

ICG on Ethiopia after Meles; Ethiopians on ICG after 22 August 2012—Discourse on Methodology

Habtamu Alebachew (Lecturer)

Introductions

I read every details of what International Crisis Group calls ‘expert report’ on Ethiopia after the death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, August, 22/2012. Fortunately or unfortunately, I came across the said report late. If I understood the essence of the pundit report, I felt that there were thorny questions of epistemology and methodology that I should raise.

First, what is the exact level of the paper? Of course, I appreciated citations, scientific terms and so on. I assume therefore that it is a pundit examination and synthesis of Ethiopia’s political destiny after the death of Meles. If the ICG experts and officials agree with this, it means that I am safe to continue.

Second, if the report is a pundit observation, I have a question over the ‘divine speed’ or the ‘light year calendar’ with which the said researcher produced that much lengthy report on Ethiopia after Meles just within six days. I doubt the plausibility of the paper even though the writer may have a good deal of familiarity with Ethiopia and its politics. I am not saying that Ethiopia is a mysterious entity that could not be subjected to scientific investigation. What I mean is that Ethiopia has as much specificities as it has commonalities with other states. I saw that the ICG pundit report is hastily organized that it tends to make gross ontological flaws that are reflected in the conclusion.

Third, as a matter of keeping words in tune with the normative essence in the nomenclature of the ‘International Crisis Group’, the writer tries to link his past knowledge of Ethiopia’s politics with what he predicts to follow after Meles’s death. Such an undertaking requires not only close observation of the subject matter but also careful investigation into the dynamic processes underneath. On this score again, I felt heavy discomfort over the paper.

1. Flawed Methodology

The ICG author starts his report with an extremely loaded paragraph strange to the world of expertise in social science fields, which states neither description nor prescription nor prediction in an orderly manner so that it would have been possible to sense a degree of coherence in his arguments. The rigid social science methodology makes it a duty to follow strictly known standards that compel the author to be adamantly concerned with the moral and scientific duty of objectivity. Let us look at the following extract out of the paper:

The death of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi, who had not been seen in public for several months, was announced on 20 August 2012 by Ethiopian state television. The passing of the man who has been Ethiopia’s epicenter for 21 years will have profound national and regional consequences. Meles engineered one-party rule in effect for the Tigray People’s

Liberation Front (TPLF) and his Tigrayan inner circle, with the complicity of other ethnic elites that were co-opted into the ruling alliance, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). The Front promised freedom, democracy and ethnic devolution but is highly centralized, tightly controls the economy and suppresses political, social, ethnic and religious liberties. In recent years, Meles had relied ever more on repression to quell growing dissent. His successor (Meles's) will lead a weaker regime that struggles to manage increasing unrest unless it truly implements ethnic federalism and institutes fundamental governance reform. The international community should seek to influence the transition actively because it has a major interest in the country's stability.

This is the paragraph with which the ICG Ethiopia's pundit started his analysis on the issue. Look! The paragraph is not an abstract or a preface or introduction; the author says it is an overview. I understand that the function of 'overview' signifies methodologically different things to different researchers depending on the nature of the issue under review. However, 'overview' in a quality pundit writing is commonly devoted to describing things as they are and briefly as a step-stone to progress to other details. It is uncommon to use 'overview' to curve up one's conclusion and recommendation in advance. In this specific ICG report, that the author starts by concluding that the 'post-Meles regime is weak', then, he apparently biased his next arguments on more of a prejudice than a scientifically debated analysis.

