

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

*Part V (Final: Continued from Part IV, [Meles Zenawi's Doctrine of Self-Preservation, Part IV.pdf](#))  
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### **Meles Zenawi's politics of divide and rule as a doctrine of self-preservation.**

What one may find quite incomprehensible is the fact that dictators are never short of people who readily avail themselves to be at their service. Some may be committed to the same overall causes, ideology or philosophy that those dictators espouse; others may have different reasons like rendering what their professions require of them. But the great majority of them are willing servants for economic or other personal egotistic reasons including insatiable desire for power, outright greed, and for some it is feeble-mindedness and utter cowardice. And there is nothing more suiting to a dictator's aspirations to accumulate as much power as they can. Moreover, having an entourage of very opportunistic and cowardly folk is one of the most important enabling factors for dictators to assert their indisputable authority and full control over their subjects. Dictators know too well that they can only stay in power by instilling fear first among their subordinates and through them on their subjects, by terrorizing and tormenting the ruled and by fomenting division among individuals and groups. And for that, they choose the “right” people, the submissive ones, that are willing to do anything and everything the dictator asks of them, no matter how heinous or immoral that could be. They are acutely aware and conscious that they earn the unqualified support and subordination of their followers not out of sincere love or for their indispensable qualities as leaders but out of fear, and instilling constant fear in their subordinates is critically important or even a must. They are, therefore remarkably efficient at making sure that they are always surrounded by yes-men; mostly the spineless type that are willing to fully comply with his orders and fulfill his wishes. Instilling fear and inculcating a sense of dependence and insecurity in their subordinates is their first line and time-tested strategy.

It should be noted, however, that, although it is not uncommon for the overwhelming majority if not all of the top echelon of a dictator's entourage to be submissive yes-men, there are some who serve under dictators out of conviction. There still are very few at the top and a whole lot more at lower echelons who consider their services to be not necessarily to the dictators per se but to the nation and the people. This category of people with otherwise genuine love of country and who consider their services to being one out of professionalism than anything else are not particularly disposed to lending their unqualified support and fight to death to save the dictators. These people are potential assets to any prospective change.

Some compatriots are surprised and seem to be puzzled by Meles Zenawi's cabinet reshuffle a few months ago where he apparently and assumedly has removed almost all of TPLF veterans from positions of power. Two questions need to be asked here: Are those veterans really "removed" from positions of power and are they really "demoted"? Is this apparent shift that brought in new faces a sign of genuine power sharing borne out of and aimed at sincere desire to be inclusive?

I find some irrationality in both arguments. Neither is what it appears to be or what the rulers and their cadres project them to be. Such mischaracterizations emanate from lack of basic understanding of the group in power, particularly Meles, his intent and modus operandi. There are few who entertain the implausible idea of change coming from within the top close-knit ruling clique. To begin with, the fate and destiny of the few people at the very top echelon of the remainder of the ruling clique are inseparable, unless, of course, physical elimination either as a result of a natural calamity or internal strife occurs. Beside existing intricate family ties, there is a lot between and among them that each needs the other and cannot afford to totally humiliate and antagonistically alienate the other short of physically eliminating

one another. There is no question that absolute power resides within Meles, and the rest of the people in that small closely-knit group around him are at his full mercy and at all times. As he has molded them into being subservient and so dependent on him for their respective positions both within the government and the TPLF itself and for their continued survival, none among them could ever challenge his absolute authority for they have neither the personal courage nor the incentive to do anything else to alter their ineluctable fate. Although Meles has the power to do whatever he pleases with them or assign them to any position he wishes, this time they were not catapulted out of their positions; they were simply repositioned to strategically vital places. Seyoum Mesfin's posting to ambassadorship in China is more of a clear indication of Mele Zenawi's (and his ruling clique's) preferred political direction than an assumed demotion. Meles knows that his cozy relations with the West are waning and is repositioning himself as the new darling of Beijing. He knows too well that Beijing will not care to bother about human rights issues or whatever he does to his people. And China needs as many high placed greedy friends as possible to pursue its ever aggressive involvement in Africa; and Ethiopia's strategic importance is indisputable. Currently, there is no sector in Ethiopia that China is not involved in, and they had been discreetly and not so discretely working for a very long time to position themselves to be where they are now. Therefore, the importance and significance of Seyoum's appointment as ambassador there is clear.

