

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF MELES ZENAWI

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African Development: Dead Ends and New Beginnings, by Meles Zenawi. Unpublished Masters Dissertation: Erasmus University, Rotterdam, no date.

In the months following his death on 20 August, Ethiopia's Prime Minister Meles Zenawi has been eulogized and demonized in equal measure. But his policies, and the transformational paradigm on which they were based, have rarely been elucidated. While alive, Meles was equally indifferent to praise and blame. To those who acclaimed Ethiopia's remarkable economic growth, he would ask, do they understand that his policies completely contradicted the neo-liberal Washington Consensus? To those who condemned his measures against the political opposition and civil society organizations, he demanded to know how they would define democracy and seek a feasible path to it, in a political economy dominated by patronage and rent seeking?

Meles did not hide his views, but neither did he ever fully present his theory of the 'democratic developmental state' to an international audience. Over nearly 25 years, I was fortunate to be able to discuss political economy with him regularly, including critiquing his incomplete and unpublished master's dissertation. During this time, his thinking evolved, but his basic principles and sensibilities remained constant.

World leaders have lauded Meles' economic achievements without acknowledging their theoretical basis. Human rights organizations have decried his political record as though he were a routine despot with no agenda other than hanging on to power. Reviewing his writings on the developmental state, this essay shows the unity of his theory and practice.

Meles had the quiet certitude of someone who had been tested – and seen his people tested – to the limit. Along with his comrades in arms in

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the leadership of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), he had looked into the abyss of collective destruction, and his career was coloured by the knowledge that Ethiopia could still go over that precipice.

Many times during sixteen years of armed struggle in the mountains of northern Ethiopia against the then-military regime led by Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam, Meles had close personal brushes with death. In 1988, he and other central committee members avoided a likely-fatal aerial bombing by just twenty minutes after their hideout was betrayed by a spy and Ethiopian fighter-bombers targeted it. Later that year, he was taken gravely ill with malaria and was evacuated to hospital in Khartoum – one of the very few times he left the field during the entire armed struggle.

As Meles crossed the border back into Ethiopia, I met him for the first time, and we began the first of our seminars on political economy. As dusk fell, still recuperating in his pyjamas, Comrade Meles climbed aboard a creaky Soviet Zil truck, captured from the Ethiopian army. All travel was at night, to avoid the MiGs, and we bumped our way along rocky tracks, first through the forested lowlands, camping out during daylight hours under trees next to a dry riverbed. Such was the itinerant life of the TPLF leadership. The next night our truck rumbled up a road cut through the mountainside by the guerrillas, with hairpins so tight that our truck had to make three-point turns. We spent the next day in caves at the TPLF's temporary headquarters in a mountain called Dejena, and the next nightfall I watched as an apparently uninhabited hillside gave forth a battalion of men, a dozen trucks and a tank, all of them completely obscured by camouflage until that moment. The TPLF had turned concealment into science.

The discomfort of the journey was less memorable than the travelling discussion group of Comrade Meles, Comrade Seyoum (head of TPLF foreign relations and later Ethiopia's longest-serving Foreign Minister), a dozen fighters, a representative from a European agricultural assistance agency, and myself. I learned quickly that the most necessary attribute of a guerrilla fighter is functioning without sleep. Meles was a voracious consumer of information and analysis, and a tireless questioner. We discussed perestroika in the USSR, theories of people's liberation warfare, the imperfections of grain markets, and, above all, peasant survival strategies during drought. At one point we met a hunter on the track and Meles spent an hour discussing with him the importance of conserving endangered species.

Meles was a convinced Marxist-Leninist, pragmatic but certain that the way of life of the Ethiopian peasants had to change or die. Having just completed my doctoral dissertation on famine survival strategies in Sudan, I tried to convince him that rural people were best served by diversified livelihoods, and that pastoral nomadism was an effective

adaptation to the vagaries of life in a drought-prone ecosystem. He did his best to convince me that traditional livelihoods were doomed to stagnation and that Ethiopian peasants had to specialize in farming, trade, or livestock rearing.

The abiding impression left by Meles and the TPLF leadership was that their theory and practice were deeply rooted in the realities of Ethiopia, and that they would succeed or fail on their terms and no others. The TPLF had convinced the people, and that was all that mattered. They did not measure their record or their policies against external standards; on the contrary, they evaluated outside precepts against their own experience and logic. It was a refreshing, even inspiring, dose of intellectual self-reliance.

