

# Meles Zenawi and the Ethiopian State.

Medhane Tadesse<sup>i</sup>

## Introduction

Meles Zenawi and the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) led Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991 after a sixteen-year armed struggle in the countryside. In subsequent years Meles Zenawi rose to have a disproportionate power in the Ethiopian state rising above the TPLF/EPRDF. As an instructor, theoretician, military strategist, intellectual and all-around, all-star politician of the EPRDF Meles shaped Ethiopian politics for over two decades and worked hard to sustain the political system he helped create. This is crucial in understanding the meaning of his death and its impact on the nature of political power in Ethiopia. And equally important, to understand what this says about the character of the Ethiopian state.

Meles Zenawi, with a touch of overstatement, is the most important person who has ever lived in the history of the TPLF and the post-1991 political order in Ethiopia. It need also be appreciated that Meles has effectively become, or merged with, the state and hence his absence or death is in effect a mortal blow to the health status of not only the political system but also the Ethiopian state.<sup>ii</sup> This is not the place to write about the turning points in the political rise of Meles Zenawi<sup>iii</sup>, but instead to draw from existing analysis a comprehensive understanding of his political trajectory and the otherwise-puzzling aspects of his legacy.<sup>iv</sup>

## The Formative years

Only few political leaders in contemporary Africa have been both great thinkers and astute political operatives. Perhaps the most gifted of them all is Meles Zenawi. Meles's early rise to political supremacy has always been an object of fascination yet one shrouded with mystery. There are many ways to explain Meles's rise to prominence in Ethiopian politics. My own sense points to three, in fact four, major factors. Prominent among which are his quick intelligence and communication skills. Meles is the most gifted orator the TPLF has produced. He has been a formidable debater, particularly in a closed circuit among party disciples. Often, he could be convincing as well as flirtatious. A voracious reader he had the tendency to read everything that mattered to his cause. He was known for his piercing intellect and brutal study schedule.

He read at a prodigious speed, extracting the essence of a book along with a vast amount of detail, which he blended with information derived from other sources and the reality of his environment. This doesn't mean all his ideas were great? Some of his inputs would be more brilliant than others; and some might be wrong, but his hard work and his propensity to supply fresh ideas would cumulatively convey the image of a brilliant leader. Meles is an accomplished politician. He is also an unusually gifted thinker. The intertwining of these talents forms the overriding force behind his quite and stealth rise to power. But also he was, by default or design, strategically placed to make an impact in the early days of the struggle. He was fortunate in his assignment and his colleagues, but he was more fortunate still in

some of his closest friends in the TPLF leadership. From the beginning of the armed struggle Meles was well positioned to advance in the leadership of the TPLF.

The young revolutionary, whose rise to prominence owed everything to quick study in the TPLF Cadre School, had little involvement in the war. Meles' work on political and ideological perspectives to the exclusion of military or other responsibilities permitted him to develop a considerable level of knowledge, as well as the opportunity to train and organize cadres and disseminate his views. He used to invoke great leaders<sup>v</sup> and depict them in his style of teaching in order to get across his arguments. He got on well with students, the rank and file and his colleagues alike, because they expected him to know more than they did, and they rarely knew enough to challenge him. These roles also gave him a unique relationship with, and understanding of, the cadres that was to prove beneficial in the future.

It was his skill as a political operative, his devotion to reading and writing that won him the favor of his party leaders that it can be easy to forget that he has spent the better part of his 16 years in the armed struggle not as a military leader but an ideologue and debater. Likewise, in the last three years that led to the downfall of the Derg, while certainly immersed in military affairs, spent much of his time putting out political fires and preparing himself for big roles. Was this sharp intelligence, inexhaustible, curiosity, and encyclopedic knowledge intimidating? Certainly. By late 1989 he was getting near the top. He didn't claim it; he earned it.