This brand of writing is more common not in such a task requiring maximum care but in propaganda literatures specifically designed as a reaction for enemy statements with a clear goal of investing on emotions than reasons. The ICG man is no where under any duty to choose this line of making a report unless his intentions were to preempt readers' attentions before an alternate message reaches them. As far as I know, Ethiopia has no declared war against the ICG to provoke a professional conflict analyst to start 'overview' with hasty, extremely sensational and disparaging remarks over an internal affair of a sovereign state;

Secondly, probably the worst methodological flaw in this 'overview' is that the writer overstuffed a long list of pieces and parts haphazardly together; as the result, he suffered from blurred insights into the crux of the main matter throughout his entire writing. The point is that the writer's analysis obviously lacks baseline or premise from which he could have progressed to arrange his ideas closing the loophole for biases and subjectivities. Before delving into excessively rapid value judgments, the standard practice in modern pundit literature is to parcel a brief theoretical or practical prism how he would see the issue in the specific realities of Ethiopia. Well, it was better if he started and got focused with the personality of Meles, in brief, in relation to what would follow after his death by curving a dominant historical parallel, or unmistakable philosophic argument or common place political patterns from the vast ocean of human knowledge and experience. Failure to do so, I believe, adversely affected not only the ICG paper itself but the organization's credibility, in general;

Thirdly, a critical study of the ICG paper reveals that the author did not have clear background research writing techniques that draw boundaries and levels among key actors in a complex political process like that of Ethiopia. Any such analysis on actors requires bounded and level-

based investigations into the individual bordered from groups, groups from populations, populations from the subsystems, and subsystems from the general system. This would have helped readers to get chances to identify cause-effect relations in the discussion across ensuing parts that, according to the ICG man, will most likely result in elevated ‘social unrest in post-Meles Ethiopia’ . What I understood from the ICG writer, however, is that he perceives Meles sometimes as an individual of superhuman qualities capable to get all what he thinks executed by any means; at other points, he placed institutions and collective groups above Meles, which, according to the report, led Meles to exercise authoritarian temptations. He brought Meles, TPLF, EPRDF, and the government as something glued together as one and inseparable. Finally, he pushed the entire external factor—western aid, anti-terrorist coalition, World Bank lean—up to be the basic conditions for the existence of both post-Meles regime and Ethiopia as a state.

Fourthly, the ICG author, for the above methodological flaw, fails to appreciate the subtle conceptual distinction between ‘political evolution’ from ‘political morphology’, ‘political means from political end’, and the institution ‘government from the systemic regime’. He placed Meles at the ‘epicenter of Ethiopia’s politics’ for 21 years; He, in an astonishing twist, retreated to Meles’s past, in his words, as ‘the engineer of one-party rule for the Tigray’s Peoples Liberation Front and his Tigrian inner circle’ to finally jump to what he called ‘ with the complicity of other ethnic elites that were co-opted into EPRDF.’

This is a jumbled and unprofessional caricature of Meles’s political evolution, his political party, government and regime. It is true that Meles started his political participation within his ethnic-based organization, TPLF; it is also true that Meles engineered the establishments of EPRDF in 1988; after three years, Meles organized his first government; at his death, what he had was not simply this or that political group or government but an *established regime*. The existing regime is the culmination of Meles,’s political ambitions and, in practice, the end-point, as a mortal human individual, of his long political evolution. Whether my author of the ICG accepts it or not, this is the widely used scientific historiography of an influential political figure in history. I shall make this point much clearer at the following part.

2. Definitional err

The ICG author mixed up political party with government, government with regime, and so on that he fell trapped to a grand definitional mistake across his entire analysis. He repeatedly used the term .regime. government, state and so on.

By the way, what does a ‘regime’ mean? And what does the ICG man mean when he says: Meles’s successor will lead a weak regime? A regime in the ABC., textbooks of political science is a systematic political establishment synthesizing values, principles, ideology, body of rules and a legal system, institutions, agencies, symbols, etc, that in a totality shape the entire political system. Regime is far more and beyond government in scope of meaning and existence. ‘Government’ is a governing body of individuals for some time, and, maximum, as old as an individual’s life. Despite the rise and fall of individuals and their governments, a regime continues if it commands the acceptance in the eyes of majority. By this definition, the United States, for example, had thought its history only one regime but, at least, 44 governments. Similarly, Britain has had one regime since 1668 but tens of hundreds of governments.

