

## **What is Meles really up to?**

### **Meles Zenawi's doctrine of self-preservation**

*Part III*

*A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye*

The undercurrent of inter-ethnic relations and the overall societal situation in present day Ethiopian can only be characterized as frighteningly volatile and dangerously close to implosion. This situation was created by the current regime's systematic application of divisive policies; policies that have, nonetheless, served the rulers to divide-and-rule Ethiopians and weaken opposition to its misrule. The absence of democracy and deprivation of basic human and political rights of Ethiopians coupled with dire and ever worsening economic conditions have further aggravated this tenuous situation. Where these divisive policies together with a sordidly undemocratic rule and the resultant chronic economic problems could lead Ethiopia and Ethiopians is unfathomable. Unfortunately, TPLF/EPRDF rulers are doing all that in the name of T'grai and ethnic-federalism. No doubt, they are doing it not to help T'grai but to use the great patriotic people of T'grai as a cynically convenient political swathe.

Dividing people, pitting one group against another and buying personal favors and loyalties through political appointments and other means is a major part of the Meles doctrine of self-preservation, nothing else. Besides, as there is nothing he and his close associates and cohorts fear more than the unity of the people, they like to keep it that way so that the prevailing perception of the regime being of and by T'grians continues to linger; in a twisted belief that doing so would keep relations between T'grians and other language/ethnic groups fractured and edgy. That is what ethnic politics begets: more division and deepening suspicion and ever growing acrimony among different groups of the people of a country. They believe that instituting division among different ethnic/language groups and all other social divides through various conduits, including manipulations in the name of "empowering nations, nationalities and peoples", and making all efforts to keep people apart and polarized is the best way to sustain their misrule.

Although that could serve the divisive rulers to stay in power temporarily, such evil designs have serious consequences and lasting negative effects on society at large that could linger far beyond their tenure. Additionally, they know too well that there is nothing easier to massive manipulation with emotional appeals, more enduring and more consequential than ethnic and religion-based differences among people of a country. Dictators come and go. But they are only after their own selfish interests and seldom do dictators die for their country and people. They do not trust the people and, as selfish and as they are, always have their escape routes ready, and when the tide turns, they will not be there for their supporters and have no qualms abandoning them in an instant.

However, many Ethiopians have been asking their T'grian compatriots a familiar question, especially in recent years. And that is: Knowing that the TPLF/EPRDF regime does whatever it does in your name and sustains its hold on power with your tacit, passive or active support, where do you place your share of responsibility in that? Although that kind of question can be seen as dismissive of the fact that the people of T'grai are also victims and many are courageously fighting for justice and unity along with the opposition, unfortunately such perception exists. Such accusations could insinuate and may be easily misconstrued to mean that the people of T'grai support the regime either in their totality or of their own free will. The main culprit for such perceptions is partly what the ruling clique purports to stand for, and partly

the very institutionalization of ethnic-based system of government. The danger of such pervasive perceptions is that it could lead to wholesale condemnation and unfair opinion of guilt by association (ethnic identity). The fact, however, is that, more than anybody else only the people of T'grai know too well what price they had to pay and continue to endure at the hands of TPLF leaders.

For those of us who continue to voice opposition on grounds of principle to politicized ethnicity and political religion is clear; they neither solve societal problems nor usher in democracy. Differences based on politicized religion and politicized ethnicity rage like wild fire and spread like incurable cancer cells that only grow deeper and wider. Ethnic or religion-based politics takes societies backwards festering suspicion, hate, wide-spread fear and constant tension among population groups, often with catastrophic results. What should be clearly understood is that societal conflicts and strife (especially ethnicity and religion-based ones) among or between sectors of a country's population do not start simply because people on each side of the societal divide collectively decide to go to war against one another. Because of their very nature that makes emotional manipulation and mobilization of people into action relatively easier, including sensationalized and irrational ones, ethnic and religion-based strife are always instigated by very few, mostly gutless, cowardly and selfish folk who seek power at the expense of others and at any cost. Maintaining ethnic-based societal divide and hiding behind the name of T'grai is what Meles and his clique have been doing and counting on as a necessary means to staying in power, and want to keep it that way as part of their doctrine of self-preservation. But what should be a real concern to every Ethiopian is the danger such misguided policies entail.

