

PM Meles Zenawi and EPRDF: Founding fathers of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

by Petros Tesfaghehis

The sudden death of PM Meles Zenawi: It was early morning of 21 August when I heard that PM Meles Zenawi passed away. I was shocked. I had to tune to the Ethiopian TV to make sense of it. I watched the entire programme of the arrival of the coffin on the plane the Ethiopian airlines. I was moved by the crying and wailing of the Ethiopian people,

At different occasion Haile Gebresellasie the Marathon legend gave a talk as tears pour down his cheek. He said referring to the Athletes who joined him in the mourning "you are heroes but Meles is hero of the heroes." The population was in deep sadness. But one thing was clear they vow to carry out the amazing social and economic transformation taking place in Ethiopia. The provision of modern infrastructure such roads, banking facilities, electricity rendered the peasant to enter into the modern money economy as they were able to sell what they produce directly to the market. Education has spread all over Ethiopia. Access to education is central to economic and social development and political maturity of a people. When the EPRDF came to power there were three universities and some polo techniques. The EPRDF build 33 universities..

The most glittering and historic phenomenon is that Meles was part of the crusade to make famine a history in Ethiopia and Africa. Long gone are the days when Ethiopia was stereotyped as byword for starvation and poverty.

As the procession accompanying the coffin marches from the airport to the national palace the youth were echoing the slogan "a hero lives on forever". Throughout the week, in their slogans, songs, poetry and vows the people of Ethiopia have immortalized PM Meles Zenawi. It is a living testimony that the EPRDF has managed to cultivate an enormous sense of confidence in the people of Ethiopia.

Condolence from the international community: His death and sympathy has reverberated all over the world as condolence after condolence poured in from ambassadors from different parts of the world stationed in Addis Ababa as well as heads of state like President Obama, PM David Cameron of UK and more. South Sudan has declared 3 days of national mourning. It showed the contribution he did towards peace in Africa. This was corroborated by the remark of the former South African president Mbeki It goes, "Africa has lost its brilliant statesman". Ruanda has declared 1 minute nationwide silence. Meles was spokesman for Africa in G20 conference, climate change and NEPAD.

Article after article were written in various internet sites of his achievements but I feel this article has summed up some of his works. It was by [Robyn Dixon, Los Angeles Times](#) | August 22, 2012 ," Meles was a workaholic who built his country of 84 million into a regional power with a strong economy, years of double-digit growth, and one of the largest and strongest armies on the continent. Capable of driving his agenda through sheer force of personality, and defusing hostility between dangerous

rivals such as Sudan and South Sudan, Meles was one of the few regional figures viewed by both sides as neutral."

The Funeral: The funeral of Meles which took place on September 2, 2012 was dramatic. At Mesquel square where the programme took place his wife Azieb Mesfun expressed the life and work of PM and his dedication to the wellbeing of the people by fighting against poverty in Ethiopia

The deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hailemariam Desalegne, pledged to continue the policies and strategies that are pushing forward the development of Ethiopia.

There were also compassionate talks from many heads of states and representatives of many countries such as Susan Rice USA ambassador in the UN. She characterized Meles as an uncommon leader, a rare visionary and a true friend. Paul Kagame of Ruanda who was very close with Meles mentioned that Meles was a compassionate advocate for the wellbeing of Africa. Silva Keir of South Sudan branded Meles as "Architect of New Africa.". Under the leadership of Meles Zenawi the EPRDF (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front) came out with a new ground breaking initiative- the federal system. They gave Ethiopia a new governance direction. The name "**Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia** expresses the broader mission of EPRDF. It is an experiment meant to put an end to the national oppression which gave rise to many years of indigenous rebellions and revolutionary wars and to heal the wounds perpetrated by the feudal repressive system. To bring this profound change EPRDF under the leadership of Meles Zenawi has shown a degree of imaginative courage that is almost beyond comprehension.

This will make EPRDF under Meles Zenawi to be the founding fathers of "Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.". This system is enshrined in the new constitution of Ethiopia. This is a revolutionary move similar to the history of those Americans who participated in the American Revolution, signed the United States declaration of independence in 1776 and established the constitution of the United States of America. The figures are –President George Washington, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison.