By reassigning them to their new posts and replacing others for the posts that were held by TPLFites, he accomplished three things. First he assuages, however temporarily, some accusations that power is concentrated in and held exclusively by one ethnic group (T'grian). That would give him and his ruling clique a badly needed respite and an opportunity to project the wrong impression that there is change at the highest levels of government without effectuating and implementing any meaningful change that would affect the autarchy in any manner. Secondly, despite the fact that real power still resides within the usual TPLF core members and loyalists, Meles' move buys him the favor and loyalty of the power-hungry ethno-elite by fooling them into believing that there is real power sharing arrangement that is meant to embrace merit and inclusiveness over strict sectarianism that marginalized many sectors of society. Third, it once again serves him as a divisive agenda to further weaken the opposition. This move instigates further unhealthy debate among some groups who feel systematic, deliberate and intentional marginalization. This strong feeling of being purposely pushed aside and excluded from meaningful political positions can, as intended by the authors, further damage group relations. Additionally, this move forces some in the opposition to overreact and focus more on it and deviate from the main overall issues of justice and democratization, thus giving them one more agenda item to fruitlessly bicker over. Furthermore, it could push some in the opposition, especially many Ethiopian nationalists and the hard line core among certain language groups, to capitalize on the issue and call for armed resistance as the only justifiable option to change the status quo; prompting some, especially the gullible ones, to jump into and embark on hasty endeavors that are not carefully planned or lack careful scrutiny and deliberation. These groups would not only be victims of fruitless efforts, but have the vulnerability to become ideal prey for the manipulative machinations of anti-Ethiopian groups like Sheabia - a regrettable faux pas that will only serve non-Ethiopian interests and benefit the rulers and damage the collective struggle.

Take Ato (Aboy) Sebhat's case, for example. His relocation to T'grai was meant to make sure that both the organizational structure of TPLF and its absolute control of the people of T'grai remain unperturbed. In recent years, for the first time since EPRP and EDU were forced out of the area, the people of T'grai got a chance to listen to voices other than TPLF cadres. Both Ato Seye Abraha and Arena T'rai posed real danger to TPLF bosses. They realized, especially just prior to and during "election 2010", that their uncontested monopoly of power and absolute control of T'grai was being seriously challenged. They know too well that that is something they cannot afford to ignore. Therefore, some serious recalibration was needed to control and reverse that erosion, and there was no one better suited and placed for that kind of intrigue-riddled job than Sebhat Nega. And the result was evident; he managed to subvert 'Arena T'grai'. It is, therefore, my contention that, Seyoum Mesfin and his likes are not, contrary to what some

may believe, removed and demoted but are moved to strategic places in a carefully planned political maneuvering by Meles, as a result of which the ruling clique has a lot to gain.

Those veterans have been with TPLF since the organization's inception; some were more powerful and very senior to him, and above all, despite the fact that they are at the full mercy of Meles and are under his inescapable control, their fate is inseparable; they are in it together. Although, he, by no means, is the only person within TPLF leadership - as is clearly stated in Ato Asgede G. IgziAbher's recent book titled *Gehadi*, where he describes and catalogues in detail the entire Politburo's culpability in sidestepping the interests and trampling on the rights of TPLF fighters and the people of T'grai by being subservient to the will and interests of and in deference to Sheabia (EPLF) all the way until Isaias foolhardily started the fateful war - Meles seems to be the one that continues to assume the mantle of serving foreign interests over that of Ethiopia without any qualms and unabashedly.

But, why people find Zenawi's actions strange or totally new is what surprises me most. Moreover, what I find incomprehensible is the fact that there are people who are gleefully willing to serve under a one-man absolute dictatorship. These willing prisoners know too well that they are totally at the whim and mercy of their demigod, and whatever benefit - be it material, political power or the likes - that they may have been able to obtain, thanks to their association with the regime, can be taken away, including their lives, at any moment. Beside the daily shaming and the purposely pointed undignified regard he has of them, those cowardly folk will not escape the fury and harsh punishments - usually culminating in death - at the hands of their boss. The Ethiopian dictum "Ye'Feri Mot Hul'Gize, Ye'Jegna Mot Aend Gize" - which literally means that 'a courageous/brave person dies once, whereas a coward dies daily until he is really dead', amply illustrates, those catering to dictators have sold out their souls, have no self-esteem and are "dead men/women walking" and always edgy.

