Ethiopia's Pathway to Participatory Democracy: Majoritarian or Proportional Representation Electoral System

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Abstract

The choice of electoral system has a profound effect on the future political life of a country. From 1995-2015, Ethiopia has run five elections in which several multi-party politicians have participated. However, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had been using its knowledge of the electoral systems to promote its own partisan advantage. Currently, the EPRDF controls 100 percent of the seats in the House of People's Representatives and has remained in power for the last two decades. Given that the existing system that has created a mono-party system, it is suggested that Ethiopia gives away to multi-party system that gives equal level field. In short, the policy implication of the study is that Ethiopia experiments, refines, and steadily improve its electoral system and give way to the proportional representation electoral system. Rather following the existing majoritarian system, implementing the proportional representation would make the electoral system in Ethiopia to be inclusive and allow the other smaller parties in the country to maximize their chance of participating in the Ethiopian parliament.

Keywords:

Proportional Representation, Majoritarian Electoral System, Multi-Party System, Optimal

Introduction

The choice of electoral system has a profound effect on the future political life of a country (IDEA, 2005). After the promulgation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1995, Ethiopia declared that its electoral system — the set of rules that specify how voters can express their preference (ballot structure) and how the votes are translated into parliamentarian seats or elect legislature (Aziri, E. and Saliaj, 2013) — would be based on majoritarian or winner–take-all electoral votes. That is, the Constitution and the amended electoral law (Article 25) state that Ethiopia follows the majority system, under which the candidate who receives more votes than any competitors within a constituency is declared the winner (Ethiopian Election, 2016).

From 1995-2015, Ethiopia has run five elections in which several multi-party politicians have participated. However, "the easiest political institution to be manipulated, for good or for bad, is the electoral system" (IDEA, 2005). Given this, there is no reason to not assume that the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) had been using its knowledge of the electoral systems to promote its own partisan advantage. For example, currently, the EPRDF controls 100 percent of the seats in the House of People's Representatives and has remained in power for the last two decades.

Citing the 1994 Constitution that stands for competitive, free, and fair elections (WIPO, 2016), some opposition political parties have shown dissatisfaction with the present electoral system and political process in Ethiopia. The various opposition groups characterize that the way votes have been translated to elect legislatures in Ethiopia for the last two decades were based on vote rigging, intimidation, irregularities, and systematic fraud.

For example, in 2005, four major opposition parties formed as the Coalition for Unity and Democratic or CUD or *Kinijit.* The CUD was composed of: All Ethiopian Unity Party; the Rainbow Ethiopian Movement for Democracy and Social Justice; the Ethiopian Democratic League; and the United Ethiopian Democratic Party (Medhin). Although they won 17 percent (i.e., 89 out of 527) of the seats in the Ethiopian legislature or House of People's Representatives, the CUD members were not willing to assume the legal seats they won.

The CUD members were not willing to take their seats in parliament because they asserted that they were harassed by the EPRDF, the ruling party, during the election process. Due to the massive unrest that occurred in Ethiopia immediately after the election, several CUD members and their sympathizers were arrested for 20 months. However, after the CUD members and some of their sympathizers were willingly to sign an apology letter, promising not to use unconstitutional means for any political aims, their incarceration was reversed and they were released from prison (Addis Fortune, July 18, 2007and Crummey, 2016).

Ethiopia signaled to the entire world that it was experimenting with and transitioning to democracy. However, after 2005, the country started to relapse to an authoritarian style that almost mirrored the Haile Selassie's feudal system. In fact, some characterize the ruling classes' form of government very similar to the military juntas' dictatorial style. The opposition groups, for instance, depicted the outcome of all elections that happened during the EPRDF period as too narrow and a failure to render the democratic space needed for a successful election. Similarly, it was discerned by the Africa Development Bank (2009) that the nominal opposition parties that exist in Ethiopia during the EPRDF regime generally perceive the period with an absence of a level playing political field, such as equal access to the official media, adequate party funding, and limited in giving political space to the opposition parties to solicit votes without fear of intimidation.

Given that the electoral system in Ethiopia was flawed and unconducive for competition, it rendered enough room for the EPRDF to consolidate the electoral competition in 2010 and 2015. For example, the legislature in the House of People's Representatives were not elected directly by the citizens, but instead selected by the EPDRF Party. As wholeheartedly accentuate, some elected members of parliament in Ethiopia felt that they did not have any obligation to the Ethiopian public because they were not required to reflect the will of the citizens. Instead, loyalties and patronage of the members of the parliament rested on their political party.

