Derg, we have seen a considerable focus on the evolution of formal political institutions such as the Constitution, legal reform and so on, with a marked inattention to how ordinary Ethiopians and non-state actors both perceive and contribute to democratic development.

A recent collaborative publication edited by Ethiopian scholar Bahru Zewde and long-time Ethiopianist Siegfried Pausewang intends to address this gap in the literature by focusing on democracy "from below," by which they seem to mean the voices of the masses living outside the immediate political center and their contribution to democratic processes in Ethiopia. The volume includes contributions from 12 scholars, both Ethiopians and outsiders, and is sponsored by two civil society organizations, one Ethiopian and one Norwegian—a vital point in a book intended to highlight the contribution of non-state actors. In his introduction, Bahru frames the key questions of the

book in the context of the "weight of tradition" in Ethiopia, where successive regimes in modern history have had increasing influence on the daily lives of Ethiopia's citizens. While effective political leadership is important, it cannot be democratic if it is not responsive and culturally appropriate. How then are we to assess the success of the formal structures of the present regime in Ethiopia on political liberalization, particularly from the grassroots level?

This a vital question to ask in the Ethiopian context today if we are interested in anything more than what is formally proposed and debated. On the whole, the contributors to the volume offer varied and nuanced assessments from different vantage points. Upon reading the entire volume, the careful reader has gained a better understanding of how democracy operates in Ethiopia than perhaps any book written on the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) thus far. This is partly because the editors have included work of a highly various nature, ranging from the historical and anthropological assessments of indigenous political institutions to formal policy and implementation assessments of federalism, gender policy and press law and, finally, assessments of peasant perceptions of political processes. Taken as a whole, the book is one of the most important empirical and theoretical contributions to Ethiopian studies in recent years.

Arguably the most fascinating and innovative contributions are those on peasants' views about democracy, with the authors in this section tackling challenging questions such as the appearance of peasant apathy in the face of a lack of genuine political competition, the ways local communities manipulate political processes such as land redistribution when these are decreed from above, and why

peasants seek external assistance for environmental degradation rather than use state-provided agricultural advisors. In fact, in different ways, each author tackles the central political questions at the heart of the post-Derg regime: How does the history of repression and the political culture in Ethiopia, as well as the fact of continuing one-party domination, undermine the democratic features of the new constitution? And, how do Ethiopian citizens react to the fundamentally undemocratic processes that impinge on their daily lives? The authors treat their subjects with remarkable cultural sensitivity, giving voice to peasants through extensive field-based theoretical assessments of historical and cultural processes and providing unique perspectives on the attitudes and actions of Ethiopian citizens.

Shifting from an anthropological approach to a mixed methodology of both formal and systemic analysis together with field-based assessments, the chapter on administrative decentralization is noteworthy for its empirical depth and analytical precision. The author grounds his assessment of the present decentralization policy in Ethiopia in the normative argument that decentralized government should promote democracy by fostering consensual decision-making, equity, representation, accountability and responsiveness of public institutions to community concerns. There is detailed historical and contemporary data on the extent of decentralization occurring, including important and rarely compiled data on revenue shares by the federal and regional state governments, as well as two fascinating case studies on *woreda*-level decentralization. Based on this rich data, the author concludes that the constitutionally unrecognized zonal governments stifle the development and autonomous decision-making powers of

the *woreda*-level administration. This has significant implications for our assessment of democracy "from below" in Ethiopia because it confirms that political processes continue to be top down and that the *woreda*-level administration is not a voice for the local people, but rather a tool of upward accountability to higher levels of administration, usually based on political party membership. The continuing domination of political cadres in formal institutions that are meant to provide ordinary Ethiopians with political space is arguably one of the most powerful obstacles to democratization in modern-day Ethiopia.

There is little to criticize in this volume, though certainly some chapters are stronger than others. The first section on traditional systems of governance contains a great deal of overlap, while excluding other important examples by focusing exclusively on the concept of the *Sera/Seera* in the Gurage, Sidamo and Kambata regions of southern Ethiopia. Certainly there are other instances of traditional political institutions in use in other parts of the country that are also powerful forces for local democracy; broadening the scope of the work to include one or two of these examples would only enhance the readers' understanding of the diversity of these institutions. The chapter on the role of NGOs in Ethiopia is notably weak in comparison with the rest of the text, particularly next to the chapter that precedes it on Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The latter is a detailed and thorough exposition not only on full landscape of CSOs but is theoretically rich. The author groups the existing CSOs into four types and includes several case studies of existing organizations such as the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) in order to assess the contribution of these organizations to the democratization process in Ethiopia.

While noting some of the constraints to the full contribution of these organizations in the present political context, the author thoughtfully includes several suggestions for improving the capacity of this sector to support democracy, including building the leadership capacity and working to promote greater cooperation among the existing CSOs.

The final section is also a bit weak, at least theoretically. Entitled "Alternative Voices," it is difficult to understand how the subjects represented constitute alternative voices. In particular, I would take issue with the assertion that women and the private press constitute "alternative voices" in the formal sense, though one may agree that presently in Ethiopia they are groups whose voices are excluded from central political processes. Women are only "alternatives" if we assume that men are the "norm," not only in lived reality but normatively. There is a certain sense in which the final section seems hastily put together, perhaps to address un-represented issues, as if the editors realized they did not yet have a chapter on women or the media in a book on democratization from the local level and they felt it essential to include these. For instance, while empirically interesting in its presentation of specific forms of discrimination against women in Ethiopia, both legal and cultural, the chapter on gender fails to consider the theoretical implications of assuming that greater inclusion of women's voices will foster greater democratization in the country.

Similarly, the first contribution in the section is a fascinating but theoretically weak study of what the author calls "Mengistulore," referring to the folklore surrounding the personality of Mengistu HaileMariam, as well as the regime of the Derg. Undoubtedly one must agree with the author that oral literary sources are important sites for determining what ordinary citizens, particularly peasants,

feel and think about political processes that often are occurring far outside their control. And several of the examples of couplets and poems the author quotes are powerful testimonies to the use of folklore in Ethiopia to protest political repression. However, the author could have done more in the introduction and conclusion to both situate Ethiopian folklore within the culture of Ethiopian life, and particularly, in providing a theoretical grounding for our understanding of how this folklore functions for peasants. If a particular poem reflects peasant dissatisfaction, what is the meaning of repeating such poems to peasants or average citizens? And what is the contribution of this practice to democratization?

Despite the varied strength of the chapters, which is to be expected, this volume makes a significant contribution to the scholarly assessment of popular participation both in the general sense and in Ethiopia in particular. The editors show an admirable openness to varied approaches for similar questions and this makes for a rich and multi-faceted picture of what democracy "from below" should look like, as well as the extent to which it exists in present-day Ethiopia. And most significantly of all, the authors point us to different strategies for building democracy in the future.

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