

What is Meles really up to?

Meles Zenawi's convoluted doctrine of self-preservation

A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye

Most Ethiopians and many in the international community may agree on the fact that the regime of Ato Mels Zenawi, the current EPRDF prime minister in Ethiopia, is undemocratic, and that he is a dictator. What kind of a dictator he is could be debatable, but the fact remains that he is a dictator.

The existence of dictatorial rules and dictators could be as old as human history itself. Dictatorships and dictators come in different shapes and forms: monarchical, feudal, military, right or left-wing, ethnocratic, etc.; some are "benevolent", others are ruthlessly depriving and oppressive, some are bloody and others are "peaceful", but they are all autocratic with a single individual having unlimited powers at the helm.

Although any country at any given time or by accident of history can have the misfortune of being under dictatorship, chaotic, difficult and desperate political situations, adverse circumstances and societal crises can create a perfect and conducive environment for dictators to usurp power and for dictatorships to flourish and thrive.

There had almost always been dictators in this world. They all have commonalities in their personal behaviors and have similarities in their overall conduct and manner of rule; undemocratic, ruthless, power mongers to the extreme, cowardly, untrusting, suspicious to the verge of paranoia and self-absorbed. Most are sadistic and vilely vindictive. Some are self-assured, competent, daring and staunchly nationalistic with strong convictions whereas others are very cowardly, spineless sellouts, some are unsure of themselves, have self-doubts and suffer from inferiority complexes, some are full of contradictions that they are in constant search of their true selves, and because of that, they have no core values or enduring principles to adhere to and hence are prone to changing their political philosophies so very often.

While some dictators are born out of adverse circumstances, others create situations that would prompt them to come to power. They employ heavy-handedness, create and maintain tense situations and keep the ruled in a state of constant fear and intimidation to perpetuate their stay in power. In our case, not few believe that it is, unfortunately, an amalgam of two dangerous manifestations of a wicked personality with an identity crises compounded by lack of a defined core belief that is combined with an ideology of narrow ethnocentrism that have gotten a suitable home in the person of Meles Zenawi.

Although Ethiopians have known dictatorial and despotic rules since time immemorial, the current one is of a different brand. This is an avowedly ethnocentric regime that is under the full control of a small clique of individuals with intricate family bond that is very determined to stay put at any cost. With Meles Zenawi at the center, members of this group do not see themselves outside of political power; something they have so far managed to maintain. And as any minority rule does, the Meles regime, in order to sustain its misrule, depends on creating and maintaining tension, division, self-doubt, despondency, constant fear and uncertainty among the ruled. To this tiny group of individuals, tolerance of dissent, genuine dialogue and honest engagement with political opponents and building consensus through inclusiveness, etc. are alien concepts. They are adamantly opposed to and perceive contrarian views as too detrimental that whatever they deem necessary is done without the consent of the ruled. For this group, what is vitally important is just clinging to power at all costs - that is the Alfa and Omega of their *raison d'être*.

EPRDF rulers may lookdown upon the Ethiopian people that is being traumatized by their wrong-headed policies and misdeeds. But, whether these ruthless rulers realize it or not, as much as

Ethiopians are held hostage and are deprived of their basic human rights, freedoms and liberties by them, it is these rulers that are the real prisoners in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian people have clear conscience and have no sense of guilt and however legitimately angry they could be, hate is not burning them inside out, and have always kept their heads up despite constant efforts to kneel them down. Hence, because of their hateful, divisive and repressive policies, the rulers fear the people - whose trust, confidence and affection they have willingly lost - more than the other way round.

In a futile but sinister attempt to curb dissent and deny the opposition large following, and in a bold move to complete the process of an unequivocal and formal imposition of one-party system on the country, the ruling party (EPRDF), which controls the whole gamut of political and economic sectors, employs forced recruitment - openly and without any sense of modesty - by pressuring people into political party membership if they wished to get a job or stay employed, have an opportunity to education, obtain and secure business permits, keep or get a plot of land, etc. Through incessant campaign-style barrages of propaganda, the country's population is kept on edge. Taking brutal measures and terrorizing citizens are standard practices aimed at inculcating in people constant fear, a sense of helplessness, loss of self-worth and self-confidence. Sowing seeds of division and creating all kinds of walls of separation among different groups of the population at various levels and brutalizing them are pursued as effective means of assuring an absolute control over and the full subjugation of the ruled.

