

OPINION

The EU was wrong not to send election observers to Ethiopia



The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has been classified as a terrorist organisation by Ethiopia's parliament (Photo: Paul Kagame)

By **MESFIN TEGENU**

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Last week (Monday, 21 June), Ethiopia held its freest election in the country's history. It was the first general election since 2015 and the first-time multiple parties have stood since 2005.

In total 20 parties had candidates, with encouraging scenes of rallies, street campaigning and TV debates in which opposition parties were allowed to engage for the first time ever.

Holding an election in Ethiopia is an immense task with a multitude of challenges to overcome.

For example, there are more than 80 language groups in the country – and all participated in this election. Praise should go to the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), led by former judge Birtukan Midekssa. Midekssa was once a vocal opposition leader who made real progress in the 2005 election but was subsequently jailed in the crackdown that followed.

When she was finally freed, she moved to the United States, studied at Harvard and returned with a detailed knowledge of the US electoral process, something she has attempted to instil into this election.

She has led the country through an arduous two-year process of consultation, across all opposition parties, via an inclusive forum where all competitive political parties have debated and decided on the rules of the electoral competition.

Despite the intense hard work, it proved too difficult to hold the election in a number of areas, owing to logistical and security challenges. Out of 673 constituencies, 102 had their vote postponed – the majority of which will head to the polls in September, while 38 in Tigray have been postponed indefinitely.

There has been much international focus on the Ethiopian election, for the most part concentrated around the impact it will have on the conflict in Tigray. It's a region which has suffered significantly since the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) launched an insurrection against the Ethiopian government last November, attacking military bases across the north of the country.

Conflict

In response, the government undertook defensive operations to regain control. The conflict has rightly received intense international scrutiny and the result of the election will likely change its future course.

If prime minister Abiy secures a renewed mandate, which looks likely, there will be stronger calls for the international community, particularly the European Union, to engage with the Ethiopian government more constructively than it has recently.

I focus on the EU because for the past few months European decision-makers, following the lead of some US members of congress, have done their utmost to undermine the outcome of the poll before a single vote had even been cast.

EU no-show

Despite an open invitation, the EU failed to send international observers.

The International Republican Institute and National Democratic Institute sent missions to observe, and the African Union sent 120 observers. Yet the EU decided against sending a delegation, despite promises earlier in the year to do so.

On 18 June, EU foreign affairs chief Joseph Borrell released a long-overdue statement welcoming "the public commitment of the Ethiopian government to hold democratic and peaceful elections." Yet actions always speak louder than words, and the EU's decision not to send observers is one that is deeply disappointing.

It seems to me, to analyse how an election has gone fairly, observers play a critical role in reporting back in-depth data and information.

In choosing to avoid sending a mission, the EU is going to rely solely on external knowledge, coming almost completely from international media sources. That simply does not provide the extensive understanding required for the EU to share an informed view of the process and its outcome.

However, we can expect EU will give a view nonetheless and I fear it will be contrary to the reality of what happened on the ground.

It is a mistake for the EU to act so dismissively towards Ethiopia at a time when conflict remains ongoing and a humanitarian crisis is occurring in Tigray.

Forgetting the politics, those living there are our brothers and sisters, and they need support. That support must be facilitated by the government of Ethiopia, with help from the international community. There cannot be any assumed equivalence with the TPLF which, because of its subversive stance, has been classified as a terrorist organisation by the country's parliament.

The election seems to have gone smoothly with limited reports of security issues, and reports of large turnouts at polling stations right across the country.

The African Union's observer team has praised the election, as have ambassadors from Sweden and Denmark.

How the EU, as an institution, reacts will be considered carefully by those in Addis Ababa, and indeed by the Ethiopian diaspora living in Europe and elsewhere.

It is my sincere belief that the EU can play a constructive and diplomatic role in bringing the Tigray conflict to an end, but that will be by working with the democratically-elected government. It won't be by through knee jerk reactions, condemning the country's leadership or pursuing sanctions which only stand to weaken the entire country.

These actions are counterproductive to the EU's interests in the Horn of Africa.

We will shortly find out the election result and if there is a renewed mandate for Abiy it will make this argument even more profound and constructive dialogue even more urgent.

AUTHOR BIO

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