

Contextualizing Messay Kebede's "Power vacuum in Post-Meles Ethiopia"

("Scholarly Vacuum & Entrapment in Ethiopian Émigré Discourse")

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For anyone closely following political developments in post-derg Ethiopia, the highly published and acclaimed professor of philosophy at Dayton, Messay Kebede, is no stranger. Besides having well-researched and deeply philosophical works to his credit, Messay is also known for producing provocatively insightful articles focusing on issues that carry both current as well as perennial traction within Ethiopian political discourse. What has, as of recent, become an interestingly strange dimension of his writings, however, is a discernable intellectual doublespeak and visible retreat from taking analysis to its next logical level; and arriving at conclusions that might end up disconcerting certain émigré circles of specific political creed or unsettle their particular "discursive" trajectory thereof. The recent article, "**Power vacuum in post Meles Ethiopia**", is the newest addition in the line of similar writings epitomizing the affliction permeating Ethiopian émigré discourse; and the subsequent entrapment many a scholar, like Messay, has succumbed in to.

Thus, this is not a rebuttal per se; for the article contains neither a fact based analysis nor a logically coherent and consistent supportive argumentation. Given the weight of the issue Messay set out to address, and the high standing expected from a person of his intellectual caliber in doing so, it is a lack that is difficult to excuse or gloss over. And, as his case would show, such neither lends a sound scholarly analysis, nor does it allow the maintenance or recapturing of scholarly integrity- both high value inputs for ensuring the success of an intellectually grounded political activism a-la professor Messay. What is undertaken, therefore, is a textual reading that attempts to contextualize and make sense of the major assertions and claims presented in the article. Here is how.

Premise & Claim

PM Meles Zenawi has been, unusually, absent from the public scene for some time now. According to Messay (not to mention the émigré politicians that scared him to submission), Meles is either "*dead, incapacitated by disease or has little time to live*". Yet, whichever is the case, it doesn't matter; and it would not make a difference. What matters, and is certain, is the fact that his "*... time is over*"... and "*surely*" a "*post- Meles*" reality and "*scenario*" defined by "*a power vacuum, and a raw struggle ...carried among contending groups*" of "*the ruling elite and the...repressive forces*" is up on Ethiopia. A situation, which is also "*...a natural effect... (of)..Tyrannical and personalized rule*" and its lack of "*institutional mechanisms of power transfer*". In fact, as Messay wants it portrayed, such is Ethiopia's present condition- a condition as gripping as it is colossal; it as such "*gives the picture of a disintegrating power system*". The above, in brief, are the main ideas and premises, put forward as representations of established facts; and, up on which, the possible scenarios, intervening factors, desirable preferences etc. described throughout, Messay's article are predicated. The first task of a healthy scholarship committed to learned analysis, in this regard, would be to ask and address; if these are valid and true

claims that concur with, and are grounded on, real facts? If so, how, and on what basis is this translated? If not, why?

Indeed, there could be as many claims as people are able or need to make, about one and the same situation. And this has never been a problem; nor does it necessarily pose one. However, it is with the truth-value and the validity of claims that difficulties arise. One reason fueling it is the fact that there are multiple mediating variables that impact the process of establishing the truth and validity of a particular claim. On the other hand, neither the ability nor the act of claim; and not the mere existence of a situation (of which that particular claim has been made), in and of itself, assigns a truth value and validates the details a claim carries. The same also applies to descriptions, assertions, statements, desires or agreements shared and made by protagonists about a claim- they do not bestow truth-value or validity in and of themselves. Each and all, has to pass the test of reality grounding; have concurrence with facts and coherence within its logic of articulation, and there by meet the challenges of counter-claim/ counter-factuality. Only then does a claim establish truth-value, and validation.

It is when put against this basic frame of scrutiny that the overwhelming lack of a truth-value grounded on facts and supported by logic contained in Messay Kebede's claim becomes evident. If anything, Messay's claim turns out to be nothing more than a bundle of desire-induced assertions. Assertions that, in fact, largely relay on an **unscholarly transposition and extrapolation** of innuendos, political wishes, day-dreams as well as unfulfilled yearnings shared among die-hard émigré political groupies as well as submissive scholars that are so scared, like Messay, they have no qualms to short change every inch of scholarly integrity to placate them.

Meles's exit, Power Vacuum & Struggle (Reality & Validity)

That PM Meles is ill; and that his illness required him take treatment and rest is an uncontested fact out for all to see, including Messay. That his absence is a result of this condition, and will be over in due time has also been made public by the very government he is head of. The statement, as a representation of the PM's actual condition, carries neither an explicit nor implicit reference declaring his present or projected status as a fait-accompli (be it politically or medically). In other words, it contains no primary grounds required of a contestation about validity or truth value, drawn from within the same fact. This, however, does not preclude the presence of other second-tier grounds, which are tangentially aligned to the issue, and allow a contestation of validity as well as a counter claim. Mistrust, political ambition and hate etc., are variables that can be used as such a ground of contest. But then, the ground of validity contestation and counter claim becomes very different i.e. would no more be derived from that same fact (the illness and status of Meles as is); but as interpreted, imagined etc. through the prism of mistrust, ambition or hate.