The May Faces of Meles Zenawi:

It would be uncharacteristic of me personally to dwell on a single person – be it Ato Meles Zenawi or anyone else; let alone demonize the person. It is my belief that demonizing individuals is not only unethical but also unnecessary, and should have no place in our struggle that aims higher and is more important than any single person or even group. Although, I find him to be the leader of the mystifyingly unpatriotic mold, my intent here is not necessarily to focus on the individual. Meles Zenawi is a moving target. And as evidenced by his track record, he has no firm commitment nor does he have a core value system or an enduring core belief, except his exceptional capacity to outwit his opponents in his drive to quench his thirst for power. But, that may not be surprising for someone who is said to be very self-centered and a calculating individual with a survivalist instinct. To come to where he is now, Meles had to constantly change what others thought he might be having as a core belief. Some may wrongly interpret his constant ideological acrobatics as an essential pragmatic move. But, pragmatism, according to Webster's Dictionary is, "a reasonable and logical way of doing things or of thinking about problems that is based on dealing with specific situations instead of on ideas and theories". Hence, if Ato Meles Zenawi's constant "ideological" shift is to be termed pragmatic, it has to do more with his simple but pervasive doctrine of self-preservation than anything benefitting the country and its people. As a master of intrigues and a good tactician, he cleverly bides his time, is highly adaptable, and throughout the course of his political career, never hesitated to take decisive actions or to easily drop whatever he may be thought to have held as a core belief and adopt new ones. No matter how dramatic and at times unthinkable one may find it, Meles Zenawi has no qualms with changing political philosophies and positions whenever he smells danger or an opportunity presents itself that could propel him to the next level or would allow him to stay put. According to accounts of people who knew him well, he appears to be so different to so many different people. As someone with unbounded lust for power, a cunning tactician with a street-smart ability to quickly see things, a master pretender and a skilful actor, he has very easily managed to project his different faces to different people. To his supporters who do not shy away from exalting him, he is a bright, bold and visionary "leader"; to his detractors, fair or not, he is a selfish, condescending narcissist and a bloody murderer who does not seem to deeply and sincerely care about the people, and someone with an apparent split personality characters that is full of contradictions and one that suffers from an ingrained inferiority complex.

We all know who the individuals in the ruling clique are and Mr. Meles has been the face of the group and the regime for almost two decades now. But Meles has many faces. Evidently, Ethiopians have different views of him. As we have seen from exchanges of viewpoints between former founding members of TPLF like Dr. Aregawi Berhe and others surrounding a book recently written about Meles by an individual (who some say is his hireling and one of his cronies) his apparent inexorable rise from a low-level and mediocre TPLF combatant to absolute power as "leader" of the nation confounds many, and continues to be a source of mundane debate. However, to most Ethiopians, how this individual rose to power may be irrelevant, as what they find disconcerting and what concerns them most is what Meles does in his current position as an absolute dictator.

For the majority of Ethiopians, he is unpatriotic, untrustworthy who does not have Ethiopia at heart and one of the most viciously ruthless of dictators that the country has ever known. For some, he is even considered to be an enemy of the country and its people, one that is bent on destroying the country and anything Ethiopian. Some even have a colorful contention that he is sent by an angry and vengeful God to further punish Ethiopians - I have no clue what that could be for. For some of those who are legitimately bitter about the despicable atrocities of the Mengistu era and whose thinking is shrouded by that fateful experience, he is someone who avenged the senseless killing of their loved ones. For others he is just a sharp-tongued demagogue who tries to disguise his true colors by masquerading his heavy-handed brutal dictatorial rule for what it is not; an emerging democracy. As the high priest of political ethnocentrism, for some Ethiopians, especially the disoriented ethno-elite who choose to see all things purely and strictly from an ethnic prism, he is a "savior", an "emancipator" of sorts and one to whom they "owe" their "freedoms". Still for quite many Ethiopians, he remains to be someone full of contradictions, one who embodies multiple-personality characters; a smooth talker who preaches about democracy and as of late even about Ethiopian Renaissance but does quite the opposite that they have a hard time figuring out who he really is.

So, although it is not uncommon for a people of a country to not always have a consensus on the character and persona of their rulers, it is unprecedented in Ethiopian history to have such a gross rift of misunderstanding or so divergent an assessment, extreme opinions and impressions ranging from enemy of the country to an emancipator of their ruler as is on Meles - a man who ruled over the country for so long. But, why is that so and what could be the rationale for his contradictory persona or for people to perceive him as such?

To the chagrin and dismay of Ethiopians at large and may be to the discomfort of his supporters, it could be argued that for the first time in the history of Ethiopian rulers, Meles is the only person who, while given the honor and privilege of leading this great country, is ever accused of being unpatriotic, for being actively engaged in anti-Ethiopian activities and for standing against our national interests. Many Ethiopian leaders definitely had flaws and exhibited weaknesses during their tenure, but those were born out of sheer ignorance, inabilities or limitations and none ever engaged in a deliberate endeavor to undermine the interests of the nation and its people as Meles Zenawi is accused of. They all strove to put their country first and had more ambitions to make their country, bigger and stronger, and above all jealously guarded its independence and sovereignty of their people. That was the legacy each ruler wanted to leave behind and to the best of his/her abilities struggled for.