A case in point is that during the last election in 2015, some of the EPRDF members seldom went to their localities to campaign because their party leaders assured them in advance that they would be elected, provided they fully ascertained their loyalty to the ideological stance

of their party. Given this, it is sad that some of the nominal candidates never cared to listen to the concerns of their constituents. After it was ascertained that the candidate had proven faithful and accountable to their political party, the constituent units were instructed to elect the party nominated cadres because he (she) was the endorsee of the ruling party (Desta, 2016).

Given that the election process has be very ragged, it seems ironic for Ethiopia to declare that the various election process that it has trespassed through the intermittent period have made Ethiopia go through and learn from the democratic process. Actually, now some of the ill-democratic management that Ethiopia had over the years has triggered flashpoints and ignited signs of massive demonstrations and violent social unrest throughout the country. The universal suffrage based on nominal majority system that Ethiopia completed have not attempted to empower women and other minority groups. Thereby, some of the vocal groups of the opposition parties have persuasively debated for other types of egalitarian election systems.

In my article entitled "From Retroactive to Proactive Strategic Management Style: Redressing Widespread Social Unrest in Contemporary Ethiopia," I have forwarded an economic model known as "Employer of Last Resort (ELR)" to resolve the massive youth unemployment that the country is encountering currently. In my second article entitled "Curbing Corruption in Ethiopia: Applying Democratic Autonomy at the Local Level," I have suggested that Ethiopia needs to institute democratic autonomy at the grass root level to mitigating the level of corruption that has engulfed the Ethiopian polity.

Currently, this article 1) reviews the different variations in the existing electoral processes; and 2) attempts to distil some lessons that could be learnt about the actual examples of institutional design in other countries. Concomitant to culture, literacy rate, and embracing simplicity, this article attempts to draw the best electoral process design that could bring about political stability, optimize local representation, and finally promote Ethiopia's autonomous democratic governance.

The remaining sections of this paper are organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the types of electoral systems. Section 3 draws some culturally appropriate policy that could be drawn to strengthen Ethiopia's democratization process. The article is not prescriptive but forwards sets of recommendations that could help Ethiopia's policy makers to make an informed decision and identify future related electoral process that could flourish Ethiopia's sustainable political harmony and stability.

The Types of Democratic Electoral Systems
Elections are the core to the nature of democratic systems because elections can provide the primary means for ensuring that elected governments remain responsive and accountable to their citizens. As put by Aziri and Saliaj (2013), for instrumentalist, elections are a means for getting the right to govern, whereas for functionalist, elections are a means for creating a balance between state and society. Given this, in democratic systems, governments are established to fulfill the will of the citizens. A regime is therefore classified as a democratic if a) there is more than one party competing in elections, and b) both the chief executive and the legislative are elected. For this paper, among the enumerable democratic electoral process that exist globally, only the two conventional divisions of electoral systems: Majoritarian and Proportional Representation (PR), which are heavy used for national

legislative elections throughout the globe, are briefly analyzed to give guidance to Ethiopia's electoral system.

Majoritarian Systems: A majoritarian electoral is a simply way of electing the candidates or parties that receive the most votes in the election process. As noted by Aziri and Saliaj (2013) a worldwide survey found that 91 out of 191 countries use majoritarian systems. Majority is generally equated with democracy. There are two types of majoritarian system; these are 1) absolute majority and 2) plurality systems.

Absolute majority electoral processes are designed to retain the views of the majority. In an absolute majority system, the candidate who receives 50+1 percent of votes from its electoral constituency is granted full power to run the government. Absolute majority fosters few political parties to cluster around one or two types of parties to get votes necessary to win an election. Within the absolute majority systems, if candidate fails to attain 50+1 percent votes, some countries use an *alternative vote (AV).* An alternative vote is candidate centered. Its purpose is to ensure that the winning candidate receives an overall majority of votes. "To win, candidates need an absolute majority of votes. Where no one gets over 50 percent after first preference are counted, then the candidate at the bottom of the pile with the lowest share of the vote is eliminated, and their votes are distributed amongst the other candidates. The process continues until an absolute majority is secured" (Norris, 1997). That is, a *preferential voting system* is used in single-member districts where voters rank some of the candidates. A candidate can win an absolute majority of first-preference votes by amalgamating votes from other candidates who are at the bottom of the poll so that the candidate with the majority of the votes gets immediately elected (Bormann and Golder, 2013).

