

Post-Election Media Environment in Ethiopia: A Bird's Eye View

By

Abdissa Zerai (PhD)

**A Paper for Presentation at a Consultative Meeting Organized By Ethiopian National
Media Support (NEMS)**

August 04, 2021, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Post-Election Media Environment in Ethiopia: A Bird's Eye View

Introduction

Ethiopia conducted its sixth national election on June 21, 2021 in the midst of enormous political, security, economic, and geopolitical challenges; and the election culminated with a sweeping victory by the Prosperity Party. As it is often stressed, the mass media plays a pivotal role in making the exercise of freedom of expression and information a reality. Media freedom is vital for keeping citizens informed. That is to say that the media inform the public about matters of public interest and act as a watchdog over government. Informing the public and acting as a watchdog are the two aspects of the media that constitute the democratic role of the media.

As such, the media ensure democratic electoral process in either of the following categories: by serving as transparency or watchdog; by serving as a campaign platform; by serving as an open forum for debate and discussion; and by serving as public educator. As the Commonwealth *Election Broadcasting Guidelines* states, “Free and democratic political processes must include elections whose credibility cannot be doubted by any voter, candidate or observer. The delivery of such credibility is very much in the hands of the media.”

It is, thus, fitting to attempt to assess how the Ethiopian media, particularly the mainstream media, has fared in its engagement with the electoral process, which encompasses the *pre-election*, *election*, and *post-election* periods.

As media and politics have constitutive relationships, a sound assessment of media's engagement in the electoral process cannot be made without situating the electoral process within its proper political context. Thus, in this piece, an attempt is made to summarize Ethiopia's political trajectory in the post-EPRDF period so that we would have a better understanding of its interaction with the electoral process, and if this interaction has enabled or constrained the media's engagement in the electoral process.

Since this is a rapid assessment undertaken in a short period, a sophisticated and rigorous methodological approach has not been followed. However, an attempt has been made to conduct brief interviews with *political party representatives*, the *National Electoral Board of Ethiopia*, and an *NGO* engaged in the defense of democracy in Ethiopia. Accordingly, *Prosperity Party (PP)*, *Balderas for Genuine Democracy Party (Balderas)*, *Enat Party*, the

Amhara National Movement (NAMA), Freedom and Equality Party, NEBE, and Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) were approached via phone and/or email. Of these, *Prosperity Party (PP)*, the *Amhara National Movement (NAMA)*, and *Balderas* responded positively to the request, and were interviewed accordingly. Hence, their views have been incorporated in the assessment piece. However, the attempt to solicit views from *NEBE, Enat Party, Freedom and Equality Party, and CARD* was not successful. In addition to the interview inputs, digital archives were accessed on the mainstream media coverage of the electoral process; besides, desktop research was used to collect pertinent information.

The assessment focused mainly on the mainstream broadcast media- state-owned and commercial- due to its dominance and wide reach in the information market. Hence, print media and social media were not included in this piece.

As far as the organization of the piece is concerned, the introduction is followed by the discussion of the overall political context. This is followed by media's engagement with the electoral process where the electoral process is further divided into *pre-election, election, and post-election* periods. This is followed by conclusion, and the piece ends with a few notes on the way forward.

Overview of the Political Context in Post-EPRDF Ethiopia

Being sick and tired of close-to-thirty years of authoritarian rule by the *TPLF*-led *EPRDF*, costly popular uprisings forced the resignation of the then Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn on February 15, 2018 and paved the way for Abiy Ahmed to become the new Prime Minister of Ethiopia on April 02, 2018. A cross-section of the Ethiopian people here in the country and around the world saw the change in a positive light and rallied behind the new government hoping that a new political dispensation would be in the making in Ethiopia. On his part, Abiy promised to overhaul government and enact democratic reforms and thereby create conducive political environment for conducting free, fair and credible election in 2020, whose outcome would serve as a testimony to Ethiopia's transition to a genuinely democratic polity.

Soon after assuming power, Prime Minister Abiy crisscrossed the country and made numerous mesmerizing speeches; held town hall meetings with a cross-section of society; set thousands of prisoners free; traveled to neighboring countries and negotiated with his counterparts the release of thousands of Ethiopian nationals languishing in their prison cells; restored relations with the neighboring Eritrea; and held meetings with Ethiopian community members residing abroad, etc.

In his effort to liberalize the political and communicative spaces, he passed decisions to unblock hundreds of diaspora-based Websites, Blogs, Portals, Satellite TV and Radio channels that had been blocked or jammed by the *EPRDF*. He allowed diaspora-based political dissidents, opposition political parties and exiles to return home and legally operate in the country. He took steps in institutional reforms by appointing Birtukan Mideksa- former archfoe of the *EPRDF*- as the head of the *National Electoral Board of Ethiopia*, assigned Dr. Daniel Bekele, former political dissident and human rights defender, as commissioner of the *Ethiopian Human Rights Commission*, and appointed maeza Ashenafi as the president of the *Supreme Court of Ethiopia*. His administration also embarked on reforming various draconian laws that had been enacted and enforced by the *EPRDF* regime, and carried out commendable reforms in other areas as

well. As a result, some fellow citizens were even tempted to give him a nickname “*The Modern Day Moses of Ethiopia.*”

These series of reforms Abiy’s administration enacted did not go unnoticed by the International community. Appreciative of the positive measures Abiy’s administration took, the international community heaped praise upon him and his administration, and stood behind his administration in providing political, diplomatic and financial support with the view to encouraging his administration to continue its reform endeavor. What is more, the international community bestowed upon him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of the positive steps he already took as well as in anticipation of what he could do in the future. Down the road, however, political ferment started to brew in Abiy’s new coalition, which later challenged the administration in being able to keep the reform momentum going.

Emergence of Cracks in Abiy’s Nascent Administration

At the early stages of the reform process, Abiy dismissed a host of *EPRDF* officials that saw the end of the coalition’s dominance by the *Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)*. Although the major was understandably a blow to the *TPLF*, it was seen by the broader Ethiopian society as a positive measure. The following year, Abiy dissolved the *EPRDF* coalition as a whole, inviting member parties to merge into what became the unified *Prosperity Party (PP)*. The *Prosperity Party* officials have argued that the *EPRDF*’s dissolution would reduce societal fragmentation and bolster democracy in Africa’s second-most populous country, a mosaic of more than 80 ethnic groups.