One may find it unimportant or even irrelevant that one would spend time on these mortal souls. However, it should be recognized that the conduct of the current regime and the overall direction the country is heading are inseparably linked to the small clique of few individuals who have managed to cling to power for so long. They are using their exceptional monopoly of power not to good use as some may wrongly assume or wish, but to fundamentally alter the very foundation of our nation to the extent of endangering its very unity. As such, Meles happens to be one of the most consequential persons to have ever assumed the highest office in Ethiopia. Some former rulers of the country may have taken or perhaps might have been forced to take fateful decisions that possibly could have adverse effects, while others may have failed to take appropriate and timely

measures to benefit the country and ameliorate the lives of their citizens. But no leader of Ethiopia had ever derided the country for what it is or has a disdainful taste for its history, or had taken a calculated decision to systematically weaken it. While leaders like Tewedros, Yohannes, Menilik or Haile-Selassie may have been consequential in living their imprint by taking decisions that altered the nation for the better or had the good intentions and unbounded desires, Meles Zenawi's policies can only be described as the antitheses of the lifetime efforts of those and many other patriotic leaders and that in direct violation of the yearning, wishes and aspirations of Ethiopians. It is, therefore, very important to know who Meles and his comrades-in-crimes really are, understand why one accuses them as such, and more importantly openly debate the danger their continued rule poses to our collective future.

Aside from what each one of us perceives him to be or who we truly believe he is, what are the bases for both his supporters' and detractors' strongly held opinions and impressions of the current ruler? What are or could be this individual's core beliefs? Or does he have any core beliefs or ideals and values he holds dear and is ready to die for? And in a larger context, do we really know who the characters in the ruling clique are, or will that be important? Why does this group currently in power tacitly, directly or indirectly encourage a policy of division that could lead to genocide? Can they change or be influenced to change course and spare the nation the fate of being a failed state? Why are some in the opposition, albeit inadvertently and in a crude reaction to Meles Zenawi's unimaginably perverse and sinister atrocities, embark on similar divisive and short-sighted endeavors that could only be characterized as an incitement to encourage ethnic-based strife? And above all, what responsibility do we have, both as individual Ethiopian citizens and as groups to stop this nonsense and effectuate positive change benefiting all and saving our unity?

Is there any chance for Meles and members of his ruling clique to realize the impending dangers? What concrete measures could they take to make Ethiopians forget the disdainful, reprehensible fateful decisions they have been engaged in and create an environment of unity? Can one be naive enough to even go further and ask if they really realize what the consequences of their policies are, or if they can be redeemed? Do we really have to be seriously bothered about what these mortal souls are doing now as they will sooner or later go?

Some postulate that the bases for Meles Zenawi's and his small clique of "trusted" loyalists' anti-Ethiopia and anti-people egregious and destructive policies to be their lack of love of country and absence of sincere Ethiopian nationalist ambitions and feelings. But, what is the root cause of that glaring absence of love of country which is attributable to those destructive policies; policies that led to decisions so detrimental to the country's unity and the peace and stability of its people, some mounting to acts of treason and those that could lead to ethnic cleansing and genocide? For some of us who opposed Meles Zenawi's misrule from the outset and continue to struggle for justice, equality and unity, our opposition was born out of solid principle of unity of purpose and nothing else. That principle was anchored in a belief that the struggle against injustice in the country, in all its forms and shapes, and for across the board equality of citizens and for the respect of human rights and human dignity had to be in unison, without due regard to and transcending region, religion, ethnicity, gender, etc.

We believed that divisiveness, be it on ethnic or other grounds, could be a diversion that dilutes the struggle and would be to the detriment of our collective future. Conscientious, conscious and progressive Ethiopian nationalists believed that the fight for justice and equality can only be attained through unity that cherishes our diversity. The basis for our opposition to Meles and his likes, therefore, was for their organizing principles and not the individuals involved. Unfortunately, that has been misconstrued by some for being what it is not; that he is opposed simply because he happens to originate from Tgrai. And that convoluted thinking has led some to totally overlook the continued misdeeds of Meles & Co. - misdeeds Tgrians could not and would not escape from - and for some to blindly support him no matter what. That kind of gross misunderstanding and misconception had been truly hurtful to many of us.

But, gradually and especially of late, many, including one time ardent adherents of his ethnocentric ideology and supportive of his repressive regime have come to realize the serious and incalculable damage the Meles regime is perpetrating on Ethiopia and its proud people, potentially leading to societal strife and chaos and putting the country's unity in serious jeopardy. As debatable as it could and should be, I still believe that the very organizing principles of the TPLF had shaped who the leaders, including Meles, are. And that very reason is what shaped the kind of regime we currently have, and not necessarily because the individuals in it happened to be Meles, Sibhat, etc. Although ideological lines could be initiated, started, given shape to, defined and articulated by individual persons, ideologies shape and mold people, not vise-versa.

To be continued....