Now, let us see how the ICG pundit confuses the right meaning of 'regime' with a leaders government and other similar concepts. Let me remind you again the part of the ICG paragraph:

His successor (Meles's) will lead a weaker regime that struggles to manage increasing unrest unless it truly implements ethnic federalism and institutes fundamental governance reform. The international community should seek to influence the transition actively because it has a major interest in the country's stability.

The ICG man's argument appears to mean that a regime is somehow equal to government or a living influential leader only. The author could not see that the regime after Meles includes what the people think and believe about Meles, too. The concept 'regime' also includes Meles's legacies as much as those of Madison and Washington, who are remembered as part of the existing American regime. As an unchallenged rule of history, a regime may continue with the downfall of an illegitimate government that tried to erode the regime like what happened to Lij Eyasu of Ethiopia; an illegitimate regime however never and ever survives twenty four hours once the government or the leader is dead.

I confidently say this perfectly knowing that the 'Ethiopia after Meles...', author of ICG can never and ever mention a single case that could refute this argument. Kaddafi's, regime fell with Kaddafi's government; the same happened in Tunisia, Egypt, the former Soviet Union, Haile Selasse's and Derg's Ethiopia, wherever you might go. However, the imperial regime did not break up following the death of the powerful Emperor Minillk II; the regime lost its legitimacy only sixty years later. The first common political science criteria to analyze and judge whether a regime tends to collapse or not at the sudden death of an influential leader is only and only whether the dead leader was legitimate or he established a legitimate regime or not.

Meles led TPLF into a broader National Coalition Front, EPRDF, almost at the right time when the armed struggle in Tigray attained its goal of removing Derg's government; amidst wide urban uproars of opposition and vast civil society criticism, Meles progressed to undertake his envisioned projects of state reformation and nation building together with a fast track socio-economic growth records. At his death, if the author wants to hear and see, Meles already organized an Ethiopian hero without an iota of exaggeration. Form this brief description, what a sound researcher could grasp is that Meles skillfully used TPLF and EPRDF, even, the successive governments not as ends in themselves but only as means for attaining his higher political goals.

Once a political program reaches the stage of being consolidated into a regime after having passed many zigzags of evolutionary path, I am a perfect Aristotelian in that I believe that a kind of political teleology would become its logical result. The regime no more demands the continuities of exceptional leaders in office or around individually.

If the author knows the political science concept of 'the state as a mystical agency', he could remember that Ethiopia is too large to be controlled or ruled by a single ethnic group. This brand of politics is not a new thing that we did not experience, nonetheless; we knew it and this was why Meles had to pay 3/4th of his life to permanently and eternally to bury it. As much a mystical existence as Belgium or the United States, Ethiopia is also a creation out of not only physical ingredients of people and territory but also out of mental pillars and nails, too. We have minds

that could calculate why we live with each other and why we wish this to be eternal before an ICG reporter dares lecturing us.

3. False Cause-Effect Correlations

The ICG pundit is more exposed to criticism in his too much careless pairing of the right causes with the right effects through out his report. He made this flaw almost across his entire paper particularly at explaining the concurrence of internal factors and external factors in a certain political development. One could see the mental framework of ICG and its staff that never gives the smallest place for the domestic people as one powerful actor in the political process. Let me demonstrate the most serious limitations out of the many by raising a question to which the writer gave answers:

- *Hated and excluded this much by the people of Ethiopia including Tigrians and faced with growing social resistance to his rule and the political system, how did Meles's regime manage to have survived for 21 years?*

The ICG reporter answers for this is the following:

The system endured because of Meles's power, political skill and capacity to attract aid and investment. The international community rarely questioned his domestic leadership and political trajectory, leading it to misconstrue the state of the nation. Despite overstated economic growth, and promised federalism and democratization, discontent is growing with the EPRDF's ethnic politics, rigid grip on power and perceived corruption.

The methodological paradox astonishing me is that while the ICG could discover all these contradictory realities of Meles's rule, western donors are either moron and feeble-minded or they may fear Meles like us, Ethiopians to alienate him. Worse than this, the background belief behind the ICG author must have been that 'Meles was there only to beg aid; and, Ethiopians tolerated Meles's repressive rule because they knew that they could not survive without aid'.