The Tigrayan elites, however, rejected the idea of merging into *PP*, and retreated to Tigray where the *TPLF* still ruled the regional government until the breakout of war in November 2020. To make matters worse, a prominent reform team member under whose name the reform team was originally known among the public (as *Team Lema*) and who was the former chief administrator of the Oromiya Regional State and the then Defense Minister gave an interview to VOA Afaan Oromo service in which he made clear his position by noting that the dissolution of *EPRDF* and the formation of *PP* was a premature measure and added that the prevailing conditions on the ground were not conducive for such a move. He even went to the extent of

saying that he did not even understand what the so-called *PP* stood for. Thus, the emergence of such serious disagreements within the new reform team set off political ‘*cannibalism*’ within Abiy’s nascent administration.

The Tigray-based *TPLF* elites then started stoking fear among the ethno-nationalist groups by portraying Abiy’s new *PP* as constituted by unionist elements bent on dismantling the multinational federation and thereby bring back a unitary system and reverse the gains that had been achieved so far. The *TPLF*’s narrative caught fire from some elites of the ethno-nationalist camp. Sensing the resonance of its narrative among the ethno-nationalist circle, the *TPLF* organized and hosted series of publicized conferences in Mekelle. These conferences featured various ethno-nationalist elites as speakers, and the deliberations were given due media coverage by the media outlets under the control of the *TPLF* regional government as well as by various digital media outlets that were sympathetic to the cause. Finally, the gathering decided to form what it dubbed as the ***Federalist Front*** and vowed that it would stand as a contending force to Abiy’s *Prosperity Party*.

The *Prosperity Party* saw this as a diabolical scheme hatched by the *TPLF* elites to regain control of the central power which it had lost, and then decided to deploy all necessary political, legal, administrative, and propaganda measures to counter what it saw as the impending threat to its power posed by the *TPLF* and its minions. Abiy’s administration then started to intensify its propaganda campaign demonizing the *TPLF* and its elites, exposing its alleged abuse of power, corruption, mismanagement, etc., during its long tenure in power. *PP* also started accusing the *TPLF* of being behind the instability and security problems being observed in various parts of the country. Thus, it started to crack down on ethno-nationalist elites who joined hands with and were sympathetic to the *TPLF* by harassing them, intimidating them, even refusing to allow them to board flight to Tigray, etc. It also tried to co-opt some ethno-nationalists elites in a bid to splitting and weakening the ***Federalist Front***.

More importantly, Abiy forged what appears to be a tactical alliance with President Isayas Afeworki of Eritrea who is a sworn enemy of the *TPLF*. President Isayas had blamed the *TPLF* elites for its costly and humiliating defeat at the hands of Ethiopian forces during the Ethio-Eritrea border war that took place about 20 years ago. President Isayas blamed the *TPLF* not

only for the costly border war but also for Eritrea's predicament following the war. That is to say, he blamed the *TPLF* for persuading the international community and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD)- Africa' regional body- to effectively isolate Eritrea and his government for more than two decades, contributed to its perception as a pariah state as well as to its stunted development. He wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to exact revenge or settle score against the *TPLF*.

Abiy and Isayas frequently visited each other's country, held various meetings as heads of states, visited important military and security infrastructures of both countries, appeared on national TV together giving statements over a range of bilateral issues of import to both states. What is more, Isayas continued making provocative public comments about the *TPLF* in a manner that threatened the *TPLF* and showed his solidarity with Abiy. He went to the extent of openly employing the infamous phrase "*game over*" in an apparent reference to the end of the *TPLF*. Abiy's government remained silent over such brazen interferences of Isayas in Ethiopia's internal and domestic affairs. It appears that his administration was using Isayas Afeworki as a bogeyman to keep the *TPLF* away from possible misadventures.

The *TPLF* saw this 'unholy marriage' as a serious threat and started accusing Abiy of treason for apparently colluding with Ethiopia's archenemy to threaten one of its own federal sub-units. The *TPLF* used *Abiy-Sayas* alliance on one hand, and what it calls 'the expansionist and irredentist' Amhara forces on the other, to rally the Tigrian people behind the party. Its propaganda machinery framed the coalescence of the triads (*Abiy's military, Amhara forces, and Isayas' military*) as posing an existential threat to the very survival of the Tigrian nation, and called upon all Tigrrians to stick together as one body and defend their nation. In such a manner, the *TPLF* essentially transformed its confrontation with Abiy's administration into a stand-off between the central government (and its allies) and the Tigrian people.

Alongside ratcheting up the war of words, the two camps continued building up their respective armed forces and occasionally engaged in a show-of-force through public display of their armed personnel and weaponry in their possession. Looking at the behavior of the two contending groups, it was no brainer for an astute observer to predict that they were heading for some kind of armed confrontation down the road.

Controversy over the Postponement of the National Election

On the political front, the sixth national election was scheduled to take place in May 2020. However, it was later extended until August 2020 due to the fact that the National Electoral Board would need some more time to sufficiently prepare itself for what appeared to be a monumental task it was entrusted with. In the meantime, Covid-19 pandemic suddenly hit the world. The crisis threw nations off balance and forced them to redirect their focus to addressing it- which necessitated the halting of regular functions. Abiy's administration proposed the postponement of the scheduled election but the proposal triggered constitutional questions. Abiy's administration argued that although the constitution does not say anything about the matter, postponing the general election would not violate the constitution. The only thing needed was constitutional interpretation that takes into account the overall spirit of the constitution. On the other hand, the *TPLF* and some key opposition political parties argued that the election ought to take place as planned, for attempting to postpone it would be unconstitutional since the constitution did not provide for such a measure. Thus, the political class was sharply divided over the constitutionality of postponing the general election.

In order to look into the constitutionality of the proposed postponement, a team of constitutional scholars was set up. After a televised argument and deliberation, the team came to the conclusion that the proposed postponement of the election is constitutional. Thus, in March 2020, the National Electoral Board announced that it would postpone the election by a year.

