

What is Meles really up to? Meles Zenawi's doctrine of self-preservation

A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye

Typical of all demagogic dictators with a special chameleonic talent, the PM is said to be all things to all people and is known to often indulge in casuistic reasoning. Call it a bad stroke of luck or an unfortunate misunderstanding, some perceive him to be an incorrigible ethno-nationalist of a deviant nature with an inexplicable hatred for certain groups, especially the Amara, while others consider him to be an Eritrean agent who cares more about Eritrea and is out there to somehow destroy the country. But for others he is a fair-minded person who is highly misunderstood, but someone destined to lead Ethiopia to greatness. How he could be a totally different person to different people at the same time is arguable. One thing that he is indisputably good at, many agree, is that he can project himself as someone who is able to fit into any given environment and make people believe who he truly is not. About two years ago someone I know well and respect and who previously had his own reservations about Meles told me in a surprising tone of admiration how impressed he was by Meles Zenawi's "wide-ranging" knowledge and intellect and considered him to be a learned and a reasonable person; and that after having spent a few private moments with him. Knowing too well how this gentleman (my acquaintance) loved to read and be engaged in stimulating and intellectual conversations, it did not take me long to find out that his new-found favorable impression of Meles was based on his (Meles') citations of some quotes from books that he knew this person definitely had read. One commendable quality that Meles is said to have is that he is a voracious reader. It is widely reported that he has a good selection of books on different subjects. Those books are displayed on separate shelves. Which shelf he seats beside depends on the person or group that is in audience.

Similarly, when a well respected longtime friend of Ethiopia went to visit Meles and confronted him with reports about the killing of innocent citizens who came out to peacefully demonstrate the rigging of the 2005 elections, Meles, in his usual dramatic fashion, was said to be "visibly shaken and surprised", took out a handkerchief, covered his face and "wept", and claimed to have "no personal knowledge of the killings" and "promised" to swiftly find out the truth. When that gentleman left for Ethiopia, he was obviously angry about the killings and was determined to pursue the issue. He left with a sense of concern and bewilderment that a person of the Student Movement era (Meles) would resort to the use of brute force and could have the nerve to give orders to shoot at peacefully demonstrating students. However, with the dose of Meles' crocodile tears, he came back convinced that at least he (Meles) would seriously and impartially investigate the killing by his special forces of innocent citizens.

Meles Zenawi's modus operandi has been consistent with other dictators in history. Thence, he shares most of the qualities and notorieties of other megalomaniac dictators: ruthlessness and brutality, hard work and resourcefulness, malice and over suspiciousness, vanity and shrewdness, pretentiousness and wanton self-adulation, greed and cowardice, unimaginable vindictiveness and viciousness, selfishness and obsessive thirst for power, deceitfulness and rudeness even vulgarity, dishonesty and outright untruthfulness, arrogance and narcissism, etc. But there is one thing I find missing in Meles that all other dictators have; i.e. doubtless, unflinching and unqualified love of country. It is a well known fact that one of the very few admirable qualities that every dictator that ever existed has is unquestionable love of country, some in fact are zealously patriotic and ultra nationalists. We find that quality even in the most reviled, lunatic, vilely and cowardly dictators like Mengistu Haile-Mariam.

Why is that given phenomenon and expected quality from a leader - without due regard to the nature of his regime - so demonstrably missing from Meles? Or, is this an unwarranted suspicion,

an unfair opinion and a wrong impression of him and is there any basis for that kind of claim? If true, what led him to be so?

Unless nationalism or love of country is something one is born with, can people like Meles who are alleged to be unpatriotic acquire it through time? Because he has been at the head of national power for as long as he did and has the opportunity to enjoy the unbounded benefits that come with it, would it be possible for him to shade off any and all ill feelings he might have or is thought to have had towards Ethiopia and Ethiopianess that he, in due course, could have developed Ethiopian nationalist feelings? In my humble opinion, Mr. Meles finds himself sandwiched between and confronted with two fundamentally contradicting beliefs and values; an enduring ethno-nationalism compounded with pseudo-leftist tendencies predicating most of his policies that stood against Ethiopian national interests, and a slowly developing Ethiopian sentiment influenced by and acquired through the positions of responsibility as the head of national government for almost two decades. Some may say that love of country is something ingrained and Meles can in no way abandon his deeply held ethnocentric beliefs and cannot have Ethiopian nationalist feelings at all. But, it would be impossible for anyone not to be influenced and impacted by the all powerful position of the likes of which Mr. Meles has had for so long. It is safe to assume that he is faced with internal contradictions that are difficult to reconcile. Keeping the equilibrium between on one hand staying in national office at the highest level and garnering all the perks associated with it and the responsibility of day-to-day arduous challenges to address the needs of the nation, and on the other holding onto an inherent belief system requiring the organic continuance of ethnocentric policies as a system of governance is quite impossible to sustain. Obviously, there is no way Meles could sustain this difficult balancing act of two diametrically opposed beliefs; sincere Ethiopian nationalist or patriotic feeling and sentiments and an opposing principle. Therefore, sooner than later, he would be forced to choose one over the other. Which one it would be can be anyone's guess. Nonetheless, he cannot play both cards at the same time indefinitely.