Meles was unflinchingly optimistic about the prospects for the armed struggle and assured me that the Tigrayan guerrillas, until a few months previously confined to the hills and the borderlands with Sudan, would penetrate as far south as Shewa, the Amhara heartland just a hundred miles from the capital Addis Ababa, within a year. I did not take his promise seriously (neither did any other non-Ethiopian). But he was correct, and within two and a half years, the TPLF – now a member of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) coalition – achieved the remarkable feat of capturing the capital city.

The EPRDF took Addis Ababa on 28 May 1991, amid international predictions that Ethiopia would go the way of Somalia, where guerrillas had overrun Mogadishu just four months earlier. On 31 May, government salaries and pensions were due. They were paid on time. Police were back on the street within days.

During the next 21 years, Meles often looked as though he was camping out in the palace. He moved into his predecessor's semi-subterranean bunker home in the sprawling grounds of the old palace of the Emperor Menelik, and took over Mengistu's spacious but damp modernist executive office. The artwork scarcely changed over the next two decades, the carpets just once. Meles was not interested in the trappings of power, only in what could be done with it.

From the outset, what needed to be done was to conquer poverty. From his early days in the field through to his last years as an international statesman, Meles was absolutely consistent in this aim. Ethiopia's overriding national challenge was to end poverty, and in turn this needed a comprehensive, theoretically rigorous practice of development. Marxism-Leninism was, for him, not a dogma but a rigorous method for assembling evidence and argument, to be bent to the realities of armed struggle and development. When the TPLF first administered 'liberated' territories in the 1970s, it took a conventional leftist line, tried to regulate trade and moneylending, and failed. The Front responded by adjusting

its policies to encourage the local petit bourgeoisie in the villages and small towns it controlled. When the great famine of 1984–5 struck, the TPLF took the strategic decision to make feeding the peasantry its priority, even at the expense of losing ground to the enemy.

Meles was *primus inter pares* in the EPRDF's collective leadership and chief economic theoretician. In an episode made famous by Joseph Stiglitz,¹ Meles objected to the IMF position that international assistance was too unpredictable to be incorporated into national budget planning purposes, with the absurd consequence that national spending on infrastructure, health, and education could not be increased in line with foreign aid flows. Meles produced arguments and data and forced the Bretton Woods Institutions to rethink.

Meles inverted Kissinger's dictum that holding office consumes intellectual capital rather than creating it. He was always learning, reading, debating, and writing, and while he never abandoned the fundamental principles forged in the field, his views evolved greatly. After 1991, he studied for a degree in Business Administration at the Open University (graduating first in his class) and subsequently a Masters in Economics at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, under the supervision of the former Minister of Development Cooperation, Jan Pronk. He never finished his thesis due to the outbreak of war with Eritrea in 1998, but the draft manuscript, 'African Development: Dead Ends and New Beginnings', was the justification and blueprint for a 'democratic developmental state'. Excerpts are available online with the intriguing disclaimer: 'The author is the Prime Minister of Ethiopia. The views expressed are personal and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Government.'² Some of his analysis is also contained in a chapter in a recent collection edited by Akbar Noman and others.³

The war with Eritrea not only interrupted Meles' studies but provoked the most bitter dissension within the EPRDF. Meles was accused of having been soft on Eritrea and blind to Eritrean preparations for war, and subsequently for stopping the war once Ethiopia had expelled the invader from occupied territory. The internal party debate then took an ideological turn that seems to outsiders to be oddly anachronistic, replete with references to Bonapartism and the 'Kulak line'. Meles clearly stated that there should be no confusion that the EPRDF's mission was to build

1. Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (Norton, New York, NY, 2002), pp. 27–30.

2. <http://cgt.columbia.edu/files/conferences/Zenawi_Dead_Ends_and_New_Beginnings.pdf> (23 October 2012).