Plurality or relative majority systems, also known as **'first-past-the-post' (FPTP)** almost always use single-member districts. In this simple system, the candidate with the most votes is regarded as the winner. As stated by Norris (1997), under the first-past-the-post system, "Candidates usually do not need to pass a minimum threshold of votes, nor do they require an absolute majority to be selected, instead all they need is a simple plurality i.e., one more vote than their closest rivals." That is, the voter is presented with a list of candidates, and votes by choosing one, and only one. "The winning candidate is simply the person who wins most votes" (IDEA, 2005). As applied to Africa countries, Molomo (2000), points that "Based on the single-member constituency system, any candidate who gets a mere plurality of the vote stands duly elected as a Member of the Parliament (MP) and the other candidates irrespective of the size of their poll are declared losers, and do not make it to parliament."
Given this, a parliamentary democracy entails to include a simple form of delegation and accountability. In terms of the chain of flow of delegations, parliamentary democracy reflects at least four discrete steps: 1) the voters (who are the holders of original authority) elect their legislative representatives to parliament; 2) the majority of the legislators then choose the head of the government or prime minister to run the country and oversee the executive branch of ministers; 3) the prime minister in turn chooses heads of cabinet and presents them to the legislators for approval; and 4) the heads of departments appoint or hire civil servants to run the day to day operations of their institutions. When analyzed in reverse direction, the chain of accountability scrutinizes or monitors the effective implementation of the chain of delegation that runs from ultimate policy makers to voters.

Though very simple, the domination of the victor is seriously disputed by many countries. For example, in a number of countries in Western Europe, some newly democratized countries, and about 25 percent of the electoral process in Africa, have abandoned the majority electoral process. Instead, they have introduced proportional representation (PR) as a pathway to participatory democracy. Professional representation (PR) encourages higher levels of voter turnout and facilitates better representation of minorities and women to widen the ideological dispersion of the voters (Downs, A.1957, Dow, 2011, Molomo, 2000).

Proportional Representation (PR): A worldwide survey shows that more than 60 of the 191 nations use proportional representation system. In stark contrast to majority democracy, the rationale underpinning the proportional representation (PR) share of the national vote is it "consciously reduces the disparity between a party's share of the national and its share of the parliamentary seats" (IDEA, 2005). In other words, the share focuses on the inclusion of minority voices and is based on a quota system. A quota system "guarantees a party and a seat in particular district. Five different quotas are commonly used" (Bormann and Golder, 2013). It allows the representatives of each community to engage in dialogue, form a shared space, and effectively bargain for their interests, grievances, and aspirations. Proportional representation (PR) adheres to the principle of equal representation of all members of society in the election processes. The most typical features of PR are that it carries multi-member constituencies and believes in equal partnership or accommodation in a democratic process (Molomo, 2000 and Lijphart, 1977).

Stated differently, proportional representation recognizes and promises harmonious relationships to exist among ethnic, religious, or linguistic factions. As aptly put by Lijphart (1977), to be called democratic, a nation must be governed by the existence of 1) grand coalition (the ruling elites of each unit rule in the interest of their constituency); 2) mutual veto (consensus is required rather than majority rule); 3) proportionality (representation based on the population of each unit); or 4) segmental autonomy. Given this, proportional representation brings about stability, the existence of reciprocal relationships between central and local government and citizens, the survival of the power-sharing provisions, and the avoidance of violence.

Specifically, in a proportional electoral system, a small party is likely to be represented by at least one member of parliament rooted in their region and sharing their political views and convictions. The number of seats that a party wins in an election is made to be proportional to the amount of its support it gets among voters. However, Party list may be open as in Norway, Finland, the Netherlands and Italy, in which case voters can express preference for particular candidates within the (Party) List. Or they may be closed as in Israel, Portugal, Spain, and Germany, in which case voters can only select the party, and the political party determines the ranking of candidates (IDEA 2005). For example, in a 5-member district, if "Party A" wins 49% of the vote, it receives two seats and "Party B" with 40% of the vote also receives two seats. and the Independent Candidate listed on the ballot with 11% of the vote is entitled to one seat in the legislative because the candidate has attained more than 10% of the minimum threshold of votes. The advantage of FPTP is that it produces representatives that could represent a certain geographical region. Thus FPTP is praised for being simple and easily applicable to semi-illiterate societies because "A valid vote requires only one mark beside the name or symbol of one candidate. Even if the number of candidates on the ballot paper is large, the count is easy for electoral officials to conduct" (IDEA, 2005).