- *Lets us take all the stories of repression, social unrest, fragilities of the Ethiopian state and unfolding inner party conflict as valid. However, growth, stability and legitimacy rarely go separate ways. How then did Ethiopia register an IMF-confirmed double-digit growth under Meles in the previous decade?*

Look at how the ICG man answers this question...

Despite his authoritarianism and poor human rights records, Meles became an important asset to the international community, a staunch Western ally in counter-terrorism efforts in the region and a valued development partner for Western and emerging powers. In consequence, Ethiopia has become the biggest aid recipient in Africa, though Meles's government was only able to partially stabilize either the country or region.

According to arguments in modern political science, while legitimacy is derived from peoples' rational calculation of benefits gained from the regime, authority begins to gather momentum that supplies it the energy to transform the statuesque. There was no any reason for Ethiopians not to rise up in unison to change the statuesque at the point of time when Meles's death reached Addis Ababa. Why did not we do this, however? Was it because we Ethiopians never did so in our history, or because we have had a shoulder exceptionally borne to hopelessly carry the burdens of ethnic discrimination and what the author says 'Meles's repressive rule, unlike other human beings including the ICG staff? Was it because we Ethiopians feared our ethnic brothers, Tigrians? (whom the writer characterizes as 'people who could worsen the matter by taking repressive measures if resistance happened?').

Let us raise another question as Ethiopians living here in our country:

- *In our case, what most Ethiopians need is development. We have now seen the true hopes and practices of national economic transformation. We have begun sensed the effects of this fast track change in our lives. If this is what we Ethiopians believe, at least, in greater number, why do you argue that Meles was the wrong typology of leader?*

The ICG pundit on Ethiopia answers the question:

The government claims its socio-economic policies have produced sustainable internal development. However, many critics call them state-driven capitalism or authoritarian development, whose major beneficiaries are the political elite and their entourage, not the wider polity. While they have superficial similarity to those in China, they face greater challenges and are unlikely to work well in the long run. The system in Ethiopia was almost entirely dependent on Meles, whereas in China it is based on a party not as troubled by ethnic diversity and with a relatively effective mechanism for transferring power. Now that Meles is no longer at the helm, the Ethiopian elite may well pay a high cost for years of corruption and factionalism and of decreasing attention to the complexity of the society and its demands.

Well, let me agree wit his point here; but how is the ICG man going to answer this question: is the role of Meles in Ethiopia's politics comparable to the existing Chinese leaders or with Mao Setung who was the founder of the present regime? Why did not China break up at the death of Moa, and why does Ethiopia slip into social unrest at Meles's death? Are you saying that Ethiopians are more ignorant about their future destiny than the Chinese?

The ICG man also tried to pin down that ethnically versed politics to be the 'sin' of Ethiopia's politics in his prognosis above. Before the ink of his pen drains an inch short, he passes to prescribe deepening ethnic federalism as the best way out of the impending crisis. Here again, he made the obvious false-cause-fallacy common to his brothers and sisters at the Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. On the one hand, his understanding is vague about the fundamental question of whether the ethnic federal structure since 1995 was the cause of ethnic unrest or its result; on the other hand, he appears to have suggested how Ethiopians could reorganize the existing ethnic federal order into a flawless institution that could avert a future

unrest. ‘Social unrest’, I realized, is the obsession of the writer as far as Ethiopia after Meles is concerned.

I guess the ICG reporter lives in Brussels where he has the opportunity to very well know the dynamics of Belgian federalism. At least, we would consider his advice if he told us by comparing the two federal orders based on the examination of the respective constitutions. Of course, dispute or misunderstanding among Belgian social forces over their perceived respective advantages is an exercise of democracy; when this happens in Ethiopia however it is a true sign of ‘approaching unrest’ due to constraints in the exercise of democracy, for this writer. This is, according to communication scholars, a distorted mental condition, which they call ‘cognitive dissonance’ where a fool could remember only one single experience of his life and declines modifying it thereafter. He fails to positively understand that one of the basic rationales of the federal order is to level independent venues for continuous interethnic dynamism, and never to quell divergent ethnic interests.