Of course, 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 and beliefs shape and mold people, not vise-versa.

Examining the track record of this tiny group currently at the helm of power gives a proper perspective as to why Ethiopians do not trust these rulers. What current TPLF bosses at the top are doing now may not be new. From what was known before and what is now being disclosed by their one-time close associates and comrades-in-arms, this small clique led by Meles did not, for instance, have the guts to stand up for TPLF combatants - that they had deliberately and consciously decided to send to Eritrea to fight for and die in support of Sheabia's quest for secession - when they were being mistreated by Isaias Afewerki's thugs. Instead, because of what is known to be a "master-servant" kind of subservient relationship they had with EPLF, TPLF leaders acquiesced and never lifted a finger to challenge those Sheabia tormentors. They are said to have gone out of their way to submit to the will and desire of Sheabia bosses by accommodating them and fulfilling whatever was asked of them. Some even accuse them of being incomprehensively subservient by providing critical support of their own initiative. That was evident even after they (Sheabia) "formally" separated from Ethiopia, where they allowed and willingly facilitated Ethiopia to be the virtual colony and the milking cow of Sheabia. That practice was halted, ironically, thanks to Isaias Afewerki's foolhardy decision to start the war. The same reports assert that, in the name of the struggle and the organization, this small clique within TPLF leadership committed horrendous crimes on their combatants and the people of T'grai. They considered T'grai their personal vassal, exercised absolute power without any

sense of accountability, and controlled every aspect of their fighters' life and that of the people of T'grai. To this spineless clique within TPLF leadership, the fighters in particular and the people of T'grai in general were not only used at will, but were expendables.

In the last two decades, it is the people of Ethiopia at large that have taken the place of TPLF fighters and the people of T'grai. What is being perpetrated by this tiny group on Ethiopians throughout the country is something they had been doing to their own fighters and the people of T'grai. Therefore, for them, their absolute control of everything in the country and their use of Ethiopia as their personal piggy bank is considered to be an "entitlement", a "given" and a "normal" exercise that no one has a right to question. But, whence what they grew up doing was in the name of the struggle and the organization (TPLF), what distinguishes their ongoing destructive endeavor is that it is being done in the name of T'grai, giving it an ethnic dimension. Needless to say that it would be utterly unfair to put the blame on all T'graians for TPLF leaders' criminal activities, as they are also the victims.

However, what distinguishes T'graians from non-T'grai supporters of the regime is that, whether the people of T'grai like it or not, the rulers are ruling in the name of T'grai. It is therefore, incumbent upon every Ethiopian, especially those of T'grai extraction who continue to lend their support to this group to be acutely aware of the dangers of overlooking crimes being committed in their name and the consequences of continuing to cuddle with and blindly support dictators – mainly out of meaningless ethnic solidarity. Just like some courageous souls like Tesfaye Atsbeha, Abraha Belai, Teshome Tsegaye Gudo, Yirga Tesfai, Tesfaye Asgedhom, Asgedo G. Selassie, Berhane Ghirmai, Negassi Beyene, Getachew Reda and many, many others who withstood nonsensical accusations by Melesites of being not only the "the enemy" but also unfairly labeled as "traitors", showed their unwavering commitment to one indivisible Ethiopia for so long, many more should join them and say as loud and as clear as possible, "NOT IN MY NAME!", and continue to uphold Ethiopia and Ethiopiawinet above and beyond narrow ethnic affiliation, close ranks and stand openly with the Democratic Alternative to end this carnage and tyranny in Ethiopia for our collective good.

It should be clear that TPLF/EPRDF draws its "support" not only from T'grai, but also from those misguided or selfish and cowardly Wolloyes, Gonderes, Gojames, Aderes, etc. who are at the service of the rulers for temporary material and/or political benefits. These willing accomplices are out there to satiate their selfish interests. But more than what they may be getting from the rulers, they lend a vitally important assistance to the regime by availing themselves to be unequal partners in the system and enabling the regime to claim to be broad-based.

