

## **Ethiopia continues its stride forward despite neoliberals' cynicism**

(Fantahun Belay)

Since last July, when the government announced that the late Prime Minister Meles Zenawi was receiving medical treatments, several overrated analysts and media outlets have been busy forecasting doomsday scenarios, forecasting a power contest in the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) leadership and even a nationwide chaos, also suggested the cessation of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance dam and the disruption of Ethiopia's role in conflict-resolution and peace-keeping across Africa.

Some are simply poorly informed, while others are in the business of sensationalizing issues. The rest were fantasizing or seizing the opportunity to disseminate make-believe stories in the hope that it might come true as well as to blacken the image of Ethiopia and EPRDF.

However, they all were proven wrong by the Ethiopian people and the ruling party on August 21 (when Ethiopian people learnt that the Great Leader Meles Zenawi has passed away) and the months following that.

As would be recalled, the public media read the statement issued by the Council of Ministers which said "with deep sorrow and grief, regrets informs the Peoples of Ethiopia that Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who has led our country for the last 21 years with great wisdom and far-sightedness, passed away on August 20th at 11:40 pm at the hospital where he was under medical treatment".

The Council elaborated the circumstances of the tragedy as the late Prime Minister Meles had been showing remarkable improvement, after undergoing medical treatment in the previous two months. However, the Council said, Meles had had to be re-admitted back to hospital two days earlier due to a sudden infection, which led to his death, despite efforts by his physicians.

The statement was shocking to every Ethiopian. From the news-anchors, who read the statement, to the ordinary citizen, at home and workplace, the news was upsetting, their grief was visible. Many burst into tears blocking traffic on streets in Addis Ababa and elsewhere. Others stared on their TV and radio in disbelief, listening to the same statement again and again, as if they were expecting a correction.

It was an even more saddening revelation that Meles dedicated his time to the successful implementation of the 5 year Growth and Transformation Plan, despite he was nursing a serious medical condition for the previous two years.

The statement was not wholly depressing, however. It noted the comforting fact that:

"Meles has left behind a solid democratic and developmental constitutional system. Today, his ideas and vision of change have become the ideas of change for 80 million Ethiopians."

"The constitutional developmental democratic system that has been left to us by a great leader is built on a firm foundation. We will always be proud of his achievements, remain confident in ourselves and nurture the unshakable belief that the efforts at making Ethiopia's renaissance a reality have indeed become irreversible."

The Council of Ministers had also assured Ethiopians and well-wishers that the nation's policies will remain in place and there is no power vacuum. It noted that:

"His Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn will, in accordance with the FDRE Constitution, continue to carry out the responsibilities of heading the Council of Ministers".

The public reaction and the statement from the Council were not simply emotional reactions, both proven themselves again and again in the months following that.

Days after the Ethiopian New Year, on September 14, the EPRDF Council convened as planned. As usual, it dealt with major national and party issues in a logical and orderly manner.

Most of the two-day meeting focused on evaluating performance and setting directions. The Council deliberated on a document entitled "let us realize the Meles / EPRDF/ vision by ensuring the rule of the practice of developmental democratic outlook" and the progress on the 5-years Growth and Transformation Plan as well as on the summarized evaluation and directions of governmental and organizational plans for the current year.

The Council deliberated on economic issues and set directions and targets for the current year: To increase annual public revenue by 50%; to enhance export trade, import-substitution and foreign currency utilization; and to decrease the inflation significantly by mid-year.

The Council reviewed the reaction to the passing of the late PM Meles Zenawi and supporters as well as partners and legitimate opposition parties. On behalf of EPRDF members, the Council pledged to renew its "promise to strive with superior drive to bring to the target the stride of renaissance launched by our organization and your effort". It also underlined that the need to channel the broad public movement created in the mourning for the late PM to accomplish the Growth and Transformation Plan. The Council took time to reaffirm the party's and the government's commitment to advance its roles in regional and international levels.