Comparing Majoritarian and Proportional Representation Electoral Process
To differentiate the majoritarian electoral process from the proportional representation perspective, this article uses ten criteria: 1) Simplicity and Clarity, 2) Measurable, 3) Contextual Relevance, 4) Social Responsibility and Inclusively, 5) Accountability, 6) Legitimacy, 7) Effectiveness, 8) Efficiency, 9) Alleviates Conflict, and 10) Administrative and Financial Sustainability.

Though very traditional, the majoritarian electoral system is very simple. In terms of agreement on issues, the majority system seems more stable and legislators could arrive at a consensus because there could be only very few disagreements on social and governmental issues. More recently, rather than using the 50% plus absolute majority vote, many countries are in the process of adopting plurality-majority (the first-past-the-post) election systems. As shown in Table 1, the proportional representative system is based on a quota system.

While the two systems provide accountability to their voters, the proportional representative electoral system is more effective and inclusive. Since the hallmark of proportional representative is social representation, this system includes minorities, women, and ethnic groups. In other words, proportional representative, whether abiding by a *closed list* (voters only choose political parties and the party deicides per their rank order who is elected into parliament) or *open list* (where voters choose listed candidates), is premised on the assumption that all constituencies must be represented in parliament. As shown in Table 1, proportional representation seems less stable because many parties share power.

In a nutshell, when the majoritarian is distinguished from the proportional representation electoral system, it is obvious that while the majoritarian electoral system provides stability, proportional representation is egalitarian and provides accountability. What clearly distinguishes between the two is that PR allows social representation and empowers a larger group of electorate and this particularly allows the disenfranchised to have influence over government and governmental policy. Finally, proportional representation accords a nation not only legitimacy but also allows it to endure both administrative and financial sustainability.

Table 1: Difference Between Majoritarian and Proportional Electoral System

Electoral System / Indicator	Majoritarian	Proportional Representation
Simplicity and clarity (the process and results are understood by voters and politicians)	Yes	Yes
Measurable	Yes	Yes
Contextual relevance (pays attention and can be made culturally appropriate)	?	Yes
Social responsibility and inclusivity (empowers a larger group of electorate and do the disenfranchised have influence over government and governmental policy)	No	Yes
Accountability (producing electable candidates who would be responsible and answerable to constituency concerns)	Rarely	Yes
Legitimacy (the fairness of the system to give equal chance to every citizen)	No	Yes
Effectiveness (the election outcome is decisive and relevant to add value to)	No	Yes
Produce political stability	Yes	No
Efficiency (increasing voter turn out and avoids wastage of votes)	No	Yes
Alleviates ethnic conflict or social unrest	Yes	No
Sustainable for continuity	No	Yes

Conclusions

After the promulgation of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in 1995, Ethiopia declared that its electoral system — the way votes are translated into parliamentarian seats or elected legislature — would be based on majority/plurality electoral system. In accordance with Article 25 of the Ethiopian Constitution, Ethiopia has run five elections in which several multi-party politicians have participated. The EPRDF has dominated the house of the Ethiopian Federal Council of People's Representatives and has remained in power for the last

two decades. For good or for bad, the easiest political institution that can be manipulated is the electoral system (IDEA, 2005). Therefore, it is possible to assume that over all these years, the Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) might have overused its knowledge of the electoral systems to promote its own partisan advantage.

However, it needs to be ascertained that though EPRDF has been winning most seats in parliament, it does not mean that EPRDF won 100% of the nation's votes. Instead, it needs to be interpreted that the EPRDF might have used its organizational structure to win majority/ plurality votes during the first election process. However, as argued by Norris (1997), the "majoritarian electoral systems, like First-Past-the-Post, systematically exaggerates the parliamentary lead for the party in the first place, with the aim of securing a decisive outcome and government accountability, thereby excluding smaller parties…." Given this type of electoral system that has become predominant in Ethiopia, it is no wander that currently, several Ethiopians and organized political parties have demanded that the electoral process needs to be restructured to accommodate the disenfranchised.