4. Evidence Deficiency: Conspiracy Theory

The other major methodological crisis in the ICG writer’s analysis is his temptations to fill knowledge and data gaps with what scholars call ‘conspiracy theory.’ By this, he changed his guesses into confirmed conclusions, even without hinting his weaknesses about data as a responsible writer. Let us see a paragraph that shows this failure:

- Meles’s 21-year rule both produced and disguised several fundamental vulnerabilities of the state. Some were already present, like government failure to accommodate ethnic and religious diversity effectively. Others were the products of his policies and ideology, in particular those relating to federalism, corruption and the economy. Should a prolonged and divisive transition result in a weaker leadership, these fragilities may put stability at stake. The few independent, critical voices still in the country have been suffocated, closing political avenues through which to channel social grievances and making inter-ethnic relations even more delicate.

I expected some kind of concrete evidence from grassroots interethnic community disputes or similar evidence when I read the statement..., ‘produced and disguised several fundamental vulnerabilities of the state.’ However, the ICG man quickly turns to his obsession of tautology to tell us about government failure. For a wise pundit, the idea ‘government failure’ alone demands adequate explanations, which the ICG man could fill only through conspiracy theory. The conspiracy theory assumed a kernel position in the author’s analysis rather than he used it as a matter of research expediency created by data shortages.

Let us raise further questions to evaluate how the ICG pundit answers them in the most conspiratorial manner against ethical principles of scientific literatures:

- *The government says the Hailemariam Desalgn was named Prime Minister after Meles in line with two principles: one is that the Constitution says so; secondly, Meles already started the process of intergenerational succession of the EPRDF leadership. How do you, as an ICG Ethiopia’s expert, comment on this?*

Here is the ICG man's answer:

Meles promised to step down a number of times, but instead he and his closest allies purged the EPRDF and the TPLF of potential challengers. Former comrades and political allies were relegated to honorary posts, and a new generation, including Meles's wife, Azeb Mesfin, was given important party and government roles. Publicly described as "internal generational renovation" and an opening of relevant positions to non-Tigrayans, such as the current acting head of government, Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, this policy seemed aimed at eliminating any remaining dialogue between the party leadership and its chairman by creating an entourage directly indebted to Meles and his inner circle, with little constituency of its own. A shrinking number of politicians— members of the TPLF executive committee and the prime minister's immediate advisers – rule. All decisions remained with Meles, who neither clearly anointed a successor nor allowed any possible natural replacements emerge.

The ICG expert's drawback description of Meles's ideology to the argument for the possibility of emerging 'weak leadership' by linking federalism, corruption and economy with 'Ethiopia's fragility' as a state is also worth considering. What is the evidence? The ICG man mentioned William Davison, "Ethiopia's terror conviction of journalist raises doubts on free speech", The Christian Science Monitor report on suppression of critics of the Ethiopian government. The magic chain of cause-effect relation between Meles's ideology and the fragility of the state finally settles at 'government's crackdown against private newsmen.' This reminds me the relevance of the Amharic proverb that goes saying: the goat here, the stick there.

The ICG man, methodologically speaking of his paper from A to Z, is outside-in where he never tried or wanted to pay an iota of place for the Ethiopian people in their country. Where did this writer find this mode of article writing where he searched for the cause of stomachache from the hair or the cloth from neighbors? I tried to trace most of the sources he used to support his arguments with evidence. Unfortunately, I found some 99% of the simply to collectively be a fallacy of tautology, that is saying the same thing in different languages from same sources. He made almost no interviews with ordinary Ethiopians due, perhaps, to his perception of us as unfit for such an issue. This made the ICG man to wholly produce intuitive prattles in which he got fallen out of scientific orbit, looking more like ghetto witchcraft.

