

What is Meles really up to?

Meles Zenawi's doctrine of self-preservation

Part IV

A personal opinion: By Ayal-Sew Dessye

The regime's relentless effort at building all imaginable walls of separation and driving a wedge among opposition groups and between them and the Ethiopian people and among different sectors of society for the sole purpose of sustaining the ruler's unsustainable grip on power is further compounded by the continued gross misunderstanding of Meles Zenawi's constant manipulative moves and divisive policies as we have seen in recent months alone; be it the release of Judge Birtukan, the cabinet "reshuffle", the "argument" with Egypt over the Nile waters, the handing over of Ethiopian farm lands to foreigners, and the deafening Nazi-era Joseph Goebbels type propaganda about "transformation" and of late about 'federalism', etc.

First, cynical and sinister policy: The release of Judge Birtukan Mideqssa: Her release is, as was her unjust incarceration, political, pure and simple. We know Judge Birtukan was and remains to be an innocent victim. We also know that Meles and his cronies have no bounds to their viciousness and cruelty, and as cowardly as they are, they proved to the whole wide world that they are willing and able to do anything and everything to cling to power as that is what they wrongly believe would guarantee their political as well as their personal survival and safety. Ethiopians everywhere and the world community at large witnessed with trepidation the otherwise good news of the release from prison of Judge Birtukan Mideqssa. Although Ethiopians rejoiced her release, people could have differing views on her release. No doubt most of the regime's supporters, who knew deep down that she was innocent and that her continued suffering in jail was indefensible, are clearly relieved that she is out of prison. That sentiment was as much for her freedom as it was a respite for them as it relieved them from defending the indefensible. Her release set them, and above all Meles Zenawi free. Nonetheless, hardcore Melesites continued to make fool of themselves by echoing their master's line in attempting to project her release as a "benevolent" act of the regime and further present it as a testament to the "wisdom" of their shame-proof leader.

What made this moment bittersweet, though, are the undeniable facts surrounding as much to this peaceful freedom fighter's illegal and illegitimate arrest under trumped up charges as to the devilishly sadistic nature of her release. True, Ethiopians everywhere and peace and freedom loving people of the world are happy to see Judge Birtukan out of jail; albeit a transition from a solitary confinement to a larger prison called Ethiopia. Nonetheless, her release from prison should be welcomed.

Second, "double-digit" growth: We have come to be accustomed to a shamefully orchestrated non-stop propaganda of the regime about the assumed "double-digit economic development". As this bogus assertion is refuted by reputed professionals and scholars like Dr. Seid Hassan and others, I will not go into detail. But the regime's growth and development narrative is an empty political rhetoric. Claiming a "double-digit" economic growth in a country where 80% of the economic activity - comprising over 60% of its exports - is agriculture-based, and the means of production, in this case land, is under the total control of the regime (stifling open competition and innovation) and where it ranks 98th out of 102 countries in Human Poverty Index and 169th out of 177 countries in Human Development Index, where only a few that are directly associated and affiliated with the rulers are getting obscenely rich while the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians are ever getting wretchedly poor and millions go hungry day after day, etc., is inherently sickening and profoundly insulting.

What is clear is that, there is a semblance of economic activity mainly in the construction sector that gives the casual observer the wrong sense of economic growth. What the current rulers and their supporters forget is the fact that they have so far received many, many times more than the combined amount of aid and grant monies that all prior Ethiopian governments were able to get. Moreover, unlike the governments of the Derg and Emperor Haile-Selassie who run war economies and with millions that went to subsidize Eritrea, the regime of Meles Zenawi is in a relatively much better position to focus on

economic development. Showcasing economic activity is one aspect of getting continued assistance from donor countries. Additionally, as EPRDF rulers exercise full control of all aspects of the country's economic life, they have a vested interest and a greater stake in any developmental activity. But, no matter how much incessant propaganda the government is engaged in, there is no proof supported by facts that attests to the validity of their claim and no discernible improvement in the lives of the overwhelming majority of Ethiopians is to be seen. If anything, we only find wide spread poverty, destituteness and desperation.

In stark contrast to the reality on the ground and the dire economic problems Ethiopians are forced to endure, we hear of promises being made by EPRDF authorities, from the PM down to political cadres, about good days ahead. There is nothing wrong about optimistic outlooks, especially coming from people with responsibilities of running the country. That is a good thing but only if they are to be believed. The problem with the PM and his regime is one of credibility. A nation should be inspired to think and act as one and indivisible if any optimism about a country's future coming from government officials is to be believed. But, the PM has a large credibility gap in that regard. And the source of that mistrust is none other than Meles Zenawi's twisted belief and divisive policies that do not see Ethiopians as one people with not only a shared history but also an unbreakable bond, inseparable destiny and shared future.