What I ask of anyone who would, nonetheless, opt to continue supporting Meles and his regime and is simply these:

Do you believe the status quo is sustainable? What legacy are you willing to leave to your children and grand children; a lot of money, businesses, plots of land and other amenities that most Ethiopians cannot afford or may not be privileged to have access to but the control of which cannot be guaranteed beyond the regime's stay in power or is only tied with your full and unwavering blind support of the regime? Will you dare to see your country to degenerate and become another Ruanda? Although you may be good enough for them as long as you support them to stay in power; have you realized that Meles and the small clique of TPLF leaders will not die for you, and that being T'grawi alone or EPRDF member will not spare you from their irrational fury as they will not hesitate to turn against you in an instant if you are not willing to support their bad habits and be accessory to their hold on to power until the end? As what matters to them most is power, not you; what will you do when they abandon you at the blink of

the eye? How long can you do that and be directly responsible for the misery of your own compatriots? You can see what is being done in your name and to what extent this tiny group is ready to go just to stay in power. But, rest assured that they will not be there if and when, there is a societal backlash. For them, using people at will for their own selfish end is as normal as juggling pebbles in Gebeta game; and people are not only used as tools, but are expendable.

Won't you prefer to leave a legacy where the cycle of tyranny is broken and justice and equality reigned supreme in your country that you can proudly say to your children that you did your share of responsibility to get there? If that is so, the time to say "NOT IN MY NAME!" is now, not tomorrow, not next year.

In the final analysis, as citizens and as human beings of the twenty-first century, it is not Meles and TPLF leadership, nor what materiel benefits or political positions you may currently have (although you may owe it to your association with or political affiliation to them), but the country and the people of Ethiopia, of which you are an integral part, your conscious, your children's future and your legacy that should matter, weigh and count more. You know that whatever you may have is totally at the mercy of Meles, and you can be out of any political position no matter how highly placed you may think you are or penniless in an instant if he desired it so, or when they are no more in power. Your best guarantee for your personal safety, peace and prosperity and that of your children's is not TPLF, EPRDF or your respective ethnic affiliation, but Ethiopiawinet and a united Ethiopia.

On a grand scheme of things, can we, on both sides of the political spectrum, leave out the organizations and the individuals who lead them for a moment and instead see things from a responsible citizen's perspective and focus on issues vitally important to the future of the country and our people as a whole? It is a fact that most of our issues are there not necessarily because of those organizations and their leaders, but despite them, but solutions to them require the cooperation of all Ethiopians. And our unity is the only best guarantee for our success, collective security, social progress and economic development. Can we see that as our collective national calling? That is the only way out; not ethic Bantustanization! But, understandably, we may find it extremely difficult to do that under the prevailing circumstances; simply because we are already in our separate boxes and the current rulers have a lot to do in creating and maintaining that environment, for that helps to sustain their misrule. I believe that not only the regime but the rest of us, each one of us in our own way, have contributed for that environment to exist. We need to take our share of responsibility to come out of this morass.

Nonetheless, if there is one phenomenon that separates Ethiopians who oppose the current regime and its leaders and their supporters is simply this: the former use a country-wide Ethiopian yardstick and perspective by which the regime, especially the leaders are measured, and nothing else – not who they are or where they come from but what they do; while the latter, be it for a false sense of security or blinded by other temporary benefits, use mainly ethnicity and organizational affinity and affiliation as their yardstick to judge the behavior and conduct of the regime and its leaders - both of which are very limited in scope that shroud anyone's thinking and consequently influence them to overlook the rulers' mistakes and misdeeds regardless of their egregious nature.

Dictators who are not lucky or wise enough to see the writing on the wall and who fail to allow real and timely reforms end up being overthrown violently. Some may have the chance to escape with their immediate family members to temporary safety, leaving their supporters to bear the brunt of the people's fury. Could the fate of Meles be any different? As a supporter of his regime, what will be your role and where do you see your place to be in that eventuality?

*Continues in Part IV....*