There are other ways, too, that Meles has departed from his comrades. Far more interesting, and potentially more consequential, was his sense of appreciation of power. Meles and his thoughts on the nature of political power is a story that has received only intermittent attention in the mainstream narrative of the TPLF/EPRDF. Though his theoretical excursions were extremely relevant and highly considered by the top leadership and Meles provided ideological perspectives to save the organization, of equal significance were a contest over power. There is an element there that is extraordinary creativity, but I can't say it is divorced from a sense of ambition. This is the more so because in almost all the political struggles that broke out with in the TPLF personal differences figured prominently along with ideological differences. No doubt, in each inter-party crisis Meles assumed a leading role providing solutions, which at the same time enhanced his power in the organization.

However, the event that transformed Meles into an undisputed leader in the organization and the country as a whole was the 2001 split within the TPLF, which dealt a serious blow to democratic centralism and collective leadership, while at the same time giving Meles a major tactical advantage. The turn of events in the last round of the war with Eritrea and the crisis within the TPLF brought Meles back into the center stage of Ethiopian politics. He was the first to suffer personally from the war and its outcome. But he made the best out of it and emerged much stronger. Once the most formidable leaders of the TPLF, who made collective leadership both possible and attractive, were pushed from the scene, it was probably a matter of time before Meles would become the unchallenged leader of the country. The few prophetic views which drew attention to this trend passed unheeded both within and outside the party. Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister, chairman of both the TPLF and EPRDF, together with his close followers quickly assumed the upper hand in the contest and then initiated what was held to be a wide-

ranging restructuring of power in the Ethiopian state. Everything that happened after that was the direct consequence of this fateful political intermission.

### **The process of consolidation**

Right after the Ethiopia-Eritrea war and the split with in his core political party the TPLF, Meles had concentrated power in his own hands and a tiny group of advisors. The irony of the whole matter appeared in the fact that the leader who stood to lose from the blowback effect of the war quickly turned the situation to his advantage and emerged victorious. Thanks to his extraordinary talent aided by the generosity of fate, Meles did not only withered away the threat to his power but he had slowly but steadily worked his way to a supreme position in the Ethiopian state. At the time John and myself concluded that “Ideological concerns and struggles for power merged in ways that can still not be completely understood, but it can be said with confidence that the result is a shift in power from Tigray to the central government in Addis Ababa, from the instruments of the party to the state, and from a group among the TPLF Central Committee to Meles.”<sup>vi</sup> Almost instantaneously, probably the last major obstacle in his path to political supremacy was removed. This marked the beginning of a long process of the personification of the state.

The rise of Meles to a dominant and undisputed position in the Ethiopian state had far reaching political implications. It weakened the rest of the political forces within and outside the ruling party, decimated other centers of power and influence and immobilized the TPLF, the most organized political force in the post-1991 Ethiopian landscape.<sup>vii</sup> There is no doubt that the removal of the rather well-entrenched and adamant party leaders would give him the opportunity to seize the full reins of power and make a clean start in the affairs of the state. He tried hard to relocate his power base from Tigray and the TPLF to the Center and the EPRDF with some success. Thus the progressive political ascendancy of Meles was paralleled by growing political strength at the Center. He created a centralized government and a party leader unified with the state making the party, the government of the day and the state one and the same. He promoted loyal bureaucrats than party loyalists which served to reinforce a clearly identifiable power pyramid. In doing this he created a power base independent of all the members of the ruling party. While this made the TPLF less influential in the EPRDF it also made the EPRDF less relevant in running the government, much less so the Ethiopian state.