As I stated earlier, because of the PM and his regime's policies, Ethiopians are divided on ethnic lines, without their freely and democratically expressed consent or desire, forcing them to think not as individual Ethiopian citizens first but as ethnic groups. And as a divided people under any pretext could not aspire to have an assured stability and a durable peace – a quintessential prerequisite for any meaningful and sustainable development, promises of “double-digit economic growth” is hollow. Currently, we may see enclaves of development here and there scattered around the country and mainly in cities. Some may cite these disjointed activities, and may even have the audacity to showcase the privileged few as proof of economic growth and development in the country. But what I am talking about here is a nationwide, systemic and sustainable development and growth. Only in countries where people are free and united, have trust and confidence in their government, where there is fairness and level playing field for competition can there be a sustainable economic growth and development of significance that could benefit the country's citizens as a whole. Sound economic development in a unified country helps to further solidify and perfects people's unity. But, without that sense of oneness among all sectors of society and population groups of the country, and devoid of an equitable system, those "development" projects could be a source of sectarian friction instead. It is from that angle and from that perspective that I have a problem with any talk of meaningful "development" in current day Ethiopia. Besides, we all know who benefits from the on-going construction projects. From the land sale to permits, from contractors and sub-contractors to building material sales, etc. are all under the tight control of and primarily benefitting TPLF leaders and their associates. Optimism devoid of a national perspective and meaning is illusory and grossly misleading. What is not doubtful is the fact that Ethiopia can be an economically developed country in a relatively short period of time if its people are given the chance.

Third, the Nile Waters: I don't think anyone would have qualms with official pronouncements of Mr. Meles on some issues including the use of the Nile waters or the feel-good claim about giving priority to making Ethiopia self-sufficient and able to feed itself. This is what most of us in the democratic opposition have been saying all along. Eight years ago UEDF, both in its National Political Program and Alternative National Economic Policy articulated its vision and promised that it was determined to making Ethiopia self-sufficient in feeding itself in five to maximum ten years. ([UEDF, Alternative National Economic Policy.pdf](#), [UEDF, Alternative National Political Program.pdf](#)).

What should be clear to all is that food security to Ethiopia is not only a moral imperative but also a national security issue. It, in fact, is the single most important issue that is at the front and center of any economic development, societal transformation including good governance with implications directly tied to the peace and wellbeing of the people and the country's stability and unity. Evidently, hungry people in a despicably dehumanizing and degrading state of poverty who are forced to rely on the regime's shameless dependence on begged food from foreign donors for their mere survival, are prone to lose not only their sovereignty, but in a more fundamental and profound way their human dignity. Therefore, any

effort aimed at addressing the central issue of food security has to be welcomed. India and China are good examples. These countries would not have attained the current economic development and technological advances had they not been able to tackle the issue of food security first and foremost. Putting up buildings in urban areas alone – most of which are empty and the soundness of their very construction and structure very much in question - and boasting about economic development is very simplistic, irresponsible and foolhardy, pure and simple.

From a distance, on the surface and for anyone who does not know the true nature of the government and the ones who do not understand or do not care about the agony of the people, Ethiopia today may look like what China was some twenty-five to thirty years ago. But most of the activities come at a heavy and unnecessary price to society. Obviously, the ruling clique and their foreign collaborators and local cronies greatly and in many, many ways benefit from this show. But, one sector, the construction of roads and especially dams is, in principle, a positive development that needs to be supported and has to continue, with, of course, the full knowledge and participation of local populations and based on sound and through feasibility studies. However, EPRDF's propaganda of "double-digit economic growth" is not only unrealistic but is aimed at hoodwinking foreign investors and fooling Ethiopians to hope for something unrealizable. Additionally it could be argued that it is premised on the wrong assumption that needed political reforms and democratization could be hushed if the economy grows. That, of course, belies the fact that people denied of their basic rights could not be satisfied with and cannot continue to endure injustices and humiliation for an economic development in name only. Moreover, as all economic sectors in the country are under the total control of and to the benefit of the ruling clique, the Ethiopian people at large know too well that gaining their freedoms, full human and democratic rights is paramount. And as that it is the only guarantees for any meaningful economic development that they can benefit from, Ethiopians want to get their rights and freedoms first and foremost.

Nonetheless, the effort at convincing almost all riparian states except Egypt and Sudan to adopt a new formal agreement among themselves that is aimed at revisiting, rectifying and undoing the unjust colonial treaty of 1929 that gave full control of the Nile waters to the two countries (Egypt and Sudan) is a good start. Of course, adding insult to injury, that so called treaty was further strengthened, upon Egypt's independence in 1959, with added stipulation that required "all Nile Basin Countries to secure Cairo's approval for any project that involved Nile water. Whilst Ethiopia contributes over 86% of the Nile waters, literally giving life to those countries, it has been a standard practice of Egypt to block and make sure that Ethiopia never got any loans from any international institution or government to be used on any water development projects like building dams anywhere in the country, especially over the Nile and its tributaries. As sad as that is, even countries otherwise considered to be friends of Ethiopia vigorously enforced that policy and blockaded any effort by Ethiopia to secure funds for water development projects; thus depriving it the chance to safeguard food security and feed its people and attain economic development. Successive Egyptian governments at least since early 1800's have attempted to make the Nile 'an Egyptian river' and some engaged in naked military campaigns (1875 and 1876, for example), albeit without success, to have direct control of the sources of mighty river.