Still the decision did not sink well with various political groups and personalities. They then accused the governing party of using the pandemic as an excuse to illegally extend its tenure in power, although the government dismissed the allegations. In June 2020, the Addis Ababa-based Balderas for Genuine Democracy- an opposition party- announced that if elections were not held, it would call for protests by October 2020, when Abiy's initial mandate was scheduled to expire. On the other hand, the *TPLF* leadership and other influential opposition politicians such as Jawar Mohammed, Bekele Gerba, Lidetu Ayalew, and others echoed the unconstitutionality of the decision and went on to argue that after early October 2020, there would not be a legitimate government.

The *TPLF* decided to form its own regional Electoral Commission albeit unconstitutional and started preparation to conduct the regional election within the timeframe set in the Constitution regardless of the argument by *NEBE* and the central government that such a move is unconstitutional. Just a week before the *TPLF*'s scheduled regional election, the Ethiopian House of Federation declared the election as "null and void", asserting that the poll was unconstitutional. Anyways, the *TPLF* went ahead with its plan and conducted the controversial election on September 09, 2020; and soon, it declared itself the winner of the regional election.

In the midst of growing political tension, Hachalu Hundessa- a popular musician and activist of ethnic Oromo origin- was murdered on June 29, 2020. Following his murder, violence erupted in various parts of the Oromiya Regional State, claiming scores of innocent lives and inflicting wanton destruction of properties. Balderas party leaders, including Eskinder Nega, were arrested being accused of stirring up the violence that followed Hachalu Hundessa's murder.

What is more, a number of other prominent election candidates and Abiy critics, including the hugely influential Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC) party figures such as Jawar Mohammed and Bekele Gerba and some key figures of the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) were also rounded up and thrown into jail.

The Mekelle-based *TPLF* felt it was under siege surrounded by the Federal forces, the Eritrean Army, and the Amhara forces. The *TPLF* leadership was certain that armed conflict was imminent. It took what it calls 'anticipatory self-defense' by attacking the *North Command*, forcing the Prime Minister to declare what his administration calls 'law enforcement' measure against the *TPLF* in November 2020. The war or rather the 'law enforcement measure' took not more than a mere three weeks before the central government declared victory and announced the end of the operation. Consequently, the central government formed a transitional administration for Tigray in order to run the regional state. However, the retreated and dispersed *TPLF* forces have consistently posed security threat, making the regional state ungovernable.

About eight months after the start of the conflict, the *TPLF* is back in Mekelle following the unilateral declaration of ceasefire by the central government on June 28, 2021 and the subsequent withdrawal of the Federal forces as well as the transition administration to allegedly

give a ‘moment of reflection’ to the people of Tigray. With the *TPLF* vowing to regain control of the territory it claims to have been forcefully taken by the neighboring states, the conflict has once again intensified. As a result, peace and normalcy has eluded the country. As we speak, it seems that we are in the middle of what appears to be a full-fledged civil war.

Again on the electoral front, a few months after the postponement of the general election, the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (*NEBE*) once again announced that the general election would be held on June 05, 2021. A few months after, the Board modified its previous announcement by noting that the sixth general election would be held on June 21, 2021 instead of June 05, 2021. The decision for the postponement of the election was attributed to constraints having to do with logistics and low voter registration.

Once again, the announcement of the date for the sixth general election triggered a heated debate among the political class about the feasibility of conducting such a consequential election in the midst of deteriorating and worsening security conditions across the country where hundreds of thousands of citizens across the country were displaced and hundreds were killed as a result of ethnic and/or religion-based violence and where a substantial swathe of the country was under a no-go zone.

Others went further by arguing that since there is a deep political divide over fundamental issues like historical narratives, the nature of the federal structure, the existing constitution, the place of ethnicity in Ethiopian politics, etc., focusing on the issue of election would not be able to solve Ethiopia’s enduring political schism. What was needed at this time was engaging all stakeholders in serious political dialogue with the view to forging national consensus among relevant actors before anything else. On their part, the *PP* and some opposition parties argued that Ethiopia is faced with serious internal and external challenges. In order to effectively address these challenges, we need to have a government that has legitimacy. The only way such a legitimacy could be ascertained is by conducting democratic election, and a government that comes out of the democratic election would be in a better position to lay a fertile ground for advancing the needed national dialogue. Finally, however, the decision to go ahead with conducting election prevailed without any serious effort to address such political divide.

Hence, one could say that *Ethiopia entered the electoral season in the midst of security, political, and economic challenges that manifest themselves in the preponderance of ‘ethnic clashes, religious tensions, militia attacks, civil unrest, economic hardships,’ and the ongoing conflict in the north.*

Electoral Process and Media’s Engagement

a. Pre-Election Period

What is often called *pre-election* period is constituted by *pre-campaign* period and *pre-voting* period. On the other hand, voter registration period and candidate nomination period (which is sometimes combined with the voter registration period) are part of the *pre-campaign* period. Then, there is, *campaign* period and *campaign silence/blackout* period, which still fall under the *pre-election* period.

Voter Registration Period

Although voter registration is an event undertaken by the *NEBE*, media play a pivotal role as both watchdog and instrument or vehicle of voter education on registration. As voting is citizens’ right, the media must inform the public of this right, the reason for voter registration, and where or how this registration will take place, if or whether where the voters have registered is where they must cast their vote, etc. The media should also scrutinize how the *NEBE* has planned to carry out voter registration; citizens’ awareness of this plan; whether the plan could guarantee citizens’ rights; the soundness of the plan with respect to separating voters into precincts or electoral districts; whether or not there exist interferences in the voter registration process, and whether the *NEBE* provides valid justifications as to why voter registration does not take place (if any) in any particular area, etc. In general, it is the media’s role to act as a mechanism for the prevention and investigation of allegations of violations or malpractice.

A cursory look at the performance of the media on the bases of the above yardsticks indicates that it fared well on the first set of measures (voter education on the ‘how,’ the ‘where’ and the ‘why’ of registration) as it served as a vehicle in conveying information on the issue in a fairly

consistent manner. However, when it comes to the second set of measures (scrutiny of the NEBE voter registration plan), the same could not be said. It is to be recalled that there were serious complaints and allegations from various political parties and candidates about interferences in the voter registration process by political functionaries from the governing party; threats of violence leveled against individuals seeking registration; refusal of registering legitimate voters with the pretext that the cap is full, that the voter should produce such and such paper, that the voter is allegedly from unfavorable political camp, etc. Regardless of such widespread complaints and allegations, there were little or no serious investigations carried out by the media to get to the bottom of the issue and thereby hold accountable the individuals or groups responsible for such acts.

