

LETTERS

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Turning a blind eye to Ethiopia

Since *European Voice's* last article on Ethiopia, the EU Election Observation Mission (EOM) has published its final report on the general elections held in Ethiopia this May. The report, finally published on 8 November, found that "the electoral process fell short of international commitments for elections, notably regarding the transparency of the process and the lack of a level playing-field for all contesting parties".

The conclusion was unsurprising. The electoral results, with 99.6% in favour of the ruling party, speak for themselves. And the Ethiopian government itself clearly expected criticism: it refused to allow the report to be launched in Addis Ababa, causing the launch to be delayed by several months and to be held in Brussels.

For me, it was a shock that the EU had even decided to observe the 2010 ballot, because the previous elections in 2005 had been stolen and political freedoms have been strangled ever since.

And yet, despite the evidence of five years and despite the entirely unrealistic results,

Catherine Ashton, the EU's foreign policy chief, issued a softly worded statement in which she referred to the election as "an important moment in the democratic process" in Ethiopia. This was a statement designed to sustain a 'business as usual' policy, rather than a reflection of political dynamics in Ethiopia.

I led the EU's election observation mission in 2005. The campaign was relatively open, but, once confronted with a landslide victory by the opposition in the capital, the party of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi manipulated the vote count.

In the aftermath of the 2005 poll, more than 200 demonstrators were massacred and thousands were arrested, including virtually all the major opposition leaders (many of whom remained jailed until mid-2007). Waves of people then fled, depriving Ethiopia of real opposition. In 2008, Zenawi re-arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment an opposition leader, Birtukan Mideksa. She was released only in October, after this year's election and after she was nominated for



FREE AND FAIR? Ethiopians queue up to vote in May's general election in Addis Ababa. REUTERS

the European Parliament's Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought 2010.

Critical voices were also silenced by several pieces of legislation before this year's ballot. The 2009 Charities and Societies Proclamation, which Human Rights Watch considers to be more restrictive than similar legislation in Zimbabwe or Russia, resulted in all independent NGOs ceasing human-rights activities or simply closing down. Together with the lack of media freedom, this means that no single credible reporting

source remains on the ground. The Anti-Terrorism Proclamation is another ploy to further restrict fundamental freedoms.

And yet, strikingly, aid to Ethiopia has increased significantly at the same time as its human-rights situation has deteriorated drastically. Despite the blood on his hands, Zenawi was invited to the G8 meeting in Gleneagles in 2005 and to subsequent G8 meetings aimed at fighting poverty, to speak about good governance and sustainable development. Western lead-

ers, it seems, delight in politically correct jargon, and disregard deeds.

Despite its violation of the principles of the Cotonou Agreement with the EU, Ethiopia is now one of the largest beneficiaries of EU support and the second-largest recipient of global aid, after Indonesia and excluding war-affected Iraq and Afghanistan. A recent Human Rights Watch report (see "How Europe contributes to Ethiopia's repression", 21-27 October) describes how EU assistance contributes to political repression, as the government is handing out aid in exchange for party support.

The EU must investigate these extremely serious claims. If the Ethiopian government does not allow it to do so, the EU should suspend budgetary aid and some aid programmes. The EU should, in particular, end the awkward *modus operandi* in which donors allow government-controlled agencies to distribute aid without independent monitoring.

More broadly, the reluctance of the EU to speak out against Zenawi's regime high-

lights the false clash between human rights, development and stability interests.

Western leaders like to present Ethiopia as a success story of development assistance, and trust this 'aid darling' as a partner in the fight against terrorism, portraying it as a crucial actor for stability in the Horn of Africa.

Zenawi's rule is, in fact, a source of regional instability, since he refuses to accept international arbitration on the border dispute with Eritrea. This provides the even more brutal regime of his distant cousin, Issayas Afwerki, with an excuse to meddle and cause trouble anywhere.

By turning a blind eye to gross human-rights violations, fraudulent elections, and the impact of Ethiopian policies on neighbours such as Eritrea and Somalia, the EU is not only misusing taxpayers' money, but supporting an illegitimate status quo, letting down those who fight for justice and democracy, and increasing the potential for internal and regional conflict.

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Plans to deal with mutilation may make the situation worse

In January, *European Voice* published an opinion piece by Jet Bussemaker, the then Dutch state secretary for health, welfare and sport, calling for increased cooperation and a coherent EU-wide policy to tackle the practice of female genital mutilation ("Europe must end the mutilation of its women", 28 January-3 February).

In the months since, the EU institutions have taken some preliminary steps to

tackle this practice, which affects an estimated 8,000 girls and women worldwide each day and puts at risk the well-being of 180,000 girls and women living in Europe each year. But we fear these efforts may not follow the direction needed to protect those who need to be protected and may, instead, do more harm to them.

After four European Parliament resolutions in four years and a recommendation

from the Spanish presidency of the EU this year, the European Commission, with leadership from vice-president Viviane Reding, has promised to take action against female genital mutilation.

In its gender-equality strategy, launched in September, the Commission committed itself to "adopt an EU-wide strategy on combating violence against women that will aim, for instance, at eradicating female genital mutilation

using all appropriate instruments, including criminal law".

We welcome the EU's commitment to an EU-wide strategy to tackle the practice of genital mutilation, in the context of violence against women. However, we are worried that replacing the lack of action with criminalising policies or instruments may drive the practice underground and further endanger girls and women.

The EU needs to ensure that any strategy to tackle female genital mutilation is developed on the basis of research. The Commission's study on harmful traditional practices, released last week, leaves much to the imagination. The comparison of different measures, or lack thereof, to address genital mutilation in the different EU member states is only cursory.

Specific, exemplary prac-

tices in certain EU states, such as the UK, are missing from this study. If this study is anything to go by, a policy developed on its basis will lack the teeth necessary to counter this practice.

To tackle a practice that is deeply entrenched in culture, identity and belief systems, we need a strategy that will focus on prevention and protection, and not only on criminalisation.

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