Under the federal system Ethiopia is shining. The change in Ethiopia is the culmination of the revolution started in the 60s by the Haile Sellasie University progressive students in Addis Ababa. In 1991 when the TPLF/EPRDF entered Addis Ababa with victory, they invited all the liberation movements and political parties who fought against the Military to participate in forming a new government. They were inclusive and meant to end all conflicts. Regrettably the OLF left the Government and lost its historical role as legitimate voice of the Oromo people.

In late 60s the Haile Sellasie 1 University students were extremely concerned of the poverty and lack of development that prevailed in Ethiopia. They started to struggle through demonstrations, rallies, and writing on the Student Union paper advocating for democratic change in Ethiopia. That rendered them to be the most radical student movement in Africa. It was the university students through staging demonstration and distributing the photos of the emaciated body of the victims that exposed the 1972 famine in Wollo, Lasta and Tigray which killed over 2 million people. The famine was to be repeated in 1985 when Ethiopia was governed by the brutal military regime

of Mengistu Hailemariam. The students were inspired by the teachings of Marx and Lenin and started to see the socialist ideology as a way out of poverty and national oppression. The radical student movement has set the agenda to shape the destiny of Ethiopia. Walegn Mekonen was the first one to come with paper that supports the right of self-determination of the people of Ethiopia. For the first time students recognized the struggle in Eritrea.

The Eritrean progressive students realized that if the oppressive feudal system is replaced by a socialist government in Ethiopia the problem in Eritrea could be resolved peacefully based on the right of the Eritrean people to self-determination.

In this the Eritreans saw a light at the end of the tunnel and were very active in the Ethiopian University student movements. It is based on shared value of justice, peace and freedom that a long standing cooperation between the Eritrean fronts (EPLF and the ELF) the Ethiopian movements (OLF, EPRP, TPLF etc.) was forged and reached to the level of military cooperation.

The opposition: Some (not all) of the members of the opposition to the Government of Ethiopia based outside Ethiopia are in total denial of the transformation in Ethiopia. For them there is no development, the country suffers from poverty, underdevelopment and is divided along Ethnic lines dominated by Tigreans/TPLF.

In history we find that the mainstream society does not have the same perception of their own history as the victims. The feudal system did not affect all the Ethiopian society equally. There were winners and losers. The Amhara ruling elite were the beneficiaries while the other nationalities were not. For example the Oromos which comprise the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia talk of millions of their people being killed and their culture and tradition undermined. It is by invading the south largely inhabited by the Oromos that the Shoan Amhara Emperor Menelik (1889-1913) built a strong feudal Empire. The lot of other people was not good either. Ethiopia was characterized as the prison of nationalities. When the Haile Sellasie University students staged a demonstration in Addis Ababa it was to expose the negligence of Emperor Haile Sellasie of the 1972 famine in Tigray, Wollo and Lasta which killed 2 million people.

I remember in 1991, I passed through Addis on my way to Asmara. I went to Giorgis to visit a relative. On my way I saw a large crowd being dispersed by the police preventing them from destroying the monument of Emperor Menelik on horseback. This is glaring example that the Amharas and the Oromo have different perception of their own history. It is the wisdom of the then government to prevent the destruction. It avoided serious conflict.

Those who deny the transformation are those who benefited from the repressive feudal system and some from the brutal military Government of Colonel Mengistu Hailemariam. They are nostalgic of their past superior status and comfortable life style.

But this is wrong an understanding of history and acknowledgement of historical wrongs are essential to the unity of countries composed of many ethnic/nationality groups. The opposition have to acknowledge that the Ethiopian Feudal Empire was

built on the total power of the Amhara ruling elite over the other nationalities. They have to be honest to acknowledge that such relationship has resulted in economic stagnation, ignorance, famine and oppression of nationalities and has given rise to all kinds of ethnic/nationality based rebellions in different parts of Ethiopia. In the 60s The Haile Sellassie progressive students have supported all those who rose up in arms to determine their right to self determination. Walelegn Mekonen – who died in the attempt to hijack the Ethiopian Airline had written a paper to that effect. The fronts were both Ethnic based and multinational such as EPRP, MEISON, TPLF, TLF, ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front) and SLF (Sidama Liberation Front) which was brutally crushed by the Military.