Since candidate nomination is political parties' prerogative, there was little fanfare with this process which would have deserved media's scrutiny as such. However, there were confusions with some candidates who declared that they were not a member of a political party and yet acknowledged that they were running on behalf of so and so party. Although the media would have been instrumental in seeking clarity on the issue, very few media outlets considered it important to even try to gloss over it; the issue was largely ignored by the media.

Campaign Period

Scholarly literatures often point out that one of the principal functions of media during elections is serving as a campaign platform. For instance, political parties and candidates have an explicit right to provide the electorate information regarding their attributes, political agendas, and proposed plans. Although they meet directly with members of the electorate, parties and candidates realize this task largely through campaigns via media. The media is, thus, duty bound in playing an essential role in realizing candidates' right to campaign by, first and most, creating a level playing field. This entails equal access to state broadcasters and other state resources.

According to scholars in the field, uneven playing field is among the most effective, but least analyzed, means of autocratic survival. They go on to argue that democratic competition is undermined less by electoral fraud or repression than by unequal access to state institutions,

resources, and the media. The argument for this is that an uneven playing field is less evident to outside observers than is electoral fraud or repression, but it can have a devastating impact on democratic competition. It is, therefore, of critical importance to democratic electoral processes that all parties and candidates are provided equal access to media for this endeavor.

From the perspectives of experts in the field, another important role of media in electoral campaign is balanced reporting, i.e., ensuring that candidates receive fair coverage. Such professionalism is instrumental in ensuring fair and free elections. In sum, media as a campaign platform ensures that the public is educated in political agenda of all participating parties and candidates equally by guaranteeing parties and candidates equal access to the platform. In light of the aforementioned yardsticks, therefore, this sub-section attempts to overview how the mainstream media fared in its engagement with the electoral campaign process.

According to the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (*NEBE*), the electoral campaign period was slated to be from February 15, 2021- June 16, 2021. For the stated campaign period, the national media regulatory body- the Ethiopian Media Authority (*EMA*) - did a fairly good job of allocating airtime and newspaper columns for all the participating parties and candidates in order to ensure an equitable access to the platforms. According to the Ethiopian Media Authority (*EMA*), for instance, it allocated a total of 830 hours of radio airtime, 576 hours of television airtime, and 830 columns of newspaper spaces for the election campaign.

What is more, a total of 57 media outlets were used for the campaign. With the view to ensuring linguistic diversity, a total of 10 local languages were used in the campaign. With respect to the actual participation of parties and candidates as well as use of the allocated time, the authority noted that 46 political parties and 143 independent, or rather, private candidates have participated and used the allocated time and space to promote their manifestoes. As for the percentage of the actual use of the allocated time and space, the authority's report indicates that 65% of the broadcast airtime and 34.3 % of newspaper space have been used nationwide. The authority acknowledged that national parties fared far better than the regional parties in terms of taking advantage of the allocated airtime and newspaper spaces. This disparity is said to be attributable to the fact that some peripheral regional states do not have their own media outlets.

As far as mediated political debates are concerned, the report indicates that a total of 142 debates on various topics have been conducted by 14 selected media institutions.

Looking at the above aggregate report, one would be inclined to conclude that the authority's effort is commendable. However, aggregate reports often do not tell us much about how each party or candidate fares in relation to their counterparts, and how fair the individual share of the allocation among the contending parties and individuals might have been; as well as what one could make of the overall media sphere. In order to look into this, going beyond the aggregate report and examining what has actually transpired on the ground with respect to equitable access to media, especially that of state media, is of crucial importance.

Uneven access to the media

For any objective observer, the uneven access to state media and party affiliated quasi-commercial media was clearly seen from the start of the campaign period. In what appears to be a carefully planned scheme, the governing party (*PP*) scheduled the inauguration of newly completed projects and the laying of corner stones for the envisaged projects across the country during the electoral campaign period. Officials of the governing party presiding over the ceremony would invariably use the occasions for political campaign purposes promoting their hitherto achievements and what they have planned to achieve in the future, and hence, calling upon the electorate to keep the party in power to deliver more development projects like these.

These project inaugurations and cornerstone laying ceremonies and campaign speeches were often given live coverage by state media as well as by party affiliated quasi-commercial media. These coverages were often repeated and relayed by regional state media outlets for days. However, these media outlets would never raise any critical questions as to the appropriateness of the timing nor would they raise questions about the broken promises as well as about what the governing party failed to deliver in the last three years of its tenure. Through the provision of such skewed access to the governing party, the mainstream media allowed *PP* to capture the eyes and ears of the electorate. On the other hand, they rendered the contending political parties invisible or less visible in the eyes of the general public.

A review of media archives of selected media outlets for the period of six weeks before the election day (from May 1 to June 15, 2021) carried out for this piece yielded over 61 projects

inaugurated and over 30 projects for which cornerstones were laid. On June 13, 2021, featuring the inauguration of the *Meskel Square* project, for instance, the Deputy Mayor of the nation's Capital touted the achievements of the governing party and noted the inauguration of over 2500 such projects thus far just in the Capital alone, and stressed how promise keeper the party has been. The deputy Mayor's statement was carried by the major mainstream media outlets with repeated airings.

Except a representative from the PP, all political party representatives interviewed for this piece complained about *the system support* role which the State media and party affiliated quasi-commercial media outlets played under the guise of project inauguration reporting. Ato Wogderes Tenaw, *PR* expert and candidate for Addis Ababa city Council for Balderas Party, noted how the ruling party used the media for its election campaign in the name of project inauguration and cornerstone laying and how the media were complicit in this scheme. He noted, "Most of our national media outlets were beating the drum at each and every project inauguration and cornerstone laying events. They were acting as more prosperity party than the prosperity party itself" in an apparent reference to the media's collusion with the *PP*.