As predicted the merger of Meles and the Ethiopian state heated up after the 2005 elections. In the next seven years or so Meles, more able and astute than his inveterate subordinates, continued his steady rise. From such a base he launched the Developmental State in Ethiopia. Having attained the height of power, Meles stood poised to start his ambitious experiment. This was not accidental as he had a philosophy in favor of a strong state with a strong leader as a prerequisite for the successful running of a developmental state. This was the life that he decided to live, and the mission he wanted to pursue. Consolidating his power and increasing the developmental mission of the Ethiopian state were Meles’s consuming focus. Both were inseparable. It was to be the major historical achievement of Meles that he finally spread the tentacles of the developmental state in Ethiopia. Without this, he surely would have become a mere footnote in modern Ethiopian history. Meles’s project of modernizing Ethiopia through the prism of a developmental state had a bearing on the kind of political order that evolved over the last

seven years. This is closely related to his view towards state power, how he exercised it and the style of his leadership. This informs his personality, his place in Ethiopian history and the nature of the problem his successors face.

### **Meles's project of the developmental state**

Whatever we might say about Meles Zenawi, we must grant that he had a well prepared and well sequenced plan for inserting his version of the developmental state. And it is crucial to keep in mind the things that influenced his theory of developmental state. Meles was particularly fascinated by the process of industrial development in East Asia, particularly South Korea in the 1960's.<sup>viii</sup> He took pains to extract the most original elements from the thought and acts of General Park Chung Hee of South Korea whose work is more compatible with his.<sup>ix</sup> Park's supreme attraction to Meles was economic. The important thing is that the Park regime initiated a successful program of industrialization for South Korea based upon export-oriented industries which were guided and aided by the government. One of the first things Park did after assuming power, more or less replicated in Ethiopia, was to persecute South Korean business leaders for profiting from the corruption in the South Korean government. The motivation for this was to gain control of the flow of capital in the country so it could be directed into the sectors that the government wanted to develop.

Compare that with the economic policies of the Ethiopian government especially as it is related to banking and telecommunication sector. The control of these resources was critical for Meles. The priority has been on state directed investment, political control, the economic empowerment of the peasantry, infrastructural development and the control of capital with a clear tension between control and development. He had a firm belief few things should be met as a pre requisite for economic transformation in Ethiopia: Stability, ethnicity and social mobilization, strong state and the mobilization of international resource. He had created all of them. This became the essence of Meles's developmental state in Ethiopia. The role of the state in encouraging and directing investment was highly pronounced but also attracting international aid and finances as well as investment was strongly pursued. A strong state and stability for economic development also informed the conduct of his foreign policy, peacekeeping role and the war on terror.<sup>x</sup> The main objective was to secure regional prominence as a stabilizing force, raise the status of the country, and increase its relevance which will in turn would attract international finances.

Accordingly, he worked hard to restructure the Ethiopian state and its economy with a profound impact. He tried to bridge the gap between the state and development, a recurring problem in the African context. He initiated the arduous process of reorganizing the state, with a particular focus on building the structural foundations of a dynamic economy. Even the bedrock of his foreign policy was highly monetized to support the grand project. Effectively using foreign aid for development was another important weapon.<sup>xi</sup> He was focused and precise on his programmes. Meles have done what he intended to do and followed his plan meticulously until his death. Here was a man with immense energy and enormous vitality. He attempted to reorient Ethiopia's political economy by carrying out far-reaching reforms, and in particular introducing the fundamentals, for what it's worth, of an Ethiopian version of a developmental state. Needless to say Meles had a rigorously empirical understanding of the

way it operated. It is against this background that his absence and its far reaching implications need to be understood.

Arguably, Meles seem to have decided to delay, or probably ignore altogether, the process of democratization for the sake of solidifying the developmental state. He believed practicing the details of Western democracy stands in the way of fully implementing the fundamentals of such a state. He argued the new economic structures and institutions required their own political organization such as a hegemonic party. On this he had clear thinking and meticulously invested on it. His was a conscious decision. He believed, human rights, free press and strong parliament distracts the agendas of the developmental state particularly in its formative stage. Meanwhile he questioned the assertion that human rights and democracy are closely linked to economic development in Africa where primitive accumulation of wealth takes center stage. Decidedly, he shelved democratic transition in favor of modernizing Ethiopia through a strong state. On the other hand he didn't feel the pressure to democratize. In the meantime he expected a speedy socio-economic delivery that could fundamentally change the political marketplace. And he thought the Ethiopian context, history and political culture would allow him to do that for sometime to come. In this regard it is highly likely that he has been informed by the so-called Oriental Despotism. Ethiopia, like many in the East which economically transformed themselves within a short period of time can be a fertile ground for authoritarian rule, a prerequisite for entrenching the developmental state. The thesis is both understandable and mildly disingenuous.