3. Meles Zenawi, 'State and markets: neoliberal limitations and the case for a developmental state' in Akbar Noman, Kwesi Botchwey, Howard Stein, and Joseph Stiglitz (eds), *Good Growth and Governance in Africa: Rethinking development strategies* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012).

a capitalist state. He further stated that rent seeking and patronage within the ruling party posed the key dangers to this objective, and they needed to be thoroughly stamped out. Meles' adversaries accused him of selling his revolutionary soul to imperialism and serving Eritrea at the expense of Ethiopia. Meles won by the skin of his teeth – just two votes in the Central Committee of the TPLF. His rivals then walked out and Meles seized the moment to consolidate his power. The next decade was to be his chance both to hone and to implement his theory of 'democratic developmentalism'.

One may disagree with Meles' thesis or argue that he failed to implement it properly. But without question it represents a serious attempt to develop, and apply, an authentically African philosophy of the goals and strategies of development.

He explained the background to me. 'For the first ten years after we took over,' he said, 'we were bewildered by the changes. The New World Order was very visible and especially so in this part of the world. The prospect of an independent line appeared very bleak. So we fought a rear-guard action not to privatize too much.'⁴

Meles was doubly constrained: internally the EPRDF was regressing, rehearsing its rhetoric but practising what Meles came to dub pervasive 'socially wasteful rent seeking.'⁵ But after emerging from the fractious debates of 2000–1, Meles had the upper hand, at the same time as international thinking shifted away from the neo-liberal demand for a non-interventionist 'night-watchman' state towards recognizing the need for a capable state to lead development. Meles agreed with the neo-liberals that the 'predatory state' of Africa's first post-colonial decades was one dead end, but argued that allowing the market to rule was a second dead end. 'You cannot change a rent-seeking political economy just by reducing the size and role of the state. The neo-liberal paradigm does not allow for technological capacity accumulation, which lies at the heart of development. For that, an activist state is needed, that will allocate state rents in a productive manner.'⁶

South Korea and Taiwan were Meles' favourite examples of developmental states that succeeded by subverting neo-liberal dogma. China's rise provided something else: by challenging American dominance it made space for alternatives. In his thesis he wrote, 'there has to be more political space for experimentation in development policy than has been the case so far in Africa ... The international community has a role in creating such a space by tolerating development paradigms that are

4. Discussion, Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister's Office, Addis Ababa, 16 October 2010.

5. Zenawi, 'States and markets,' p. 169.

6. Discussion, Meles Zenawi, Prime Minister's Office, Addis Ababa, 26 February 2011.

different from the orthodoxy preached by it. Africans have to demand and create such a space' (p. 39).

Meles' starting point was that Ethiopia (and indeed Africa as a whole) lacked comparative advantage in any productive field. He laid out his case in one discussion we held.⁷ 'African workers produce textiles at nine times the price of the Chinese.' Similarly, African foodstuffs could not compete in international markets. 'In these circumstances, the best way to make money is through rent: natural resource rent, aid rent, policy rent. So the private sector will be rent-seeking not value creating, it will go for the easy way and make money through rent.'⁸ In reaction to this, Ethiopia postponed private land ownership and kept state control of the financial sector and telecoms.

The argument continued, 'If the state guides the private sector, there is a possibility of shifting to value creation – it needs state action to lead the private sector from its preference (rent seeking) to its long-term interest (value creation). So the state needs autonomy.'⁹ The government should choose when and how to partner with the private sector (an example was developing Ethiopia's leather industry) and should invest in education and research.

Meles clearly identified the challenge of development as primarily a political one: it is necessary to master the technicalities of economics, but essential not to let them become a dogma that masters you. It is the politics of the state that unlocks development.

The 'developmental state' should, he argued, be obsessed with value creation, making accelerated and broad-based growth a matter of national survival. If Ethiopia could sustain its growth levels – which have been running at close to 10 percent per annum for most of the last decade – it could achieve middle-income status and escape from its trap. To succeed in this, a third element was needed, namely the hegemony of developmental discourse, in the Gramscian sense that it is an internalized set of assumptions, not an imposed order. Meles liked to give the example of corrupt customs officials in Taiwan, who exacted bribes worth 12 percent of the value of imports of consumer goods, while not demanding bribes on imported capital goods, illustrating how value creation had been internalized in this way – so that even the thieves followed the norm.

