

Literally, Meles is the life of the party.

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I have to admit that I felt sad when I read the recent Washington Post interview where the current Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Meles Zenawi, told the reporter that he “has had enough.”

If and when, for sure, Mr. Zenawi leaves the chairmanship of EPRDF - the most controversial political party of our time - the contemporary Ethiopian political stage will never be the same again. It will be boring and devoid like a club at 2:00 AM, or like watching a movie where the hero died prematurely. Meles has been the MC, the lead actor of our political drama for the last fifteen years. He did not have much help from his supporting actors nor a body double to perform stunts. He did it all by himself making us get mad, worried, ashamed and sad at times and glad, confident, proud and happy at others.

To the opposition, Meles has evolved to become the political equivalent of Clark Kent, the Superman. They have been incapable to challenge, let alone defeat, his political prowess and wit.

I can understand his decision tough as he may be overworked and have developed other priorities like spending quality time with his family. He has been on the scene for over 30 years on a fulltime basis serving at different positions with extensive travel itinerary, and he hardly took any timeout. His time spent on the job makes a laughingstock out of American Presidents who take multiple timeouts in a year, including month long vacations.

The political machinations and animosity surrounding his position did not make the job any easier either. Meles has been a target of constant and malicious politically motivated attacks and plots to destroy him, if possible, or his career. The extremely hardcore opposition members who hate him with passion leave no stone unturned to implicate him with all kinds of conspiracy and wrongdoing. They accuse him of conspiring to dismantle Ethiopia, of forming his own financial empire, of incarcerating and murdering his political opponents including his most trusted friends. At one time, this same accusation were made by this same writer as well. But Meles always managed to come out a survivor and a winner, the most notable one being his coming-out-on-top after a contentious inter-Party power struggle.

Those of us who have a very limited involvement in Ethiopian political affair, and who ended up becoming victims of politically motivated personal attacks, however minuscule compared to that hurled at Meles, have said “had enough” more than once and understand all too well their ramification on one’s personal life. Unlike us, however, Meles is never a quitter and he is determined to carry out his responsibility of safeguarding and improving the livelihood of close to 80 million poor Ethiopians on his own terms. He persevered and continues to get his job done with enviable intellect and razor sharp focus.

As it comes with the territory, most of us agree that Meles has made several mistakes, particularly during his early years. Again, I believe, he learned his lessons and managed to become admired by oppressed groups in Ethiopia and has become an internationally recognized statesman.

Meles is now at a point where he has to think about how he wants to be remembered and how to continue his legacy. May be there is not much he can do about how he will be remembered, as “beauty is on the eye of the beholder,” but he can certainly establish a lasting legacy. He can leave behind a great Ethiopian legacy for the first time in thousands of years of our existence by peacefully transferring power to the next Prime Minister chosen by his Party or by the winner Party of the next election in 2010. That would be one-of-a-kind and the best present he could give to Ethiopians at the dawn of the new millennium.

To the new leader, the challenges in the coming years will be even more difficult. At the dawn of the 21st century, we have yet to extricate ourselves from perennial famine, illiteracy, and disease. Ethiopia is ranked last, or next to last, by many major international indexes.

These are also unprecedented times in Ethiopian history, we have the most and best educated and informed Ethiopians inside the country and a sizable population living abroad. And all of them are exposed to differing and sometimes conflicting political ideologies, cultural norms, and religious beliefs. Ethiopia will need a leader of Meles's quality, in some cases, and much different than Meles in others to craft policies that will help us improve our standard of living while keeping us safe and united. We will need a leader who is well read, courageous, and a master in making deals, concessions and compromises. In due time and training with Meles serving as a mentor and advisor, I am hopeful that we will cultivate these qualities in the new leader.

In the final analysis, long after the "last call", I believe Meles will be remembered as the person who experimented with bold ideas to lead us through the most tumultuous political period of our time and changed Ethiopia and Ethiopians forever. He will be remembered as the leader who put the foundation to create a new and democratic Ethiopia based on equality and respect for all its citizens.

I like to say that Meles has done a good job and will continue to do even better until he finishes his term. I cannot wait for him to write his biography.