There is no doubt some aspects of Ethiopia's political culture stand in the way of the widespread democratic aspirations of Ethiopians. Totalitarian culture- top-down rule; primacy of the collective over the individual; a well organized, self-serving mammoth bureaucracy; a subservient, fatalistic attitude towards officials and politics; lack of public spirit- has existed in Ethiopia for thousands of year and has formed certain ingrained mind-sets and habits which still endures as the most tenacious obstacle in the country's path toward true democracy. Compounding this was Meles's openly declared hegemonic project. We do not know enough about the impact of Ethiopian history in Meles's thinking at this time to say for certain how profound an effect this had on the events following the 2005 elections. But it is fair to say that he promoted the notion that an aggressive policy confined exclusively on economic development is worth pursuing.

It would be a mistake to see all this as fatalistic and a deliberate negative assault on the process of democratization in Ethiopia. However controversial this may sound Meles had his own best hopes. And he was eager to be validated and this is discernible in the sense of urgency of his actions. He craved his economic policies will bring about quick results on the ground changing the political mood in the country in his favor. As such he thought the democratic upheaval in 2005 as a pointless disruption. Right after the brutal crackdown of opposition protesters he resolved to speed up economic delivery. It was meant to be Ethiopia's Tiananmen. Practical results in economic terms became his constant and prime concern. He never let go of the conviction that Ethiopia will turn a page and change the national mood and turn the opposition in to a fringe movement and the margins of society.<sup>xii</sup>

Part of Meles's difficulty is that his world view is inherently leftist and thoroughly authoritarian. But intellectual honesty demands acknowledging that his moral vision derives, to a considerable extent, from the tradition and political culture of the TPLF and Ethiopia at large. The culture that produced Meles Zenawi is pretty much the same culture, it seems fair to say, that created previous leaders and that runs our country right now. His inability to see the need to allow more political space and parallel development of democracy and the severity and determination with which he decided to crush the opposition and for that matter any form of dissent-one of orders of magnitude- suggests an ideological commitment of the sort that usually reflects devotion to a political project or a creed. As a result there are some grounds for questioning whether Meles's project is even fair, safe or meaningful. The fundamentals of the developmental state in Ethiopia, however useful and important it may sound needs to be revisited. In any case, it's hard to believe that Meles's wholesale offensive against any form of independent centers of power such as free media, free organizations, free business; persecution of critical journalists and enactment of repressive laws were unconnected to his creed of the developmental state. Meles has tried to insert the rudiments of the developmental state and it is up to the rest of Ethiopians and the country's emerging leaders to make it more humane. It is possible to reform the developmental state without allowing its pillars being eaten away by usual termites: ethnic entrepreneurs, countless locust oligarchs, political repression, rent seeking and corruption.

We should not, though, conclude that there's no debate whatever to be had between developmental state and political liberalization. The view and political project championed by Meles that the two endeavors are utterly distinct and thus incapable of interfering with each other is overly simplistic, toxic and dangerous. It is equally possible to isolate Meles's preoccupation with duality of authoritarianism and economic development. It is possible to have both a strong and well governed state. No decent analyst can fail to be repulsed by the sins committed in the name of the developmental state. So we all agree: mingling development with authoritarianism can be bad. But the critical question is: compared to what? Where do we draw the line between what the developmental state can accomplish and what it should be allowed to accomplish. These questions are difficult and might merit an honest and extended discussion among all concerned Ethiopians, and it is exactly for the same reason Ethiopia's emerging leaders should not suppress critical thinking. But if such discussions are to be worthwhile, they will have to take place at a far higher level of sophistication and within the context of a more open and conducive political environment.