Wogderes recalled the time the incumbent Premier criticized the number of cornerstones laid during the EPRDF era, and his government's decision to not begin new projects before finalizing the ones that have been started. He noted, "We all remember the Prime Minister once saying they will not have enough time to recollect the already laid cornerstones. However, like his predecessors, he started using the old trick of trying to fool the public in the name of project initiation. And the media, being the right hand of the government, played their role well by serving as the right fooling instrument by covering the projects in a manner that gives all the credit to the governing party"

Ato Tahir Mohammed, Public Relations Head of *NAMA*, also shares Wogderes' observations. To him, coverage of project inaugurations and cornerstone laying has created massive imbalance. "The coverage of inauguration of projects obviously created imbalance in the election campaign. The incumbent enjoyed at least 50 plus election campaigns in the name of inauguration programs. This has been a tactical fraud with the support of institutions including the electoral board and security institutions. Party heads with their full title were delivering messages for even unfinished projects."

The Prosperity Party, however, sees coverage of the inauguration of the projects as simply an advantage of being an incumbent. To the party, the inaugurations were successes of the government and successes should be shared to the public as that could also happen in other times. “It is an international trend, when you become incumbent, you bring your successes to the public. You cannot hide them. This should not be politicized,” noted the party official who wanted to remain anonymous.

Party Debates

Party debates are an important part of the activities carried out during electoral campaign period. Here the media also plays an important role in enabling full participation in elections by allowing the parties and candidates to debate with each other. It was in view of this that the Ethiopian Media Authority (*EMA*) allocated airtime for parties and candidates to debate among themselves. However, the way this was executed leaves us much to be desired. Although the EMA report indicates that a total of 142 debates on various topics have been conducted by 14 selected media institutions, the number of debates and/participation in the debates could have been much better had there been fair and responsible adherence to conduct of the debates.

Parties interviewed for this piece identified at least three major problems with the media’s engagement with the party debates. These include *systemic marginalization of some parties*, *media’s failure to hold the party that repeatedly skipped debates*, and *media’s refusal to conduct the scheduled debates in absence of the PP representatives*. In this regard, Ato Wogderes from Balderas Party, for example, said that his party was systematically marginalized from the debate. “Saying that Balderas is a regional party competing only in Addis Ababa, they [*NEBE*] assigned our party to Addis Media Network (*AMN*). Since *AMN* was not one of the media institutions authorized to carryout party debates, Balderas Party could not challenge the incumbent on critical issues such as inflation, security concerns, infrastructural problems, unequal access to job opportunities and other issues of import to the residents of Addis Ababa. We believe that confining us to *AMN* was deliberately done to prohibit us from challenging the incumbent where less significant regional parties were even given airtime and debating opportunities in federal media institutions.”

Another crucial issue during the debate was related to the ruling party's refusal to take part in scheduled debates. Opposition political parties invariably complained that the PP refused to show up for scheduled debates on numerous occasions, and the media did not bring the issue to the attention of the public and hold the party accountable. By refusing to participate in the scheduled debates, the party was depriving the public of their right to know the position of PP on various issues of import to the public so that they would be able to make informed decisions when voting. In this regard, *EZEMA*, for instance, noted that a party debate on the topic of "Culture and Tourism" was scheduled for June 04, 2021 that was supposed to be hosted by the *EBC*. On the scheduled date, the representatives of all the contending parties arrived on time but the representative of the Prosperity Party failed to show up.

What is more, Prosperity Party also failed to show up for a scheduled debate with *EZEMA* Party on the topic of "International Relations" hosted by Ahadu radio. In the absence of a representative from the PP, the representative from *EZEMA* answered questions fielded by journalists and the audience. Similarly, a representative from the PP was no-show for the scheduled debate with *EZEMA* on the topic of "Economy" while a representative from the latter arrived on time. The debate was supposed to be hosted by the state owned FM Addis 97.1 station.

Furthermore, Architect Yohannes from *EZEMA* accused the PP of irresponsible behavior in skipping over 12 scheduled debates. He said, "It is not the first time the PP did not send a representative for the scheduled debate; this has happened for over 12 times so far. The reason the party gave for all the absence is that they did not receive message. We do not believe this is the problem from the media. We believe the message we all received was sent to them as well. We all feel sad for that. This shows the disrespect they have for contending parties. We want the public to know that we returned without accomplishing anything because of them."

A party representative in the Public Relations office of the Prosperity Party did not deny the fact that the party skipped some scheduled debates although he stressed that it participated in most of the debates. He said, "We have taken part in the debates; there might be some missed debates in line with the relevance of the issue for national unity, debating party's stance for national unity and other important perspectives. We promote brotherhood; we prefer to avoid debates that tend

to take us to extremes of differences. Otherwise, I can say that Prosperity Party has properly used these stages.” If the *PP* stood for brotherhood as it claims in the above statement, the proper platform for exposing the extremity of the contenders in front of the public should have been on the debate stages, not in fleeing from engagement in the scheduled debates. Hence, its justifications for not showing up for the scheduled debates do not seem to hold water.

According to Ato Tahir from *NAMA*, what makes the situation alarming besides the ruling party’s refusal to show up for the scheduled debates was the fact that some media institutions refused to carry out the scheduled debates claiming that they could not conduct the recording in the absence of Prosperity Party debaters regardless of the fact that all the other party representatives were present. For instance, EBC refused to run the debate scheduled for June 04, 2021 on the topic of “Culture and Tourism” which it hosted, on the ground that a representative from the PP did not come. The exact same thing happened on the topic of “Economy” that was hosted by the State owned FM Addis 97.1 station. It canceled the scheduled debate claiming that a representative from the PP was not there.

The above testimonies clearly show that the PP did not adhere to the agreed upon debate rules but cherry picked which debates it should participate in and which debates it should skip. During the electoral campaign, the mainstream media not only failed to expose the behavior of the PP but also they (especially State owned media) exposed their partisanship toward the PP in refusing to conduct the scheduled debates on the ground that a representative from the PP was missing.

b. Election/Voting Period

Experts argue that media presence at polling stations during the voting period is important for carrying out its watchdog role. Its presence is also important in ensuring voters are kept informed of progress of the vote as well as for safeguarding the transparency of the voting process. On the voting day (June 21, 2021), the mainstream media reporters were present at various polling stations, especially those polling stations located in urban areas, transmitting up to date reports on the voting process. However, as the vast majority of the polling stations were located in the rural areas, media presence at these areas would be difficult to realize due to manpower shortages, logistical and security challenges. Thus, it is safe to argue that

ascertaining the transparency of the voting process was beyond the reach of the mainstream media in a large swathe of the country.