Policy Implications

With the increased expressions of antipathy towards the existing government, the current government seems willing to consider constructive suggestions that might bring tranquility to Ethiopia. As policy implications, it is suggested by this article that instead of becoming dependent on the existing system that has created a mono-party system, Ethiopia must give away to multi-party system that are given equal level field. Thereby, it is the right moment for Ethiopia to experiment, refine, and steadily improve its electoral system and give way to the proportional representation electoral system.

As discussed above, the proportional representation electoral system is inclusive and can allow the other smaller parties to participate in the election system and maximize their chance to participate into the Ethiopian parliament. As narrated by Amy (2005), the basic principles underlying proportional representation (PR) instead of electing one person from each district are: 1) several members are chosen to parliament from multi-member district; 2) legislators are elected in large from multi-member district; 3) each party or independent candidates puts up a list or slate of candidates equal to the number of seats in the districts; and 4) the seats in the multi-member districts are assigned in the proportion of votes received by the various parties or groups running for election.

To start with the proportional representation (PR) electoral system, in Ethiopia, for example, the voting system could start assorting the nearby 700 (i.e., 600 rural and 100 urban) *woredas* into the parliamentarian 547 seats. Then, one seat could represent approximately 1 to 2 *woredas*. Then five candidates could be chosen to represent (depending on their geographic proximity) approximately 6 or 7 *woredas*. Due to the low literacy rate in Ethiopia, it is advisable to use an open form of listing candidates and the party for the voting system (See Figure 1). For example, in a hypothetical five-member district, if the "UNITY Party" wins 40% of the vote, it receives two of the seats, the "ETHIO-DEM" party with 20% of the vote receives one seat, the "GREEN" with 20% receives one seat, and the "Independent Candidate" with 12% is entitled to one seat because the candidate has attained more than 10 percent of the minimum threshold of votes.

Figure 1: Open Ballot System

Official Ballot
VOTING INSTRUCTIONS:

1. You only have ONE Vote 2. Place an **X** in the box next to the candidate for whom you wish to vote. 3. **Your vote counts both for your candidate and your party**									
UNITY		ETHIO-DEM		HIBRET		GREEN		Independent Candidates	
1	Ms. AAA	1	Mr. 111	1	Ms.XXX	1	Mr.666	1	Mr.aaa
2	Mr. BBB	2	Ms. 222	2	Ms.YYY	2	Mr.777	2	Ms.bbb
3	Mr.CCC	3	Ms.333	3	Mr. ZZZ	3	Ms.888	3	Mr. ccc
4	MS. DDD	4	Mr.444	4	Mr. RRR	4	Mr.999	4	Ms.ddd
5	Ms. EEE	5	Mr.555	5	Mr. SSS.	5	Ms.000	5	Ms.eee

Source: Adapted from Amy, Douglas J. (2005). *"How Proportional Representation Election Works." **Behind the Ballot Box: A Citizen's Guide to Voting Systems.***

This kind of division is very simple to administer and can encourage a cordial relationship among the sub-units or *woredas*. Members of the constituency can easily participate to run a coalition government and can require the elected officials to be accountable to the citizens. No vote can be wasted because elections can be held fairly, without restrictions in every locality. As persuasively argued by John Adams, following the proportional representation (PR), the legislative system in Ethiopia could be made to reflect "an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason and act like them" (Pitkin, H. 1967).

Given the massive unrest that has been recorded in current Ethiopia, it is a high time for Ethiopia to rethink and redesign its existing electoral system. The existing majoritarian or "winner-all-take" system is out dated and does not meet the needs of citizens. Voters of minor parties feel that the federal legislatures do not represent them. With the present system, they feel that they would rather not participate in a nominal election system to elect only the existing mono or EPRDF party.

As argued in my previous article (see Desta, 2016), Ethiopia's journey towards autonomous democratic federalism can become a reality if it redesigns its form of federalism and practices predictable and transparent democracy that incorporates adequate checks and balances. To empower its local citizens and speed up its transition to democracy, it is high time that Ethiopia considers using the proportional representation (PR) electoral system. The proportional electoral system allows multiple ballots choices to all Ethiopian citizens. Under this broad electoral spectrum, no Ethiopian who is eligible to vote could be left out. Proportional representation also minimizes the ethnic tensions that have become very rampant in the country. Therefore, with adequate citizens' participation using the proportional electoral system, there is no doubt that Ethiopia would remain stable and could march towards achieving the three pillars (Economic, social, and environmental) of sustainable development.

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