

The Ethiopian Parliament

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Historical overview

Ethiopia has a long history of independent statehood, but a formal parliament as an institution was only established under Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1931. At the time, it was not a genuinely representative body but popularly accepted as a benevolent act of imperial reform and a progressive measure to build a centralized and modern state. There were no political parties and candidates for parliament were either largely drawn from the feudal aristocracy or selected for their support of the status quo. It was also around this period that the first written constitution was promulgated to lend modernity to a traditional monarchy whose legitimacy was largely derived from tradition and culture (Clapham, 1969; Perham, 1948).

The functions of the Imperial parliament as a law-making body were limited. Legislative initiative was the monopoly of the Emperor though deputies could ask his permission to deliberate on subjects they suggested. Thus, the Imperial parliament could hardly be characterized as democratic or representative because it was not a freely elected body, and the members, almost all of whom belong to the feudal gentry, were appointed by the monarch as a dispensation of imperial favor (Perham, 1948).

Starting in the mid-1950s, the Imperial regime took some steps aimed at modernizing parliament and the constitution. A harbinger of this initiative was the revised 1955 constitution, which was a small improvement over the 1931 constitution. It introduced universal suffrage allowing the people to elect their parliamentary representatives for the lower house, and also paved the way for a more assertive legislature over the executive and more open and critical debates on political, social and economic issues. However, these measures by themselves did not bring about substantial change in the workings of parliament, and one of the world's oldest monarchies was swept away by a popular revolt and replaced by an oppressive military dictatorship known as the *Dergue* in 1974 (Clapham, 1968).

There was no parliament worthy of the name under the military *Dergue*. Typical of all dictatorships, the group ruled the country through a series of emergency decrees and proclamations. There was no law to define the role of parliament, and legislative-executive relationships and separation of functions in the policymaking process were all non-existent. Most legislative and executive functions were exercised by a self-appointed Standing Committee composed of military people, and structured on a leftist command and rule model. In 1987, the *Dergue* promulgated a constitution that paved the way for an ostensibly civilian rule, and also created a parliament, known then as the *Shengo*, an extremely weak institution to rubberstamp the decisions of a ruling military clique (Meheret, 1997; Halliday & Molyneux, 1983).

In 1991, the *Dergue* was overthrown and was replaced by the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), a coalition of ethnic-based organizations currently ruling the country (Harbeson, 1988).

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The Parliament under the EPRDF

In 1995, the EPRDF, after a national referendum, adopted a constitution that created a parliamentary form of government and declared Ethiopia a federal state. The Ethiopian parliament has two houses: (i) the House of Federation (HoF), and (ii) the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR). The HoF is a 153-member assembly (the upper house) consists of members designated by regional governments representing the different ethnic or nationality groups. It has formal powers only to deal with constitutional issues and ethnic or nationality matters. The HoPR (the lower house) has 546 members, popularly elected *on the basis of universal suffrage and by direct, free, and fair elections held by secret ballot* and is the main legislative body of the country.

Since formally Ethiopia has a cabinet form of government, both houses of parliament are controlled by the ruling party, which also leads the executive branch of government, raising questions about the efficacy of the checks and balances arrangement, particularly given the one-party monopoly of state and government. Obviously, this means that the ruling party passes laws and policies without sufficient debate and often with unanimous consensus. No doubt the absence of a viable opposition and the heavy-handed tactics of the ruling party have contributed to one-party rule and an absence of competitive governance and political process.

Electoral system and Elections: Limitations under the EPRDF

Article 56 of the Ethiopian constitution stipulates that: *a Political Party or a Coalition of Political Parties that has the greatest number of seats in the House of People's Representatives shall form the executive and lead it.* The Amended Electoral Law of Ethiopia, Proclamation no 532/2007, states that a Candidate who received more votes than other Candidates within a Constituency shall be declared the winner (Article 25). Both the Constitution and the amended Electoral law emphasize that the country follows the majority system, under which the one seat in each electoral district is won by the candidate who gets a simple comparable majority of votes in the district. Thus, Ethiopia has adopted the "first-past-the-post" electoral system: a candidate who receives the majority of votes within the electoral district is the winner.

Upon coming to power in the early 1990s, the EPRDF committed itself to parliamentary democracy, including free and competitive elections (held in 1995, 2002, 2005, 2010 and 2015) and a pluralist political order. Despite this, little or no headway has been achieved in instituting multi-party competitive politics because the ruling party has always been the dominant winner in all the elections, often with a landslide. Over the years, this has resulted in the entrenchment of one-party rule, and the absence of any alternative opposition worthy of the name. This undesirable outcome has led to a state of 'shallow democracy' and laid bare the fragility of multi-party competitive politics in Africa's second largest country.

Roles and Features of the Ethiopian Parliament: An overview

Political Roles

The formal functions of the Ethiopian parliament include representing the people in one of the most important institutions of government, scrutinizing the work of the executive, and taking measures where necessary; establishing and organizing different committees and other necessary structures of the House; approving or appointing government officials; and facilitating the conditions for members to meet with the electorate in the respective constituencies. In addition to its law-making function, the HPR approves general economic, social and development policies and strategies as well as fiscal and monetary

policy of the country: and approves and amends the federal budget and levies taxes and duties on revenue sources reserved to the Federal Government. In fulfilling their representational duties, party rules stipulate that parliamentarians must interact with their constituencies at least twice a year so that they can consider voter concerns and preferences in the law and policy making process. These ritual functions, however, have been of little relevance in creating an effectively functioning parliamentary system of government and administration. As a result, the country has to go a long way before 'deep democracy' takes root (Appadurai, 2001).

High representation of women members

Articles 14 and 35 of the Ethiopian Constitution provide for equal rights of men and women. As a country with more than 50% female population, Ethiopia cannot afford to ignore the cause of women, and one of the ways of enhancing their status is fair representation in parliament and different levels of government.

In this regard, there has been some headway in recent years with a significant increase in the proportion of elected women representatives over the past twenty years in the federal legislature as well as in big regional councils. The increasing number of women MPs has been particularly evident during the past five elections conducted under the EPRDF. In the current parliament, [there are 212 women MPs \(38.76 per cent\) out of the 547-members assembly](#) who work vigorously to have enough representation of women in the six permanent standing committees, and actively participate in the debates to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in budgets allocations. While Ethiopia has attained relative success by encouraging women to serve as parliamentarians, however, it needs to be pointed out that the number of women in high government or executive leadership positions is far from desirable (Ashenafi, 2008).

Conclusion

Since WWII, Ethiopia has had three regimes of different persuasions and ideologies, but none of these governments had what could be considered strong, and freely and democratically elected parliaments that served as genuinely representative institutions. Parliament was often dominated by a ruling clique with vested interests or a single party, with multi-party and competitive politics the exception rather than the rule. The political order was authoritarian and top down. Simply put, all the three post-World War II governments commonly shared an unenviable historical legacy of failure to institutionalize a truly parliamentary and democratic form of rule. This puts Ethiopia in the category of countries exercising 'shallow or fragile democracy' – where electing representatives through the ritual of voting is no guarantee that citizens' rights will be fulfilled, and equally important, where the potentials for violence exacerbated by social exclusion and marginalization haunt state and society. Much needs to be done to institutionalize genuine democratic governance and effective parliamentary rule.

References

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