

Confusion threatening nascent journalism: a reflection on “የቀድሞው ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር መለስ ዜናዊ ፎቶግራፎችና ፖስተሮች ይነሱ!”, The Reporter, 6th Feb 2013.

I contemplated a lot in compiling this comment. To confess, as and when time allows, I always visit The Reporter pages for I consider them as a nascent source of alternative news. What I read recently has made me question this perception of mine, re. the editorial “የቀድሞው ጠቅላይ ሚኒስትር መለስ ዜናዊ ፎቶግራፎችና ፖስተሮች ይነሱ!”, a posting from 6th February 2013.

I consider editorials as representations of an institutional perspective on prioritised vital issues of the day and I didn't find this to be the case with this editorial. The article is posted under both ‘መነሻ ገዕ- ርእሰ አንቀጽ’ and ‘ዋና ዜና’. I take it this is an innocent mistake and consider the article to be the former. Seen as an editorial, then it is straight forward to consider the article as a perspective of “The Reporter’ the institution and not that of the editor per se, nor that of the writer or contributor of the article. This is a crucial distinction; history is awash with evidence where violations of this distinction condemned many a newspaper to disrepute and decline. Again, I take the article to be that of the institution ‘The Reporter’ and, as there is no such thing as a news paper without a perspective, I wouldn't expect it to be nonpartisan or neutral on any issue it engages with.

Well, taking it on face value, the priority vital issues it claims to address is the gruelling effect of the PM Meles Zenawi's posters, be it because the posters are or will deteriorate, the Ethiopian people have already openly expressed their grief and need no reminders, the allegedly constant trauma the posters may cause to the PM's family and also, because it is time to move on and focus on taking forward the vision the PM championed and expose the inaction allegedly concealed behind talk of “vision” and “legacy”.

The article refers to no evidence of a gruelling effect of the poster on people. However, let's again take on face value what the article purports to. If we factor the overwhelming affection and grief of the people on the unexpected death of the PM to the Ethiopian tradition when in grief, it is unlikely that the posters are causing such a gruelling effect on people. On one recent documentary on ETV, an elderly citizen indicated that, while out expressing his grief, he had asked for an umbrella to protect the picture of the late PM Meles from the heat of the sun. One Gemed, a commentator on ‘The Reporter’ webpage on this very article, reports his friend equating an office with many posters with going to የሴቶ ቀብር ቦታ. Has ‘the Reporter’ the institutions received or observed similar encounters? If yes, how widespread and representative of the population at large are they to warrant committing an editorial? If in both this cases the answer is negative, then one is left to ponder whether the views expressed in this article are that of ‘The Reporter’ the institution or that of the person of the editor, contributor or writer. In either case, the ‘The Reporter’s’ institutional procedures remain wanting in terms of maintaining its values.

The other alleged reason for the editorial is the trauma that may be caused by the posters to the Family of PM Meles. There is little millage even in this case, if anything one has to refer to the ex First Lady's speech during the national funeral ceremony. Furthermore, it is not beyond anyone's wits that the poignant reminder from the posters goes along with a dignified sense of pride in PM Meles' deserved portrayal as the incarnation of the people's vision for Ethiopian renaissance. This is

an age old tradition typical of all societies across the world. What if at all makes it unique in our case is the effect of our Ethiopian tradition with regard to our heroes and gallant sons and daughters, something one would expect to be not beyond the wits of any Ethiopian institution.

Another concern of the article relates to the posters' obliteration by wear and tear and the effect of the weather and thereby losing their message. On the face of it this may be an honest concern. However, I find it a lame argument and one which is culpable of obscuring that fact that the representation (in this case posters PM Meles) and the actual embodiment of a people's vision (in this case the late PM Meles) have different lives. The former is shaped and reshaped as time goes by and generations change; the latter is imperishable for it is ingrained in the will and history of the people. In the case that this distinction can hardly be considered as a strange matter to the 'The Reporter' institution, this alleged concern becomes nothing but a reflection of the vivid perplexity of the message the article purports to air, and hence, at best veering to a maceration of disturbed intention.

This brings me to substantial dimensions of the article: one relating to alleged inaction concealed behind talk of "vision" and "legacy" and the other, the establishment of the PM Meles foundation by law. With regard to the latter, the article does a disservice to the issue since it doesn't elaborate on what it sees is the problem with establishing a legally instituted foundation by reflecting on the premises of the law and the articles that underpin it. Without these its assertions are, at best, open to speculation and don't go beyond a daft sensationalisation. In the same way, in the absence of actual evidence pointing to potential or alleged 'concealed inaction' is nothing more than speculative sensationalisation- anathema to the ethos of investigative journalism.

To sum up, none of the above makes the issue of the posters a vitally important agenda deserving the immediate attention of an editorial. The failings observed are by and large a reflection of a failure to make a distinction between Meles the biological being and Meles the embodiment of a popular vision of renaissance. The posters are the current representations of Meles the vision; to obfuscate the posters with the vision is nothing but inconsequential dream. This failure is then entangled with the article's disturbed perplexity with regard to its core message, particularly vivid if one reads in between the lines- itself a manifestation of the confusion between the 'The Reporter' the institution, the person of the editor, the writer or the contributor. Maintaining The Reporter as a source of alternative news requires that such confusions are tackled root and branch.

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