One may wistfully be reminded of what has transpired in Ethiopia in the last two decades under Meles' EPRDF. As remarkably durable as bad and fateful decisions are, whatever good Meles Zenawi may have done or whatever good intentions he might have in store would be intrinsically tied to or heavily overshadowed and eclipsed by his policies that left Ethiopia landlocked and his experimentation with ethnic-based Kililization of Ethiopians in the name of federation that divided the country on strictly ethnic lines that forced Ethiopians to grow apart; causing the deterioration of group relations with a potential of societal strife and implosion.

What continues to confound me is the fact that many have opted to blindly support EPRDF's leadership, especially Meles, without any due concern about the regime's dismal and abominable human rights record or his disregard for the national interests of Ethiopia. Sadly, as Ethiopians, we have allowed ourselves to consciously or unconsciously align ourselves into two distinctly parallel camps of blind supporters and adamant opponents where we either blindly and without any question lend our support to Meles and his ruling clique and opt to look away when our citizens human rights are grossly violated and our national interests are compromised or are put in clear jeopardy; or oppose everything and anything done by Meles and his regime without any careful scrutiny of facts and thoughtful consideration to the validity or importance of the matter in question. How, for example, can one, in good conscience, overlook and condone the torture and killing of one's own compatriots, or the ceding of the country's territory to foreign governments, or a deliberate policy that left the country weak and landlocked, etc? Conversely, how can we support or ally ourselves with groups that have stated objectives of seceding from the country or those who want to wage "Jihad" against our people, or those who are actively engaged in acts aimed at destabilizing the country, simply because they happen to oppose the regime?

Needless to say here that, we are doomed if we fail to see things as Ethiopians first and not as party members or as an ethnic group, and look at issues of national importance and matters that affect and directly impact the lives of our compatriots and not necessarily who the players are.

I ask each one of my compatriots who happen to support Meles and his regime to just pose for a moment, take their TPLF/EPRDF hats and the political ethnocentric garb off, try to see outside the box and as impartial Ethiopian citizens and from an Ethiopian nationalist perspective, look very carefully at the following points that have profound impacts and effects on Ethiopia and all Ethiopians, ponder, try to understand and judge for yourselves if "other" Ethiopians have legitimate reasons for opposing Meles Zenawi's or/and his regime's policies and if their accusation of him of disloyalty to the nation is justified.

Would you find it acceptable if anyone group among the opposition did these?

- The unwarranted dissolution of Ethiopian national institutions like The Armed Forces and collectively denied citizenship rights to all who served in WPE (Derg),
- Vigorously campaigned (including writing a letter of plea to the UN by Meles Zenawi in his capacity as president of the “Transitional Government”), argued for and facilitated the illegal secession of Eritrea leaving the country landlocked,
- Arbitrarily and without due regard to history, appropriateness, feasibility, necessity and possible risks and without thorough deliberation and without taking other plausible alternatives into account, restructured the country on strictly linguistic/ethnic lines – a conscious decision considered by many to be tantamount to intentionally planting a time-bomb waiting to explode; resulting in societal strife and wrecking havoc and seriously threatening the country's unity where no group would be unaffected or be immune from,
- Introduced a "constitution" (the first of its kind in the history of any country) that formally dissolved a country into new entities, promulgated secession and transferred sovereignty from the people of Ethiopia as one whole entity to "nations, nationalities and peoples",
- Disparaged Ethiopian national symbol (the flag) and scornfully mocked at Ethiopian legacy and its history,
- Allowed the looting of Ethiopia by Sheabia and gave their killing squads a free hand to kidnap and kill Ethiopian citizens at will,
- Embarked on sinister divisive policies aimed at and resulting in worsening of relations and sowed the seeds of division among Ethiopians,
- Unfairly targeted and mistreated people of certain language groups (especially the Amara, and of late the Oromo),
- Engaged in genocidal mass killings targeting certain ethnic groups like the Annuak,
- Arrogantly and unboundedly have total control over and monopolized all political and economic sectors of the country by (and assumed to benefit) one ethnic-based group,
- Weakened the country's readiness that invited unprovoked aggression by Sheabia,
- Surreptitiously but shamelessly saved the aggressor by ending the war very precipitously - a war that the country was forced to get into in the first place and incomprehensively gave up the military gains that tens of thousands of men and women sacrificed for,
- Revived dead and buried colonial treaties and senselessly signed the so called Algiers Agreement that allowed Esaias Afewerki to get what he lost at the battlefield and is waiting for an opportune moment to comply and handover land that countless died for,
- Allowed, for the first time in the country's history, the deployment of a UN "peace-keeping" force on Ethiopian soil,
- Rigged consecutive elections,
- Arrested en mass and tortured opponents,
- Poisoned and killed political opponents and prisoners,
- Politicized the Orthodox Church, causing its weakening and resulting in division,
- Allowed foreigners and their interests to have unrestricted say and dominance over citizens,