What Messay does, on the contrary, is try to invoke the PM's situation as ground and at the same time take a long jump from there (the fact of illness and temporary absence from duty) to construct a claim of a "passage/exit of Meles" (from both active life and active political leadership) that is presumed as a consummated-given in the present. To carry and maintain such onerous task, Messay embraces positions that are epistemologically, logically and analytically self-defeating. First, he out rightly writes-

off the distinction between primary and secondary grounds of a contestation/counter claim, as none-issue; and takes the whole thing as if it is a factually settled given (which in fact is so in his thought, desire etc.). Second; he turns, the specific fact of illness/absence, to indeterminate elastic construct i.e. an all-embracing totality that squeezes and portrays the realm of each, all or anything in between; the *“dead, incapacitated or has little time to live”*. Understandably, without such dichotomous construct, Messay, cannot hold together his factually barren “claim construct”-- **“Meles’s exit, power vacuum & power struggle”**-- as valid and concurrent facts of Ethiopia’s reality, at the same time. Even then, depiction represents, nothing but, an oxymoron of a claim, resting on major fallacies in argument and the fudging of facts. Indeed, Messay, is not unaware of this. Rather, it is a price he has chosen to exact from objective analysis & scholarship for the sake of upholding conclusions and claims compatible with his express interest of promoting the “supreme goal of all engagements”- the imperative of effecting regime change in present Ethiopia.

Very important to look at is, in this connection, a statement “referring to the reaction” of the Ethiopian government, which Messay introduces in the piece, after a carefully misconstrued reconstruction. It reads as follows; *“The bare fact that the government has so far refused to provide any reliable information about his condition is indication enough that Meles’s time is over. The assurance that he is now receiving treatment or resting and that he will soon resume his work is just a lie destined to prevent a popular uprising and conceal the on-going power struggle until the emergence of a winning faction. ”*

The above statement uncontestedly establishes the extent to which Messay could go, to infuse potency & traction to his “claim-construct” (which in the absence of the factual grounding of a claim, as is the case with him, is highly exalted). It captures, Messay’s attempt at reconstructing a desirable hermeneutic signification around that particular fact within a given context, yet carrying the import of a specific articulation and course of action leading to a certain preferred outcome concurring with the same claim-construct. It is, accordingly, loaded with, and as of necessity renders, duplicity. At one level it appears as an interpretation, description, a statement or analysis of fact, and at the same time, a judgment passed on the truth-value of an action apparently committed by the “government of Ethiopia” about the condition of its PM (for e.g. what Messay describes as unreliable, a lie, a concealment etc.). Messay neither provides an explicit affirmation nor an explicit denial as to what actually transpired or constitutes the content or form of what he, implicitly, invokes as the government’s “action” as it relates to Meles’s condition.

The hermeneutical weight of Messay’s “engineering” resides in some key words he deploys throughout the statement-***bare fact, refusal, reliability, and indication enough***. These are words, which are selectively inserted with the intent of injecting a lease of factual grounding as well as validity to what is otherwise a personal (Messay Kebede’s) reading and assertion about a situation.

The portrayal of a “government refusal”, which is a factually baseless claim grafted on the same by the professor, through the insertion of the qualifier term- **“bare fact”**-, as Messay intentionally did, **“assigns an ontological marking”** to what, in reality, is an “engineered construct” “representing an action” that is claimed, but had never transpired. That way, contestation as to the factual validity of Messay’s claim is (i.e. posing questions of counter-factuality, such as; did the government in reality refuse? If so, when,

where, and how?), relegated as a function of trust or skewed perception emanating from political loyalty; and, eventually mocked at or out rightly dismissed. Because, how any sane person would dare to doubt or question a fact that is bare, i.e. naked, something (in this case, *the refusal of the government-Meles's own- to provide reliable information*) that is an open given, and accessible to all. Thus, wherever such ascription finds a little traction or sway, Messay's fact fudging claim-construct gains undeserved respite from incisive scrutiny, and a possible safe passage towards acceptability- if not lasting credence.