5. Paradigmatic Blind-spot

As a pundit for ICG, the Ethiopia's expert must have the knowledge that studying societies through existing more influential paradigms helps to raise the scientific quality of any research. It also helps to get the study well focused. Moreover, political processes are naturally to complex to be haphazardly studied intuitively. The ICG man's report sounds more emotional and hostile to the state of the nation because, I argue, he used no specific paradigm that would have regulated

hum from getting tempted to his personal prejudices. Let us see the fundamentality of the errors the ICG man made for not basing himself on a working scientific paradigm:

- Which one of the three key factors which you mentioned above would be the major explanation of the ‘social unrest’ thesis in Ethiopia after Meles? Economic problem, Ethnic federalism or Corruption?

If the answer is economic problem, how does economic problem finally mature into causing a wide popular social unrest, which the ICG man predicted in Ethiopia after Meles? Could it be explained with the ‘grievance’ or ‘frustration’ or ‘political modernization’ or ‘relative deprivation’ paradigm? Does the ICG pundit predicted social unrest in Ethiopia after Meles have a potential to induce a common agenda for bringing the diverse interests among the people together against the existing regime like what the people of Tigray or Eritrea did during Derg? Is there any possible common front purpose that drive Christians and Muslims, the military and the civilians, the Tigrians and the Somalis, etc, to stand together? Otherwise, sectional articulations of interests like what the Muslims or Oromo elites or whoever currently demands is more of a social demand than a social unrest in line with the original design of the Constitution. Why is this potential for social unrest in Ethiopia but a sectional demand in the USA? There is no a single line of paradigmatic justification in the ICG paper to proactively answer this questions.

If the answer for the above question is however corruption, then paradigmatic questions are to follow. Let me agree that there is corruption in Ethiopia. However, at what stage and social time does public corruption grow to be a real cause of social unrest? When the Tunisian or Libyan or Egyptian revolutions broke out, all the three countries’ registered growth was positive. Tunisia ranked the 40th largest economy in the world; Libyans at household level have had government-funded private houses and no Libyan child is illiterate. However, public corruption reaching, the revolution-provoking stage of kleptocracy, convinced the majority of citizens to rise as one individual headlong against the respective regimes. Is the ICG Ethiopia’s pundit saying this with regard to Ethiopia after Meles? If this man wrote his report with explicit or implicit paradigmatic baseline, I argue, his paper would not be that much lengthy

For the limitation of this type, the ICG man tended to base his arguments on the gross fallacy of past cases of conflict—2005 election crisis. The man could not realize the fact that the Meles government learned too much from the crisis as much as the situation opened up opportunities for his oppositions. The fact that the ICG writer did not have any paradigm, he could not enquire into what miracle made election 2010 peaceful. He could not see the dynamic factors in the mean time that he became a prisoner of what scholars call the fallacy of *a priori* of his own. Let use see what this means in practical questions:

- How did EPRDF win election 2005? The answer could be: by rigging and intimidation,
- How did EPRDF win election 2010? The answer again is: by rigging and intimidation, according to a priori fallacy.

This pattern of argument by the ICG reporter fells victim to fallacy when other questions follow like the following:

If election rigging and use of force provoked social unrest post-2005 election, why did not they during election 2002? Because the ICG man is never restricted by any paradigm, he did not try to answer this question by asking those Ethiopians who threw stones against government police in 2005 but did not the same in 2002. How can then I personally, as an independent citizen, learn from ICG?

Conclusions

For all the reasons above, I could not learn from ICG anything that convinces me to consider and modify my views to the exiting regime. I suspect also that there ICG report does not convince government leaders in Ethiopia after Meles. I still wonder what relations there is between the demand for place in government posed by an Opposition leader in the Parliament yesterday and this ICG report as both shared the same view as a baseline: Ethiopia after Meles is at imminent danger of social unrest.

As an Ethiopian, I say none of the ICG predictions come true since 22 August 2012 not because 65 days are too short for social unrest to explode but simply because the basic flaws in the ICG argument, from which they should learn.