They should have known that any Ethiopians irrespective of their ethnic background are entitled to participate in ruling the country. The question is, are those in power addressing the chronic political, economic and social problems of Ethiopia. During the funeral a Somali speaker has expressed that this government has given the Somalis a voice they never had. It is extraordinary to listen to that view from the Somalis who had been extremely hostile to Ethiopia. Today all the people peripheral to Addis Ababa are visible No wonder Suzan rice has said, "Meles had a world class mind."

On the contrary the Diaspora opposition have ignored the past injustices and conjures up a great deal of ethnic prejudices. Particularly the prejudice against Ethnic Tigreans. They instigate ethnic hatred, foster fear that breed violence instead of reconciliation and peace which breeds harmony. However the level of consciousness of the people inside Ethiopia is high to the extent that they are vowing to maintain the unity in diversity of all Ethiopians. The denial of the Diaspora Opposition will not serve them good it is tarnishing their image. Ethiopia it is about time that they face the reality and talk about reconciliation. Finality it is the people inside Ethiopia who would defend the gains of the revolution and transformation not the Diaspora because they are the main beneficiaries.

What is beyond doubt, though, is that the death of PM Meles is one of the saddest moments in history because it is going to be difficult to see like him again, in history such people are rare, and he is going to be missed a lot.

PM Meles Zenawi and Eritrea:

The people of Ethiopian and Eritrea have strong cultural and historical ties. Throughout history they fought together and died together. Many Eritreans have participated in many Ethiopian struggles and Ethiopians have supported the struggle of the Eritrean people.

It is, therefore, unfortunate that the two brotherly countries went to a very senseless and destructive war in 1998. Inevitably, the war has sown hatred between the two peoples and that has to be reversed. What the Ethiopians and Eritreans have in common is more important than what it divides them.

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Therefore to build peace is profoundly important. For me to allow more than 73,000 Eritrean refugees a safe haven in Ethiopia is a form of peace building between the people of Ethiopia and Eritrea. It is with the same principle that Citizens for Peace in Eritrea (CPE) has carried out a peace building conference February 2001. It organized two day conference one day in Keren with representatives of all war displaced people and the next day in Asmara. The next move was to go out and meet Ethiopian Civil Societies which did not materialize. The thrust of the issue is to engage with Ethiopian people to build peace.

To help Eritreans is humane but it has also other profound implication. Most of Eritrean youth leave Eritrea in order to avoid the indefinite national service. This is the most destructive human rights violation against the Eritrean youth. The youth are denied the opportunity to exploit their potential to build their life to work freely and pursue education of their choic. Hundreds of the refugees are allowed to pursue university education in Ethiopia. They represent an asset to future democratic Eritrea by filling a gap in man power due to the huge brain drain by abandoning Eritrea.. Eritreans do realize all this and have felt the loss of PM Meles Zenawi. Condolence after condolence came through. Assena.com pioneered by writing the first moving article. Furthermore many article in recognition of the life and works have been written in Eritrean websites. Eritreans representing the Eritrean refugees in several camps came out expressing their sorrow of the death of the Prime Minister.

Meles has left a massive cultural legacy of peace and development which represents a challenge to the people and Government of Ethiopia. It is also a challenge to Eritreans to express willingness for peaceful co-existence and mutual prosperity. .

When I see what Ethiopia is in today I feel the objective of those revolutionaries of the 60s and beyond who sacrificed their life has been vindicated. My analysis is based on the memory I have when I was part of the Haile Sellasie Student Movement and a veteran of EPLF. I had good working relationships with many members of the Ethiopian Liberation fronts and university students.

My condelence to to Azieb Mesfin, the children and the people of Ethiopia. may God bless Ethiopia.

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