Interesting to decipher, and central to the "Mesayisque" hermeneutic doctoring under review, is the choice and usage of the term "**refusal**"; appearing in the same sentence following the word "bare fact" and before that of "**reliability**". His usage is not dictated by shortage or lack of better terms. In fact, Messay, is well aware that the term "**failure**" or "**inability**", can better represent, and render correct depiction, analysis and critique of the true facts that transpired in reality i.e. the information about the PM's condition and the state of the republic provided by government; plus the possibility that timeliness, degree of detail etc. could be made points of legitimate contestation. What "**inability**" carries is, in this sense, an affirmation of the occurrence in an undertaking; which, however, might still appear to fall short (not that of denial or defiance). Whereas, "**refusal**" refers to a resolve, and expresses an act of defiance that renders a person or a group unwilling, to carry a certain task or involve in a certain undertaking. "**Refusal**" not "**inability**", accordingly, is the chosen term deployed by Messay. In asserting that " the government refused" to avail reliable information about its PM, Messay is injecting a *signification of meaning that portrays an alignment of power and the respective standing of Meles within it, as being no more of what it used to be up to this point i.e. "Meles's time is surely over"*. And the proof or ground for the validity of the claim, Messay seems to insinuate, is none other than the "displayed defiance"(signified by that one act of refusal to provide reliable information) of the EPRDF and its government- a fact which would have never been remotely fathomable had *Meles been around, or, only absent temporarily* etc. Hence, the subsequent claim that Messay went on to construct; "*power vacuum & ongoing power struggle*"; characterized by a complex web of possible happenings ranging from "*popular uprising to military coup and the nightmarish scenario of ethnic clashes*"etc. Our only deliverance from the mayhem all these might entail, and the only route to salvation, which Messay invokes at the end, is regime change; particularly one brought by a "*Western intervention*" *al la Libiya*.

Imagine, such coming from, a self-declared ultra-nationalist who at one time dared to travel (until, thankfully, Genenew Assefa put the brakes for him) the slippery slope of Freudian psychoanalysis to deconstruct what he still holds dear i.e. Meles's anti-Ethiopianism.

Naturally (his claim notwithstanding), someone solely interested, and involved head to heel, in the engineering and doctoring of a counter-legitimation discourse and meaning, as is Messay, cannot afford to choose otherwise. Usage of the term "inability", for example, carries the presence of an ongoing or still open possibility of influence by PM Meles. This, however, under cuts the very ground, plus the political and theoretical imperatives that allow, Messay, to write-off Meles; eventually, making the whole construction of claims and concurrent meaning fabrics, related to notions of" power vacuum, power struggle, a disintegrating power system, popular uprising and the need for western intervention etc.", baseless.

The fact that, why there is no functional atrophy of the state and no fall-out among protagonists observed to date, if “a totally disintegrating power system” has been an existentially given fact of the present, is not examined as an issue posing counter-factuality, and hence, truth-value challenges. Moreover, with the exception of a fleeting reference to usual innuendos about the usual big personalities, Messay makes no attempt to address “who the contending groups he mentions are, or how their struggle has so far manifested itself in the actual arena of national politics?”

On a related note (granting his claim of contending groups is true), there is still a problem with Messay’s claim. That is, if Messay’s characterization of the current Ethiopian system as a tyrannical rule of a single leader is valid; then the determination of “a winning faction” from among the contending actors should not be hard to come by. For, in a political set up of personalized loyalty (where reward is exclusively conferred and implies gradations) there cannot be power parity between factions involved in a power struggle that is so “raw”. Neither, could such absence of parity would allow, Messay’s related assertion of a still unclear or delayed appearance of a winner. Hence, there would be no need for “concealment, or fabricating a lie” to cover something that is not there i.e. a power struggle and a simmering popular uprising given in the reality of present Ethiopia. In short, one cannot hold on to all these contrarian claims as equally true and valid in the same go.

Working through such a maze of engineered meaning, assertions are transfixed in to learned analysis. Drawing up on such, and extrapolating the same, what has been a politically motivated “desirable if”, becomes an essentialist affirmation carrying a tone of finality. Based on that, the possible is elevated to the status of the real; doctored portrayals’ and self-initiated imagery’s are made to pass as facts. And overstepping the scholarly test of counter factual and logical scrutiny, these in turn are put forward as the rightful basis for further explanation and action. The ultimate outcome could not be anything but one and the same—circularity.

Epilogue

In the arena of émigré politics, and associated scholarship, nothing seems constant or certain. Neither the opportunistic political temperament, nor the unsettling daily challenges of a harsh life world provide a help, either in the form of a respite to reflect or a shoulder to lean on. The only certain shared yardstick handily available is, therefore, neither a principle nor a belief i.e. scholarly, pragmatic or ideological. It is rather **blanket hate**—the hate of Woyane, the hate of EPRDF, the hate of Meles and anything that comes along with it—the hate of life in all forms of its Ethiopian denomination under the current system of government. Thus, even at the cost of factual denial and logical inconsistencies such shall be maintained; least a fatwa is to be faced, and lived, in the lonesome life of an émigré far from home soil. What Messay lacks is not the intellectual wherewithal to know the debilitating problem such carries, as well as, the need to stand up to it before late. What he lacks is the subsequent courage required to muster and deploy one. In fact, as time goes by, Messay, appears to be fast losing more of it. And surely, such is a gift not that much found in direct proportionality to that of intellectual finesse—at least among a significant many.

May god bless him with his grace, and give him **the courage to call his own intervention up on himself**—not that of a “Western intervention”, which Ethiopia and Ethiopians need the least. Amen!