African countries might have the trappings of human rights and democracy, but, he said, 'there is no sustainable democracy in a society characterized by pervasive rent seeking. We need value creation to be dominant for there to be a foundation of democracy, for politics to be more than a

7. Discussion, Zenawi, 16 October 2010.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

zero sum game, a competition to control state rents.' Worse, he added, 'I am convinced that we will cease to exist as a nation unless we grow fast and share our growth.'¹⁰

Thus far, I found Meles' case compelling, though I questioned if it were possible to create a common mindset of value creation in a country as vast and diverse as Ethiopia, in such a short period. Was there not a danger that a theory, however sophisticated, would degenerate into a set of dogmas parroted by party cadres who scarcely understood the meaning of 'pervasive rent seeking' but who knew the rewards of loyally following the party line? Meles' response was that the EPRDF had indeed neglected political education and party organization for years, which explained the 2000–1 internal crisis and the poor performance in the 2005 elections, including being wiped out in the major cities. But, he argued, a new generation of leaders was emerging, he was renewing the party at all levels, and, above all, his policies were delivering results. Ethiopians had never, ever, experienced anything like the recent economic growth and the spectacular expansion in infrastructure and services – and this, he said, would transform the country in the next fifteen years.

Included in Meles' paradigm was a theory of democracy. He writes, 'Even if a developmental state was to be solely concerned about accelerating growth, it would have to build the high social capital that is vital for its endeavours. It would have to stamp out patronage and rent seeking. These are the very same things that create the basis for democratic politics that is relatively free from patronage' (p. 10).

Meles condemned liberal formulae as 'trickle-up democracy' and said that, in a poor developing nation, political parties and NGOs would easily become patronage mechanisms, rather than the basis for a true associational political culture and sustainable development. He feared a 'no-choice democracy' in which factions contested for which one could best loot the state.

Developmental states could come in several forms, Meles argued, provided that they maintained the hegemony of value creation, were autonomous from the private sector, stamped out rent seeking and patronage, and maintained policy continuity for sufficiently long to succeed. A developmental state could be authoritarian, but in Africa's ethnically diverse societies, democratic legitimacy was a *sine qua non*. Ethiopia's ethnic federalism and decentralization reflected this. Meles said his preference was to have two competing parties, each of which stood for developmental values, but in their absence the option would be a stable dominant party or dominant coalition, such as Japan or Sweden enjoyed in post-war decades. In the Ethiopian case, he wrote, 'the peasant

10. Discussion, Meles Zenawi, Prime Ministers Office, Addis Ababa, 17 October 2008.

is the bedrock of a stable developmental coalition'. His critics said this denied them the chance of voting for real alternatives.

Hence, Meles' approach to democracy and human rights was all of a piece with his overall theory. He said, 'when [the developmental state] has done its job it will undermine its own social base, to be replaced by a social democratic or liberal democratic coalition'. Meanwhile, he argued, what meaning did liberal civil and political rights have in a context of abject poverty or political chaos? Development and a strong state were prerequisites for human rights, and Ethiopia needed to establish these first. Justifiable or not, this is a serious argument that deserves serious assessment.

In early 2011, I asked Meles why he had been so reticent about his theory. He replied that he should not jeopardize Ethiopia's interests by pursuing a personal intellectual agenda that would be sure to draw fire from his numerous critics and detractors. However, he added that his ideas, which had been heretical just a few years earlier, were becoming common currency, and that as the time approached for him to leave office at the 2015 elections, he planned to update his dissertation and publish it.¹¹

Almost 25 years ago, Meles was indifferent to opinion and argument that failed to match his own standards, and was quietly confident that Ethiopians would shape their own history, and that history would prove him right. Recently, when I asked Meles what he would consider his legacy, he was uninterested in those who hailed his government as triumph or disaster, and addressed only the question of whether developmentalism was becoming hegemonic in Ethiopia.¹² It would be another decade, he said, before that question could be answered. Meles also said that the intellectual work of articulating the theoretical grounding of his politics, and extending that analysis to what he called the 'archetypal' African state, characterized by a vigorous political marketplace, was just beginning. Enough of Meles' writings are in the public sphere to demonstrate that Meles was a truly original thinker. Let us hope that his unpublished papers provide sufficient material to fill out the other, less explored, areas of his intellectual inquiries.

11. Discussion, Zenawi, 26 February 2011.

12. *Ibid.*