What perhaps raises curiosity in relation to the media's engagement during voting is the way it put a positive spin on the long queues, and the long hours it took voters to cast their votes. The media invariably framed the phenomenon in a manner that reflects the commitment of the electorate for the exercise of their democratic right in having a say in deciding who should govern them. In doing so, the media knowingly or unknowingly let the electoral board off the hook since the long queues and the long hours it took to cast the vote were the result of the electoral board's failure in making available more voting centers so that the electorate could cast their votes with more ease and efficiency. The media also seems to have failed to ask critical questions as to how many voters might have returned home without casting their votes frustrated and discouraged by the endless queues observed on the election day. Such one-dimensional thinking might have been due to the pliant nature of the mainstream media.

With the conclusion of the voting process, the media ought to ensure the transparency of the vote counting process with the view to preventing fraud. This watchdog role would continue until the declaration of the final result. In our case, the end of voting was followed by serious complaints about the integrity of the vote counting process with accusations of tampering with the votes, disagreements between those who were executing the election at various polling stations, delays in releasing the outcomes at each precinct etc. However, any serious investigative work aimed at finding truth about the allegations and ensuring the public's right to know the truth was not carried out by the mainstream media. Instead, the media was busy running the narrative as to how the entire election process was peaceful and how the electorate proved the prognosticators wrong.

In the midst of all this, the central government declared a unilateral ceasefire on June 28, 2021 and subsequently withdrew the Federal forces as well as the transition administration of Tigray Regional State to allegedly give a 'moment of reflection' to the people of Tigray. The media then turned its focus almost entirely on the story of the declared ceasefire and troop withdrawal, overshadowing the vote counting and result releasing issues. This being the case, the NEBE announced the official result of the election on July-----2021 --- weeks after the vote casting

process ended- declaring the Prosperity Party the winner by collecting over 94% of the total votes.

Looking at the entire electoral process from start to finish, the performance of the mainstream media leaves us much to be desired. In terms of critically examining the electoral process and exposing the malfeasances, the mainstream media seem to have not lived up to expectations. It is also difficult to say that the media has played an important analytical role that could have enhanced its ability to play the watchdog role. To a large part, it has served as a transmission vehicle without serious effort in analytical work. Its engagement during the electoral process could be said to have been characterized by the ethos of *system support* where it acted for the most part in favor of the governing party.

Looking at the statement made by the chair of the NEBE- Birtukan- on the occasion of releasing the final result of the election corroborates this observation. Birtukan emphatically noted,

State media houses, I would like to politely tell you today that we have been observing you very carefully; you were broadcasting government officials' campaigns day and night as if the microphone could not be taken off your coats while you were reluctant to even broadcast a 10- minute to a 20-minute campaign of opposition parties. This has hugely affected our sense of equitability and fairness. We passed it as if we never observed it knowing that it did not entirely fall within our mandate. However, we would like to stress that the upcoming election will not be treated likewise.

On the positive note, however, the mainstream media did a commendable job, among other things, in taking reasonable care to avoid the use of inflammatory and polarizing language, which might have contributed to preventing election-related violence.

c. Post-Election Period

As literature in the area affirms, media responsibility in an election does not stop with the announcement of the result. Scholars are of the opinion that post-election reporting is a continuing story of importance to the public, and includes reporting on electoral dispute mechanisms and the outcome of related cases, the inauguration of those who are newly elected,

the selection of a new government, and implementation of campaign promises. They go on to argue that post-election reporting is one of the most important elements of election coverage and of political reporting more generally. They stress that reporters in healthy democracies even continue to scrutinize electoral authorities and elected officials through assessing their promises, actions, and policies, as time progresses. In this sub-section, an attempt is made to provide a bird's eye-view of the mainstream media's engagement in the Post-election period.

Following the NEBE's announcement of the final results of the election, the mainstream media did not waste time in framing the post-election narrative as "*Ethiopia has won.*" The frame '*Ethiopia has won*' was initially used by Ato Binalf Andualem, chief of Prosperity Party Secretariat, on June 23, 2021 following the meeting of the executive committee of the party. On the same day, Ato Binalf gave an exclusive interview with ENA in which he publicly used the frame for the first time. This means that the frame originated from the Prosperity Party. Following ENA's interview with Ato Binalf, almost all state media and quasi-commercial media outlets picked up the framing and invariably echoed it day and night on their platforms.

On June 24, 2021, for example, Walta- a party-affiliated quasi-commercial broadcast media-carried a news story with the heading "*Ethiopians are winners of the election*" by quoting Ambassador Dina Mufti, spokesperson at MoFA. The story reads, "He [Ambassador Dina] noted that the Ethiopian people have shown that they are wise enough to understand that their country stands tall beyond temporary wins for parliamentary seats or the lifespan of a political party."

The paradigmatic choice of *Ethiopia has won* in place of the *PP has won* is a strategic choice where such a framing indirectly equates the *PP* with Ethiopia or the Ethiopian people by displacing the *PP*'s electoral victory with the victory of Ethiopia/people of Ethiopia. The media should have raised critical questions such as how the *PP*'s interest could be the same as Ethiopia's interest; if the opposition were the winner, whether that would imply Ethiopia's loss; or whether the narrative would remain the same, etc. However, by uncritically embracing the *PP*'s narrative and thereby echoing the same narrative time and again, the mainstream media shirks its responsibility of being a watchdog and plays a subservient role to power, and in doing so, becomes an instrument of legitimizing the status quo.

Harassment of Dissenting Voices

From the start of the electoral campaign to date (i.e., up to the post-election period), there have been growing disconcerting signs with respect to government-media relations, especially with those with dissenting and critical voices. Recently, journalists of Awlo Media and Ethio-Forum- both of which are digital media with YouTube platform- have been detained. According to the July 08, 2021 report of BBC Amharic, the whereabouts of the detained journalists has not been known. When the report was released, it had been over a week since they were taken into custody, and they have not yet appeared in court.

Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) called upon the Ethiopian government to release the detained journalists and media practitioners without any precondition. The CPJ noted that it has information from reliable sources that police broke into Awlo Media office and detained 12 journalists and media practitioners. It also added that journalists Yayesew Shimles and Abebe Bayu of Ethio-Forum have been detained. A few weeks prior, Abebe Bayu had been beaten and left in a ditch by anonymous attackers. According to the official Facebook page of Ethio-Forum, Abebe was arrested few minutes after the release of CPJ's report denouncing the physical attack on the journalist.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Forum (*EHRF*) has also denounced the detention of the journalists and called for an immediate corrective measure. In a statement released on July 22, 2021, the Forum noted that the whereabouts of the detained journalists still remained unknown. According to Forum, the families of the detainees could not visit them as they didn't know where they detainees were kept. It added that the situation worries Forum on top of its inability to follow-up their situation.”

Prior to the detention of these journalists, Seyoum Teshome, an online media practitioner and activist and Muctarovich Osmanovich, also an activist had been abducted and physically attacked on March 23, 2021. Talking about their abduction and attack, Seyoum disclosed that the attackers used an ambulance to block their car forcefully pulling them out of their own vehicle and loading them on the ambulance. Once in the ambulance, the attackers beat them as the ambulance sped. He believes that the attack was aimed at silencing his critical views on corrupt politicians, elites and mal-administrations.

The suspension of the license of an Online based news magazine *Addis Standard* was another media related incidence that transpired in the post-election period. After the suspended magazine editor publicly disclosed its suspension, the Ethiopian Media Authority (*EMA*) wrote the following on its official Facebook page on July 15, 2021 using “Notice” as its heading:

Ethiopian Media Authority has suspended Addis Standard, an online media registered by the Authority on May 28, 2021. The temporary suspension followed complaints and alarming trends in EMA’s monitoring findings. We have learned that the Media has been a platform to advance the terrorist group's agenda, to the extent of refusing to abide by the decisions of the House of People's Representative: legitimizing a terrorist group as a "Defence Force". This and other related misconducts will be subject to thorough investigation and further actions will be taken.

EMA would like to reaffirm that it is committed to press freedom; promoting and enabling professional and ethical journalism. As a regulatory body EMA would also like to emphasize that freedom comes with responsibility and accountability. We urge all media to respect the rule of law and work responsibly.

Soon after, various concerned international organizations denounced the *EMA*’s measure. Center for Advancement of Rights and Democracy (*CARD*), for example, put out a statement saying that the imprisonment of journalists from Awlo Media and Ethio-Forum and the suspension of the license of *Addis Standard* “undermines the freedom of expression enshrined under article 29 of *FDRE* Constitution in addition to disregarding media freedom adopted in the Media Proclamation1238/13.” *CARD* further expressed its belief that the freedom of the media and the safety of its employees play a key role in the protection of human rights and the building of democracy. *CARD* called for urgent reversal of the action as they are illegal and illegitimate. To *CARD*, the advice of *EMA* to the media about their word choice puts the authority’s impartiality and independence in question.

Sometime before the election day, a new issue of a weekly news magazine known as “Fitih” was impounded on the date of its publication for allegedly carrying material deemed sensitive. But a day or so after its distribution date, the moratorium was lifted and the issue

was eventually made available on the market. The measure was allegedly precipitated by the appearance of prominent PP leaders namely, Prime Minister Abiy Ahammed, Adanech Abebe- Deputy mayor of the nation's Capital-, and Takele Umma, Minister of Mining and Energy, on the front page of the news magazine with a heading that is unfavorable to the aforementioned PP officials. These emerging trends described above, if allowed to continue, would have a chilling effect on the freedom of the press. In fact, the measures are already having an impact in terms of uncertainty and insecurity being felt in the journalistic community.

This as it may, what is interesting is the fact that political party representatives interviewed for this piece invariably backed the government's measure, especially the action taken against journalists of Awlo and Ethio-Forum, regardless of their party affiliations. They argued that the government has the responsibility to maintain rule of law in the nation. Maintaining the rule of law also applies to the media; and the measure that has been taken against Ethio-Forum and Awlo Media would not be any different.

The PR representative from the Prosperity Party noted, "The government should play its role of maintaining law and order. In that effort, we might see similar things. This should be taken seriously only if the government tries to silence the media in the name of maintaining law and order."

A similar view was also expressed by AtoTahir from Balderas Party. Ato Tahir reiterated, "As we criticize the media that show partiality to the government, we should have the same attitude for the media that shows partiality to a certain group. The aforementioned media outlets were purely violating the rules and regulations of the country, and as institutions operating in the country, they should be held accountable for their deeds."

There is no doubt that the media and journalists are not above the law. They should equally be held accountable for a violation of the law. However, the violation the interviewees noted was something related to showing partiality to a certain group.

There seems to be a misunderstanding about how public media and private media operate in a democratic setting. Scholars argue that public media (or state media in our case), by virtue of their source of funding, are a resource for the entire electorate. It is generally accepted that

they should not be politically partisan in their editorial coverage. They stress that public media/state-owned media has an obligation to give voice to a variety of opinions and not to be a propaganda organ for one particular political party. What is more, it has particular obligations to provide civic education, as well as to provide a platform for the different political parties.

In established democracies, use of a public resource for partisan political campaigning carries all the same legal and ethical implications. Experts argue that the existence of clear laws or regulations protecting public media against government interference is justified in the spirit of enabling it to fulfil its expected roles. The private media, however, is held to have slightly different obligations. According to scholars, the obligations of the private media are far fewer compared to that of the public/state media. They go on to argue that the essence of a free media environment is that broadcasters and journalists *are not told what they may or may not say or write*.

According to these scholars, the best guarantee that the variety of political ideas are communicated freely and accurately is often understood to be for the media to be allowed to get on with their job unhampered. But this does not mean that private media have no obligations at all. Professional journalistic standards will demand accurate and balanced reporting, as well as a clear separation of fact and comment. However, holding a certain political or ideological position and advancing it in a manner (peaceful) the private media see fit could hardly constitute as a violation of the law and subject it to prosecution or imprisonment. Thus, as *Awlo media*, *Ethio-Forum*, *Addis Standard*, and *Fitih*, are all private media outlets, their political or ideological position, their choice of words, or their selection of a story angle, etc.,- no matter how much we disagree with it- is hardly sufficient condition to subject them to prosecution.