It was at the end of the two-days meeting, after setting major directions and plans directions, that the Council dealt with the issue of electing new leaders. Even then the Council didn't rush to allocating positions arbitrarily rather in a scientific and systemic manner common to EPRDF.

The Council deliberated on a document titled "the building leadership and the stride of the Ethiopian Renaissance", which was compiled by the late PM Meles Zenawi and approved by the party Executive Committee last July. The Council deliberated on capacity building works to nurture and build leadership, to enhance the competence of governmental structure, on consolidating various public organizations and on fighting rent-seeking. The Council adopted the document as a basic document of the party, thus to be discussed at every level and be put into implementation.

Finally, in a secret ballot election, the Council elected by unanimous vote, among three nominees, Hailemariam Desalegn as the party Chairman. Demeke Mekonen was elected to serve as Deputy.

A week later, on Sept. 21, the House of Peoples' Representatives convened in an orderly fashion to formally install Hailemariam Desalegn as Prime Minister of the nation.

All this happened without a hitch, despite the fact that such a peaceful transition of power was the first in the country's history.

In the absence of signs of disagreement in the top leadership and any form of disturbance in the public at large, the overrated pundits had to admit, grudgingly, that the transition was smooth.

However, as cynicism is their second nature, they continue picking up on minor events to predict forthcoming troubles and cast doubt in the mind of investors and other stakeholders.

The latest of such misguided commentary on Ethiopia was published on The Economist last week.

The Economist admitting the smooth political transition wrote:

" the transition to a new prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, has gone smoothly. The streets of Addis Ababa, the capital, have seen no unrest and the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) suffered no defections. "

But it immediately rushed to add unrelated and inaccurate statements. It said:

" A few audible grumbles were swiftly silenced. Rioting Muslims were beaten back. A minister was fired as were four regional officials in events that may or may not be related to the leadership change. "

Only God and The Economist know what "audible grumbles" have been "swiftly silenced". But everybody knows the problem with religious extremism is several years old and the rioting started to occur about a year ago. The public knows that the fired Minister, Junedine Sado, went to trouble with the party months before Meles died. The dismissal of the nameless regional officials probably occurred in the imaginations of The Economist.

But the article goes on to make vague, unverified and unverifiable claims. It said:

" Jockeying among the elite has been kept behind firmly closed doors. In public it espouses business as usual. "

Such vague statements are intended to avoid accountability. There is no way to disprove this kind of statements.

If The Economist is talking about appointments, several ministerial and lower level appointments have been made in the past six months without a hitch. If the Economist is saying the leadership is in disagreement, then we know that it took only a day for the EPRDF Executive Committee, which met last weekend, to approve the reports for the forthcoming Congress.

If there was to be "jockeying at all", it would have happen when the EPRDF elected new chairpersons and other appointments. Bar that, as a healthy organization, EPRDF will always debate to develop ideas, proposals and reports.

The Economist's divorce with reality becomes evident when one reads its baffling remark about the former first lady. It wrote:

" Meles's widow, Azeb Mesfin, who for a few months refused to move out of the prime ministerial palace, still controls a state-affiliated conglomerate, EFFORT. "

A reader in England, who has little information about the circumstance, might think "the prime ministerial palace" is a large mansion like the Windsor Castle and the officials were fighting for it.

But Ethiopians, who visited the palace to pay tribute to the body of the late Prime Minister last August, know that "it is not as good as a rich man's villa", to use the popular expression at the time. No matter the quality of the house, Azeb Mesfin is a veteran fighter of the ruling party who abandoned life for the struggle. Housing would be at the bottom of her concerns.

The claim that Azeb "still controls a state-affiliated conglomerate, EFFORT" is even more puzzling. To begin with, she is an executive committee member of the ruling party, she has the obligation to contribute her part until the party decides otherwise. And, EFFORT, is an Endowment company led by a CEO and a Board of Directors. Azeb has become chair of the board by virtue of her experience and competence and Meles's passing has nothing to do with whether she continues on her assignment or not.