The instigation at various times of religion-based societal strife and the sponsorship and active support of anti-Ethiopian and anti-unity forces mainly by Egypt but also by Sudan has been well established. And that continued endeavor, obviously, is aimed at causing permanent instability in the country where the central government of the day is forced to be bogged down in interminable internal conflicts; exhausting energy and the nation's meager and valuable resources on unnecessary wars. That age-old policy of enmity, which, in effect, has condemned Ethiopia to continued poverty and recurring food shortages and deprived it internal peace should not stand, and it should be the duty and responsibility of any Ethiopian government worth the name, and Ethiopians of all political persuasions to decisively and unequivocally undo this unjustifiable endeavor on the part of mainly Egypt and Sudan and their backers. Successive Ethiopian governments have failed to make proper use of the abundant water resources the country is blessed with. For Ethiopia to be unable to feed itself and be dependent on foreign food handouts while its rivers flow beyond its borders to give life to others is maddening, incomprehensible and absolutely unacceptable. At different times of our history, Ethiopian leaders like Yukuno-Amlak, Dawit, Amde-

Tsion, etc. used the Nile as a bargaining chip to compel and get concessions out of Egypt, and some were determined to build dams for irrigation and since the beginning of the last century for hydro-electric power purposes.

Given the ever diminishing water supplies coupled with the explosion of population growth in our region, control of water resources is vitally important and very contentious with serious geopolitical, economic and social ramifications. Therefore, the fact that The Nile Basin Initiative was finally formed by all riparian states (Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ruanda, Sudan and Egypt) to look into better ways to collectively address issues relating to the use and development of the Nile waters, is a good start as it could give way and possibly enable those countries to reexamine and redress past unacceptable colonial arrangements and find peaceful solutions benefitting them all. Last May, in an effort to addressing the issue of equitable water-sharing, five of those upstream countries, Ethiopia, Uganda, Tanzania, Ruanda and Kenya, formed the River Nile Basin Cooperative Framework and ratified the agreement. They have asked the rest to join with them and decided to give them one year to join them before implementing it. The prospect for strengthening the hands of the upstream countries to stay the course and compel Egypt and Sudan to finally accept fairness is a little better with South Sudan becoming a new independent country.

The question of their ability to put the decision into practice aside, the fact that, for the first time ever, upstream states had the wisdom and political courage to come together and collectively challenge this lopsided and totally unacceptable colonial arrangement in a unified manner, and the decision to give Egypt and Sudan one year to revisit the issue is a wise move that is strategically important and tactically correct. And Ethiopia's leading role in both efforts is very commendable. But, official pronouncements of good intentions either out of sinister motives aimed at tactical and short-term political gains or vainly pompous posturing could only amount to a diabolical endeavor and a dangerous undertaking. If such are the motives, in fact it could result in further complicating the already dire situation as that could give a false pretext and a lame excuse to enemies of the country and entice them to intensify their anti-Ethiopian covert and overt activities. Any official pronouncement from any person of power, group or institution should be well-thought after, deliberative and something that can produce tangible results benefitting the country and its people as a whole. This can only be done if there is a sincere desire and psychological readiness to go all the way to put them into practice. And this requires a unified country that is led by leaders with foresight, proven fortitude and unquestionable patriotism.

Although tactical political maneuverings could not be ruled out in what Meles does in his dealings with foreign powers, the somewhat incomprehensively cozy relations Meles is believed to have with Egypt - his official heated rhetoric notwithstanding - may confound many. Well, the same could be true with Sheabia's Eritrea. Whatever the case may be, Egypt's current involvement in some sensitive and strategically located "development" projects in Ethiopia and some backdoor deals the regime is reportedly engaged in can only increase the suspicion Ethiopians have about Meles' real intentions. Such apparent contradictory positions in international dealings might have been interpreted as a shrewd political maneuvering, but, because of his track record it could only be symptomatic of his dubious nature. What Ethiopians are uncomfortable with and are not confident about PM Meles Zenawi is not out of unfounded fear or baseless suspicion, but his own track record. Based on his track record, Ethiopians have a hard time believing what Meles says, and are not sure if he can put the interests of the country above his immediate interest to stay in power. The question Ethiopians have over and over again is this: If the situation warrants conflict, will Meles show some backbone to stand up for Ethiopian security and national interests? Or what course of action is he prepared to take if say Egypt or Sudan or both refuse to agree to the spirit of the Initiative? Or can he cavalierly take the country into an open hostility and confrontation without the necessary all out readiness, just like he did when he invaded Somalia? And it is against this background that Meles and his small group should be judged, and not by what they say; no matter how often they talk about any issue or how burning it could be, or how desirous and changed they project themselves to be. Of course, the Nile issue is not something that could and should be left to Meles, or seen from a perspective of who is in power now.

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