## **Conclusion**

At his best, Meles inserted the rudiments of the developmental state in Ethiopia, but at his worst he made it intimidating and suffocating. It is the latter that should draw the attention of Ethiopia's emerging leaders as the most urgent problem that need to be fixed. It is time for the country to move beyond its authoritarian past and build a democracy that matches the democratic aspirations of its people and supports its development.

## **Key Issues:**

The modalities of the developmental state need to be redefined.

There is a need for political reforms both to meet the democratic aspirations of the Ethiopian people, achieve political stability as well as the revitalize the much needed developmental state model<sup>xiii</sup>

Ethiopia's economic development must be anchored in a strong political process, a prerequisite for long term stability. If the current trend persists, it is extremely worrisome development for the health, perhaps the viability, of the Ethiopian state.

Political reform must include appropriate constitutional reform, such as the articles related to the power of the Prime Minister as well as the governance of the security sector.

---

<sup>i</sup> Medhane Tadesse is academic specialist on peace and security issues in Africa

<sup>ii</sup> Writing this piece has been started long before the untimely death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and it became apparent to update it to fit into the current reality. Interests in the political life and legacy of Meles Zenawi seem to come in waves. When asked about the legacy of Meles Zenawi by the media I said I was impressed by his focus on the economy and disappointed by his political record. His sudden death was harrowing news as I had the hope that he will introduce political reform and retire. This might have been the only path for a win-win situation for him as a leader and the country he led.

<sup>iii</sup> Medhane Tadesse & John Young, TPLF: Reform or Decline. Review of African Political Economy. London 2001.

<sup>iv</sup> This study inevitably has depended largely on free quotations from earlier works of the author on the same subject and some discussions with individuals, but for reasons that will be apparent the sources cannot always be acknowledged.

<sup>v</sup> Many remember him in his portrayal of Mao Tse-tung in the TPLF Cadre School.

<sup>vi</sup> TPLF: Reform or Decline in Review of African Political Economy 2001.

<sup>vii</sup> This partly explains the great deal of apprehension associated with his death; that is why all life, it seems, is up in the air.

<sup>viii</sup> Upon meeting the Korean president Lee Myung-bak in 2010 Meles is said to have greatly impressed him on his knowledge about the process of industrialization in that country.

<sup>ix</sup> Park Chung Hee, To Build A Nation. Acropolis Books. Washington DC, 1971. His economic plan followed the creation of a new constitution, the Yushin Constitution, which increased the power of the government and suppressed political opposition. The same happened in Ethiopia after the 2005 elections while draconian laws were introduced after the 2010 elections.

<sup>x</sup> Medhane Tadesse. The Conduct of Ethiopian Foreign Policy: From TPLF Politburo to Meles Zenawi, 1991-2002". In Globalization & the Conduct of Foreign Policy in Africa. University Press of America.2005.

<sup>xi</sup> In his domestic policies of modernizing Ethiopia, albeit in a heavy handed way, he resembled that of Emperor Tewodros. In foreign relations, his sober, smart, and careful policies were, to a large extent, alike to that of Emperor Menelik.

<sup>xii</sup> The reasoning behind this seems to be that the post-2005 generation, particularly the new economic elite will not be interested in human rights and democracy and their main goal will be to get rich or go abroad. It could even be a bulwark against democratic transition due to its parochial economic interests. It is not totally wrong to assume that electoral democracy would threaten the benefits entrepreneurial elites and oligarchs enjoy under the current system.

---

<sup>xiii</sup> It is important to note that the sudden death of General Park of South Korea led to a comprehensive review process which in turn resulted in the fast development of South Korea.