- In clear violation of Articles 12 (1) and 55 (12) of his own constitution, undermined Ethiopian sovereignty and nationalism by secretly agreeing to hand over Ethiopian border lands to the Sudan, (*1)
- In the name of "development", unfairly and unnecessarily displaced citizens and sold and continues to sell millions of acres of fertile land, in secret deals, to foreigners - included among them are historic and avowed enemies of the country (and no official document of the deal is available to the public or even to the rubber stamp parliament and no single cent is ever accounted for from the presumed deal),
- Allowed the importation and utilization of harmful chemicals that could damage the environment and cause cancer and other severe ailment on the population,
- Systematically pit one group against the other and create an environment of constant fear and suspicion on and among the people of Ethiopia,
- Continue to trample upon the rights of citizens and engage in gross human rights violations, etc.

Additionally, would you be willing to endure assumed or real, calculated and intentional ethnic discrimination, ethnic favoritism, dehumanization and humiliation? As Ethiopians, how would you feel and react if every aspect of political and economic life of the country were controlled by a small clique of one ethnic group? How would you feel if the entire higher echelons of the country's Armed Forces, the police, financial institutions, the bureaucracy, media, etc. are arrogantly and without any sense of modesty and human decency and without due regard to merit, are controlled exclusively by the Amara, the Oromo, the Guraghe, the Annuak, etc.? Do you consider the act of exercising and ascertaining an all-round one ethnic dominance over others to be equality? Have you ever thought of the unsustainable nature of such a system and have you pondered what the consequences down the line could and would be and what the possible backlash would and could entail? And above all, have you realized what your share of responsibility in all that is?

If I am not mistaken, the first book written by a member of TPLF politburo is not, as one may expect, about the struggle of TPLF or that of Tgrai. It was a book about Eritrea, titled "*The Eritrean Struggle: From Where to Where?*" This over 300-page-book, justifying Eritrean secession and glorifying their struggle, was written in 1980 by none other than Meles Zenawi. What business does a TPLF leader have to making the issue his priority? Why can anyone be surprised at Meles Zenawi's all out campaign to facilitate the illegal secession of Eritrean and without due regard to Ethiopian national interests, and his subsequent actions that favored Eritrea at the cost of Ethiopia? Do you, dear Meles supporters, blame Ethiopians for their strong sense of suspicion and mistrust about Meles' patriotism or his lack of it? Have you ever asked yourselves if those countless young people who sacrificed their lives fighting against Mengistu died to make Ethiopia landlocked and for Ethiopians everywhere, including in Tgrai, to live in constant fear?

**I At the time, the most unimaginable was happening to Ethiopians. With the knowledge and full accord of the regime, Sudanese army was allowed to march into sovereign Ethiopia areas, evict Ethiopian farmers, destroy their crops, loot whatever they could, burn down twenty-four settlements, destroy large forest area with wild animals that lived there and abduct thirty-four Ethiopian citizens from their own country and land. These Ethiopians were taken by Sudanese forces to the Sudan and imprisoned there. While this fact was openly know and reported, including direct testimonies of those imprisoned Ethiopians in the Sudan in interviews with the VOA and it was widely reported at the time through press releases issued by 'Ethiopian Border Affairs Committee', Meles Zenawi, in bold face and arrogantly, lied to members of his parliament that "no single farmer was ever displaced).*

To be continued....