INTRODUCTION

TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES AND MULTI-PARTY ELECTIONS IN ETHIOPIA

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Introduction

This book addresses the intricate interrelationships between multi-party elections and traditional authorities in Ethiopia, as exemplified by nine case studies from the country’s contested 2005 national and regional elections. Although multi-party elections in Africa have attracted considerable interest in recent years (see Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Nohlen et al. 1999; Villalón and VonDoepp 2005; Lindberg 2006), the role of traditional authorities in elections is severely understudied. This holds particularly true if one considers the fact that over 300 multi-party elections have been held throughout Africa since the ‘third democratisation wave’ reached the continent between the late 1980s and 2008. This volume addresses this lacuna by analysing how clan elders, customary leaders and indigenous political organisations – which we subsume under the broad heading of ‘traditional authorities’ – participated in and fashioned multi-party elections in Ethiopia, Africa’s second most populous nation.

The vast body of scholarly work on democratisation and electioneering in Africa and other parts of the world has different emphases and approaches to understanding the phenomenon, and can be loosely grouped into five different strands of research. One body of work focuses on the structural preconditions for successful or failed democratisation processes (see, for example, Bunce et al. 2009); another

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1 We are indebted to Markus V. Hoehne, Staffan Lindberg, Judith Vorrath and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this introduction.
3 This classification is used purely to illustrate the range of scholarly literature on the topic. One may obviously group research on democratisation and elections into other categories too.
Adherents of this research strand who specialise in the study of democratic transitions are known as transitologists (see Schmitter 1995). The first is dominated by political scientists and economists who study the conditions under which some variant of liberal democracy has gained a foothold in Africa. Their predominant concern lies with the formal aspects of democratic transitions such as electoral codes, political parties, campaigning, judicial reforms or power sharing. For proponents of this research strand democratisation and election studies in Africa have typically concentrated on understanding the capacities and constraints of ‘modern’ governance institutions with reference to their own intrinsic objectives and standards. Democracy is assumed to be a universally shared norm and characteristic of political modernity, which is hoped to produce more participatory, representative and accountable governments in Africa. Consequently, this group of scholars measures democratisation as a function of a country’s ability to produce formal political institutions that are broadly based on universal principles and norms of liberal democracy. Formal institutions are, indisputably, crucial attributes of both established and emergent democracies; and the comprehensive Afrobarometer surveys show that Africans do indeed have similar perceptions of modern democracy as inhabitants of Western countries (Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi 2005). Nevertheless, given their preoccupation with modern state and party politics, this body of work often has little to say about the ‘traditional’ sector or sphere of society. The latter is seldom considered relevant to understanding democratic transitions and is stereotyped as non-political, non-democratic and a relic of the past.

The other approach to the study of democracy in Africa of relevance to the Ethiopia case – and generally represented in this volume – is dominated by anthropologists and historians. They seek to understand contemporary political transitions through the prism of local actors’