Political Parties' Contestations of the Electoral Process and/or the Outcome

Another important occurrence that would have serious implications for the media in the post-election period has something to do with opposition political parties' contestations of the electoral process and/or the outcome. Several opposition parties have recently held press conferences or given press releases in which they announced that based on their assessments, the electoral process was flawed and concluded that the electoral outcome is what it is as a result of that, and hence, they are heading to court to contest the outcome. So far, the announcements were greeted with lukewarm by the mainstream media. It would be

interesting to see how the media would engage with such a challenge. Perhaps another media-worthy event would be the upcoming election in early September in areas where the election did not take place on June 21, 2021 due to security and/or other challenges. However, since the outcome of the upcoming election- whatever it might be- could not affect the victory of the incumbent overall, it is not clear how much significance it would be given to by the mainstream media.

The Re-intensification of the Armed Conflict in the North and Its Implications

Finally, what appears to be a more serious challenge to media in this post-election period would perhaps be the re-intensification of the armed conflict in the north between the TPLF forces and the rest, and the deteriorating security and economic situation as well as the unsettling geopolitical environment. Since the reigniting of the armed conflict in the north, the mainstream media has been preoccupied with the mobilization effort and the legitimization of such national mobilization.

The slogan that decorates our TV screens, appears in newspaper front pages, and fills the airwaves is 'saving the nation' by responding to the national call for deployment. The nationalistic and patriotic fever is getting higher by the day. In such difficult time, emotion and sentimentalism takes over reason and rationality. Critical reflection or dissent would easily be seen as unpatriotic, and hence, would become intolerable; the exercise of what Noam Chomsky calls 'thought policing' could become a new normal; groupthink and demagoguery could become the currency of the day. In fear of one's security and livelihood, one might have to either go with the flow or choose to remain mute, and thereby suffer the spiral of silence effect. Unless due care is taken, truth and press freedom could easily become the first casualty in this difficult post-election period.

Conclusion

In this short piece, I have tried to briefly outline the trajectory of the political transition that has ushered in following the fall of the EPRDF in view of providing context for the subsequent quick assessment of the mainstream media's engagement with pre-election, election, and post-election periods. I have argued that the mainstream media did a better job

in serving as a vehicle for voter education as well as in avoiding using inflammatory and polarizing language and thereby contributed to a relatively peaceful conduct of the election.

However, I have also noted that there has been a lack of level playing field in terms of providing the incumbent and the opposition parties equal access to the mainstream (especially state-owned and quasi-commercial) media. The media favored the incumbent in its coverage and framing. It served as an instrument of *system support* and thereby engaged in legitimizing the status quo. The concerns of the opposition parties about irregularities and other pertinent issues were not given due attention to but were often glossed over by the mainstream media.

The long queues and the long hours the electorate had to endure during the voting was portrayed by the mainstream media as the electorates' commitment in exercising their right to have a say in who should govern them. In doing so, it let the NEBE off the hook since the long queues and the long hours the electorate had to endure were attributed to the failure of the NEBE in making available sufficient polling stations.

What is more, PP's election victory was framed as Ethiopia's victory by the PP's leadership in an apparent attempt to couple the PP and Ethiopia, and the mainstream media uncritically adopted the narrative and echoed it in its various platforms.

The post-election period has brought to the surface some disconcerting signs in tolerating dissent and critical viewpoints resulting in harassment, suspension, assault and detention of journalists without any due process. What is more, the reignited armed conflict in the north, the deteriorating security situation and the tense geopolitical environment seem to have ignited nationalistic and patriotic fever where emotion overtakes reason and propaganda and demagoguery seem to be on the rise, and the mainstream media being implicated in this with serious implications for truth and press freedom in this post-election period.

Way Forward

We recognize that there is no particular recommendations that could serve as a panacea in how the media ought to be strengthened in fragile socio-political environment like Ethiopia's. However, a serious analysis of the complex political, economic and social

context of a country would help in designing context-sensitive strategies that could help in strengthening independent media which could contribute to societal development. It is in this view that the following suggestions are forwarded for thinking about as we go forward.

- As discussed in the piece, one of the major problems identified with respect to the mainstream media's engagement with the electoral process is the uneven playing field in terms of access to the media by the political parties. The problem is structural in nature than accidental. Although people often call public media in referring to state-owned media, they are public only in name or form. In reality, however, they are state-owned media that mainly serve the interest of the party in power. In order to ensure this function, loyal political functionaries and/or sympathizers are often assigned as gatekeepers. In such an environment, there is little room for diversity of viewpoints or dissenting views. What is often encouraged directly or indirectly is one dimensional view. Unless this reality is changed, the problem is here to stay with serious implications. What is needed as we go forward is making concerted effort in finding intervention mechanisms to encourage the transformation of the state-owned media into a genuinely public media that is governed by an independent board according to the principles of journalistic integrity and public service provision.
- A similar effort should also be exerted with respect politically-affiliated quasi-commercial media which maintain a symbiotic relationship with political parties. Although these are procedurally and theoretically considered commercial media, substantively and in practice, they are often ideological apparatuses of the parties behind them. Systematic persuasion, education, lobbying work should be thought about in an effort to effect to draw a clean line that separates these media from vested politico-economic interests and enable them to evolve into a truly commercial media.
- It is important to think along the lines of supporting media training programs that cater for journalists as well as members of political parties, which provide education about the ways media can be used in the political arena; the ways media can consolidate a credible political system, as well as trainings that provide skills for journalists to analyze political, economic and social trends.

- It would also be important to find a way to support dialogue by conducting conferences and workshops among international and local actors that looks into the complex ways media is interconnected to broader socio-economic and political development.
- Since the development an open and free media environment requires the presence of a well-functioning government, it is important to consider supporting local efforts geared toward bridging the gap between the government and the media community.
- It is also important to think about supporting research that is committed to examining the role of media in state as well as nation building.
- Extending support to professional journalistic associations that are committed to journalistic integrity and investigative journalism would be another area worthy of exploring.