The same is true of those who are now promoted to new political positions. Some may honestly believe that they are serving the country; and they may have good intentions and sincere desires to do so. In truth, whether they like it or not, those positions are only symbolic and they are there not to serve the country, not even their respective constituencies but the selfish interests of the dictator.

We all know the role of absolute power; it controls people's lives down to the individual level and endangers the safety and security of millions. Especially true is when such absolute power is in the hands of people with identity crises and inferiority complexes and with no moral bearing. But the real question is why and how are such individuals allowed to do what they do? Why does Meles continue to have some following? How does he fool people to "accept" his line of argument and his policies; policies that are clearly anti-people and against the strategic interests of the nation?

Along that line, there is one recurring question that I had been asking myself many times over. And that is: How many among us now in the opposition have a good potential of being dictators if and when circumstances allowed us? Honestly, although may be not as treasonous, the answer is not that much encouraging; giving me the notion that it is partly a societal problem that needs to be addressed through a genuine national reconciliation and democratization processes, and may require a cultural revolution. Political and community leaders should show individual commitments by playing exemplary roles to weed out the inherent culture of violence as a means of assuming and/or staying in power. What is more disconcerting and really disturbing is the fact that that undying culture of violence is compounded with highly polarized and polarizing ethnic-based sectarian politics. Ethnic-based politics has highly poisoned our thinking that we have allowed ourselves to seeing Ethiopians not as individual citizens whose wishes, aspirations and future are inseparably linked, but as groups that one has to constantly suspect and fear the other.

We know Meles, as any dictator with a narrow and ever shrinking base, dreads the unity of the people. He instituted difference and division of the people into a system of government; as is clearly stated in his "constitution" that started by asserting that Ethiopians are not one people. It could be said that Meles is the most secluded and isolated "leader" Ethiopia has ever known. His lack of trust of the Ethiopian people is paranoiac and beyond comprehension. Simple acts of mingling with the people are out of the question. Even what is considered to be envied by most rulers, like seeing them off or welcoming them back by the population can become an arduous and torturous task to be dreaded. Past Ethiopian rulers welcomed, in fact, expected the population to openly see them off when they leave an area or the country and to come out and welcome them upon their return. In the history of Ethiopian rulers, only Meles requires every Ethiopian to be as far away as possible from the roads he travels on or avoid them if possible or face the other way when he passes by. No wonder people have always given him their back!

At the moment there are many groups that are calling for unity of the opposition and there is a renewed hope that political organizations could heed those calls. Inspired by events unfolding in our region, there is also an energized effort particularly aimed at popular uprisings in Ethiopia. It is encouraging to see so many energized young people being involved and once again at the forefront. But, equally energized are anti-Ethiopian groups and elements. And as usual, the latter are in full gear to exploit the fervor and enthusiasm of Ethiopians. Unfortunately, they are not alone and have good company. Encouraged by the unqualified rapprochement of some impetuous and impulse-ridden elements among the opposition, they have good reasons to be active and energized, as they would be the biggest beneficiaries of any popular uprising if the progressive unity forces of the democratic opposition do not act fast to be a viable alternative.

As much as we in the democratic opposition and patriotic Ethiopians have a renewed hope for energizing the popular movement for change, Meles is also gearing up proactively and retooling his arsenal and ready to deploy new and not so new divisive as well as his repressive methods. He knows that, no matter what he does, there is no power big or good enough that could stop a unified people from attaining their objectives. He understands the demographic shift and how determined and militant our youths can be. He has seen that. That was the reason, thanks to the direct advice of a certain turncoat that Meles was eager to listen to and adopt his plan that his first priority following the 2005 elections rested and focused on the youth. He has devised and implemented mechanisms that put the emphasis on systematically keeping the youths dependent on the regime. The system was crafted so that the country's youths would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to have access to education or employment opportunities unless they are somehow involved in the regime's restrictive programs that require them to be members of the ruling party or serve in its web of spying networks. Given the state of the economy and lack of opportunity, many have fallen prey to the regime's sinister plan. Nonetheless, all such devilish efforts can evaporate when a unified and unifying force is able to assert a credible presence.