The whole basis of The Economist's article becomes suspect when one reads its nonsensical claim about the Metekakat plan or the generational leadership transition. It said:

" Talk of "generational change" over the past few years was seemingly a charade. "

As everybody knows the generational transition plan has started in 2010. From the beginning, it was clear that it has three phases. In the 2010 EPRDF Congress, the first phase was implemented, almost half of the EPRDF leadership resigned from the front line and assumed supportive roles. Less than three or four

of the leaders remained in the Cabinet that was established after the 2010 election.

The second and the third phase were planned to take place until 2015. However, the party appears to be rushing the process.

Following the sudden death of Meles Zenawi, all the new appointees were from the new generation. The Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Trade Minister and the Civil Service Minister. Even when Hailemariam appointed two officials with the rank of deputy Prime Minister to coordinate and expedite performance in areas of the Growth and Transformation Plan, he picked from the new generation.

This process is not seen as a "charade" among EPRDF members, supporters and good-meaning Ethiopians and friends of Ethiopians. To the contrary, the question is why they are rushing to transfer responsibilities to the new generation without taking time for experience-sharing, especially at the time when the country and the party lost the herculean dedication and skills of Meles Zenawi.

It seems The Economist is relaying the eagerness of the neo-liberals and the regime-change advocates. As we observe from statements made at different instances by these forces, they see some senior officials (no need to mention names) as nationalist, uncompromising and dedicated. They hope, in the absence of them, the leadership will be weaker and bend to their demands or easily trapped by their plots. What they forget is that EPRDF is an institution with knowledge and skills accumulated and derived from almost forty years experience and its new leaders will not be strange to any maneuvers.

This wishful thinking becomes evident, when the article declares:

" In his first six months in power, the prime minister has announced few new policies. Reform efforts are frozen. Economic liberalisation has been postponed at least until after elections in 2015. "

The new Prime Minister didn't announce new policies, his objective is, as he said during his inaugural speech, to "carry through the grand plans launched by the great leader. " Indeed, he launched several projects, signed agreements, etc. as per the Growth and Transformation Plan.

Necessary reforms are not frozen, they are on-going. Hailemariam appointed an official with the rank of deputy Prime Minister to coordinate Good Governance and Reform. He also pledged to launch a nation-wide survey to tackle administrative problems.

If "economic liberalisation" means inviting local and foreign speculators to mess up the finance sector, land and other critical sectors, it is neither planned nor postponed. Ethiopia can not be anymore clear that it does not intend to follow the dead-end neo-liberal paradigm rather the developmental state path that brought sustained double-digit growth for a decade.

The Economist becomes funnier when it claims:

" the Party leaders seem unsure how to survive without Meles. They govern on autopilot, following the blueprints he left behind. "

How can the leaders could be confused if they have a blue print left by the greater leader? When did governing by an auto-pilot became something to be criticized? In fact, auto-pilot is a developed technology that is absent in less advanced aircrafts.

In terms of a political system, an auto-pilot would be a clear sign of a matured democracy with healthy institutions of governance. However, for The Economist, anyone who doesn't blindly follow the failed path of neoliberalism is considered as confused.

The point of all this rambling becomes clear when The Economist claims:

" Those who know him say he (PM Hailemariam Desalegne) is more comfortable with capitalism than many of the leftists around him. He was never a Marxist, but nor does he have an alternative vision for the country. "

Whether the neo-liberals like it or not, Ethiopians do not plan to re-invent the wheel. They do not need to start building everything from the scratch just simply because a new prime minister is elected.

As long as the developmental state blueprint left by Meles continues to deliver the objectives of poverty reduction, industrialization and betterment of the lives of Ethiopians, we will strongly stick to it.

The Economist adds:

" Instead of chaos, an eerie calm now hangs over the country. "

For those who are eeriied/disturbed by calm, Ethiopians have only gave a clear and unequivocal answer in the days after the passing of Meles Zenawi that they will shall continue to the economic stride in unison.

Ethiopia's calm and stability is not a matter of chance rather a result of two decades work. It will remain so no matter what it makes the neo-liberal cynics feel.

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