Whereas Meles had been given ample time to design and refine his divisive policies since the 2005 elections, the democratic opposition, unfortunately, wasted valuable time by bickering and splintering itself. All we need to and must do is shift the whole narrative to reflect our convictions about democratic principles and our commitment to justice equality and unity of our country. Some compatriots may wrongly believe that the time to chart our future can wait until Meles is gone. That is not only shortsighted and dead wrong but is also extremely dangerous. Given the state of the country and that of the democratic opposition, it should be absolutely clear that the time for answering the 'what next?' and being fully and credibly prepared for it is now.

The only viable force that Meles and his cohorts fear most is a unified progressive Ethiopian nationalist movement that has the commitment and dedication for justice, equality and the unity of the country. In these times of change, Meles will continue to count on his usual endeavor of dividing our

people on religion, region and especially on ethnic lines. Meles knows that he cannot have permanent friends outside of the small clique within the remaining TPLF leadership, and depends on his divisive policies, maintaining the fear factor that he has instilled on our people and his continued deployment of the instruments of oppression that he does not shy away from using so blatantly. Of course keeping the opposition to his rule ever divided is part of the equation. Within EPRDF itself, he has so far used one group against the other to sustain his stay in power. His practice of picking one group at a time as a favorite and "trusted" party over the rest continues unabated. As is well known, Meles and his friends formed and aptly made use of former EPDA to propel them out of T'grai. Once its service as an Ethiopian Trojan horse was over, EPDA, a one time multi-national organization, was re-baptized as Be'Aden (Amhara National Democratic Movement) to conform to TPLF's ethnocentric ideology. Meles used each EPRDF component organization (OPDO, ANDM and SEPDF) to balance the equilibrium and assure his uncontested dominance. Currently, it is SEPDF's turn to stand guard!

Under the prevailing circumstances, the regime will continue on its divisive policies at all levels. The ongoing saga in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church is part of the overall divisive strategy. New and reinvigorated campaigns to further foment division among Ethiopians living outside the country, especially in Europe and North America is to be expected. These campaigns would come in the name of "investment opportunities" in the country and "opening dialogue" with the Diaspora community. Moreover, as I said before, it should not be surprising to anyone that the regime may instigate war, particularly with Sheabiya, mainly to divert attention and create tension. All these are futile attempts that are aimed at dividing our society and the opposition and deflect unified action against it, especially a popular uprising.

How long can we allow this ruling clique to traumatize a nation with impunity? What is our share of responsibility in all that? As the adage "no one takes advantage of you unless you allow them to do so" aptly illustrates, what would be our share of responsibility in all that? Given our dismal failing to see the bigger picture to get our acts together and act in unison, aren't those of us in the Ethiopian political arena partly to blame for the continued misery of our people? How long can we continue falling short of our people's expectations and allow the carnage to continue? It is not only Meles and his small ruling clique that have lost their moral bearing; it is also us - yes and big time! Our failure to unite and our shortsighted and unprincipled association with forces of disunity have greatly contributed to the regime's continued existence.

Despite our wishes to see Meles and his regime go as quickly as possible, he may stay in power unless we remain focused on our interrelated strategic objectives of the country's unity and the establishment of a democratic constitutional order. Addressing issues pertinent to our country's national interests and our collective struggle for the realization of the aspirations of our people require sober and careful assessment and thoughtful and dispassionate deliberations. Whatever short-term or tactical benefits some may assume to get out of hasty and unprincipled but opportunistic associations with undemocratic and anti-unity forces should be weighed against their long-term implications and strategic consequences to our nation and its people. Ongoing efforts by democratic unity forces and patriotic Ethiopians to address the need for a unified approach are very encouraging and should be supported. Needless to say that these Ethiopian progressive nationalists and centrist forces, both inside and outside of the country, should learn from similar efforts in the past and avoid political placation and any futile exercise of alliance formations that foment division among the democratic opposition, shortchange and derail the collective struggle, delay our march for freedom and unnecessarily hinder us from achieving our strategic objectives. It is imperative that they do not deviate from the central issues of unity of our country and democratization of our society.

Our unity is the foundation for our collective progress and the guarantee for justice and real equality!

Long live Ethiopia!  
Long live our unity!